

McGill University: For the Advancement of Learning, Volume 1, 1801-1895

Stanley Brice Frost, *McGill University: For the Advancement of Learning, Volume 1, 1801-1895*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1980. Pp. 313

In the conclusion of this history of McGill University the author refers to the importance of the students' "registering year by year for their courses in arts or medicine, in law or applied science, steadily growing in numbers, starting their own college magazine, inventing new forms of football, or organizing college societies and other social occasions . . ." This growing host of graduates, having been "prepared for the manifold tasks of life" were able to fill with "competence and dignity the highest positions in the land." (p. 295) If *McGill University* had indeed captured the students' input to the development in Quebec of an English language university, and if it had also enlightened the reader to the difference that the university made to the graduates themselves and to the city of Montreal, it would be unique among histories of Canadian universities.

Unfortunately, as with other recent publications on the growth of Canadian universities, it is purely an institutional history, approaching the topic from the top down, from the point of view of the founders, the administrators and the principal. The student body has no identity, no personality, no life. Students appear as numbers, and numbers that grow only slowly. The role of professors is almost as ephemeral as that of the students. Although some faculty have been identified by name and by expertise, only one is cited as taking a stand on any issue — John Clark Murray, professor of moral philosophy and an advocate of co-education — a stance that Murray was forced to abandon publically or face the possibility of losing his position. This inclusion, however, does not elicit a discussion of academic freedom! The teaching faculty is mentioned in connection with salary disputes, and the removal of a professor to a prestigious position elsewhere also drew comment — a sign of the academic quality of McGill. Faculty involvement in new courses or programmes, in community activities, or in the general intellectual development of both McGill and Montreal is seldom addressed. As a center for the "advancement of learning" *McGill University* comes off as a sterile environment, concerned about facilities, buildings, and money more than students, professors and their accomplishments.

The monograph divides itself neatly into two parts: the early years, and the Dawson era. The first seven chapters chronicle McGill from the bequest of James McGill to the eventual evolution of a neophyte institution that was anglophone, protestant, and professional. These years, roughly 1815 to 1855, are ones of confusion, change, and uncertainty regarding not only the McGill bequest but also public education in general. It was only after a truly public education system under the control of the House of Assembly had been established that the Governors of the Royal Institution could devote time to McGill. Time was certainly needed. Tortuous lawsuits, an empty treasury, an isolated farmhouse with nominal and temporary professors marked the first fifteen years. An affiliation with the Montreal Medical Institution gave the College students and professors, and a degree programme, but made no *new* impact on the city of Montreal or on the opportunity to pursue higher learning. Political problems caused by the control of McGill by two bodies, one provincial, the other royal; economic problems increased by an ambitious building program and incompetent planning; religious problems attributed to a number of supporters who wished the College to remain an Anglican institution; and academic problems associated with the kind of institution McGill was to become — Scottish, English, or American occupied the energies and interests of the governors through the middle years of the nineteenth century.

The Dawson years, 1855-1895, are entirely different years for McGill. Although all of the problems are not solved the institution quickly acquires students, buildings, qualified professors and an academic reputation. The author spends a lot of time praising Dawson and his accomplishments and because of this the overall history disappoints. The inordinate time and space attributed to Dawson leave little room for the real life of the university — the students, courses, and their effect on the city and country. One example, that of the education of women, will underscore this point.

Dawson's own inclinations, and that of Donald Smith, who offered a bequest for the education of women, were for "separate but equal" facilities. Although the trend across North America was to either co-ed institutions, or all women colleges, McGill compromised with a middle course which had the advantages of neither option. Although Professor Murray's objections are noted, little attention is paid to the reaction of the women themselves — either as students or as members of the community. A nascent feminist movement was underway in Canada in the 1880s and a number of women's organizations began to form and to take an active interest in social affairs, including the role of women in the society. These women surely were not quiet on a subject so important to them. Records of organizations like the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, the National and Local Councils of Women and the Young Women's Christian Association for example, should provide the women's point of view. And of the women in the separate program itself little is known. Were they satisfied with their education and how did it influence their later life? Did they become professional women; were they active in social causes; did they participate in women's organizations? Did the acceptance of women change the courses, the atmosphere, the quality and vitality of the institution?

McGill University: For the Advancement of Learning is good institutional history. There is no question that the author has used excellent, albeit traditional, historical sources, established a conceptual framework and written an interesting monograph. He clearly identifies the early problems, the evolution of an anglophone, protestant, professional institution, and the emergence of a vital, respected university suited to the needs and conditions of a growing Canada. However, having said this one must not belie the fact that over the last two decades the writing of history has undergone a revolution. Historians have moved away from political, military and constitutional history to a concern for people, for social change, for grassroots input. Minority groups and women, children and schools and reform institutions, the fields of health, labour and agriculture have all become legitimate areas for the work of historians. New sources, such as census data, diaries, letters and records of amateur organizations are used, and new methodology, including the use of computers, statistics and oral history have allowed historians to use different sources and to ask new questions of the evidence. This trend has made Canadian social history exciting. Alas this historiographical development does not seem to have been applied to the recent histories of our universities, and *McGill University* is no exception.

The author, intimately connected with the administration of McGill over the last several decades, has produced an "in house" history, dominated by litigators, administrators and benefactors. What is needed is a history that tries to analyze intellectual and social growths, a history that evaluates the effects of the institution on the society and in return the society's impact on the institution. We need to know the backgrounds of the students, the influence they had on the university, and the relationship McGill developed with its community. Then, and only then, will we be closer to understanding today's McGill and its place in the intellectual development of Quebec and of Canada.

Nancy M. Sheehan
The University of Calgary