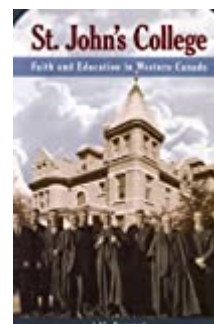


J. M. Bumsted. *St John's College: Faith and Education in Western Canada.* Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2006. x + 210 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-88755-692-0.



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Anglican Persistence Despite Educational Failure in Manitoba

In 2004, Paul Stortz reviewed a recent history of the Ontario Agricultural College for the *Canadian Historical Review*. Stortz set out some general critiques of published educational institution history, noting the tendency of such books to hagiographically document “the rise of the institution,” often without any reference to the larger social contexts in which these developments took place. He noted that “the university is on the road inevitably to bigger and better things” when these histories are written. However, he remarked that “a dispassionate and critical approach could more likely be realized if someone were to write a history of a university that did not make it. Now that would be something.”[1]

St. John's College: Faith and Education in Western Canada is the “history of a university that did not make it” that Stortz envisioned. It is a curious tale of an Anglican religious college which was founded without clear goals; survived without clear support; never made up its mind as to what it was going to focus on; embraced, rejected, and then re-embraced co-education; changed location often and always too late; and nearly closed on several occasions. On the positive side, it boosted the ca-

reers of five bishops, and trained hockey players as well as a governor-general. On the negative side, it was the institution whose mismanagement and fiscal improprieties brought down the entire structure of elite rule in Winnipeg. This is the account which J. M. Bumsted, a veteran scholar of Manitoba history provides for us, and it is a delight to read. Bumsted pulls few punches, even if he does occasionally recognize he is arguing from hindsight. At the outset he declares he is not interested in writing a “huge tome” or a “celebratory romp,” but a biography of a college suited to alumni and others interested in “the lives of small institutions of higher learning” (pp. vii-viii). He admits that the tale he is to tell is one of “tenacious institutional survival” and faith even in the face of collapse (pp. x-xi).

In the two-hundred-some pages that follow, Bumsted only just manages to prove that St. John's College was ever really a functional institution within the world of higher education in Canada. Late in the book he mentions, in passing, that the institution did not even become part of the National Conference of Canadian Universities and Colleges (NCCUC) until 1965, nearly one hundred

years after it was founded (p. 168). Indeed, the college was unable to get the right to grant degrees until it joined the University of Manitoba system. The lack of university standing should be connected, it seems, to the fact that the college was teaching no recognizable university-level courses even when it joined the federated University of Manitoba in 1877 (p. 26), although the author does not admit this. As Bumsted outlines it, "St. John's College" was merely a collegiate school with some higher level students tacked on for most of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As late as 1924, he notes that only 24 of the 1182 University of Manitoba arts students did all of their training at the college (p. 57), with collegiate school affairs taking prominence (p. 91). A 1923 report declared, quite accurately, that the college at that point was an "insignificant" part of the larger university (p. 98).

Some of this was related to the inability of the college to decide what it wanted to be. Even Bishop Machry, the founder of the college, vacillated between developing a purely theological school or a religiously influenced liberal arts college, before settling on a school that would teach theology and arts, with a concentration on religious training (p. 22). A faculty of divinity was established in 1877, but arts courses had a more spotty development. In the early twentieth century, the college was eager to expand its efforts but had neither the resources nor the support from the greater university to do so (p. 63). No sooner did St. John's develop an arts course (with a grand total of six fourth-year students in 1913-14), than they were urged by the university to give up this teaching and to focus on theological work (p. 81). Indecision within the greater University of Manitoba as to how to organize teaching was partially responsible for this confusion, but well into the twentieth century it was not clear how much arts St. John's would teach or for how long. This made long-term planning impossible.

Planning was also impeded by lack of funds. Although the college had a successful initial fundraising campaign, it then proceeded to overspend on its buildings and began its life significantly in debt (p. 36). It seems that the only year it ran without an operating deficit was 1949. Much of this was related to over-spending. For example, in 1882 the college had seventeen teachers and seventeen students (p. 34), a faculty ratio of one-to-one, which hardly made for cost-effectiveness. The survival of the college for one hundred years without ever turning a profit is remarkable—but the constant focus on finding immediate funds must have been a psychological burden. Financial troubles dominate Bumsted's book,

with the college in financial trouble in 1903 (p.57), with strained finances in 1918-19 (p. 85), with "financial uncertainty" and "unforeseen unhappiness" with financial management in the 1920s (p. 93), and, finally, with a nearly complete loss of their endowment in 1932 through the famous defalcation of financier John Machry in 1932. This scandal, which harmed the University of Manitoba, wiped out somewhere between half to one million dollars of St. John's already weak financial underpinning, and the loss of endowed professors made the operating revenue situation even bleaker. Bumsted covers the defalcation in painstaking and fascinating detail (pp. 111-116), highlighting again that the most significant incident in St. John's College history was not related to academic success but to financial failure.

Even after the defalcation faded into the distance, the college had difficulty raising funds from any source. Alumni were largely disinterested, as was the Anglican diocese. Throughout the 1940s, the Warden of the college was faced with an annual ritual of knocking on the doors of certain local businessmen to cover expenses (p. 144). Federal grants after 1951 were some help, but these were keyed to enrollments which remained small. Even when the college reached the significant enrollment of 248 students in 1959-60, it still was dependent on annual door-to-door collections (pp. 159-160).[2]

At this point the reader might wonder why the college was still functioning. Bumsted, to his credit, notes that the college could have been closed several times. In its entire history, it had no supporting constituency as few Anglican students were interested in attending. The diocese occasionally seemed to view the college as either an embarrassing mistake or as "too academic" and cut off from the needs of parish priests for their education (pp.160-161). Manitoban society barely noticed the existence of St. John's. The only tangible assets the college ever had were its reputation (based entirely on longevity) and its buildings (which were often poor structures that cost too much money to maintain). In one hundred years, it could boast of few famous scholars or prominent students (apart from some hockey players, a governor-general, and W. L. Morton), of no academic achievements of note, and of no significant impact on the religious life of the province.

By the 1970s, all of these factors had essentially eliminated the college. Federal grants were removed in 1967 and the diocese moved theological training to Saskatoon, ending any hope of diocesan funding and essentially destroying the faculty of theology after some ninety years

of continual existence. Moreover, the University of Manitoba insisted that St. John's enter into an agreement by which it lost all autonomy and rights to teach or have administrative officers (p. 173). Although Bumsted tries to play down the effects of the 1970 agreement and claims the college still had room to maneuver and to develop "autonomous enclaves" (p. 176), he does not show any significant successes in these endeavors. He leaves the reader with an impression of a St. John's College today that is an underfunded, underappreciated, invisible part of Manitoba—but which still exists as an enduring name on a building (p. 209).

In his introduction, Bumsted notes that St. John's problems were similar to other church colleges, especially in Western Canada (p. viii). This is an interesting point that is largely unexplored in the book. Was St. John's the only college which did not "make it," or in fact are there several others just like it? Was denominational education in Western Canada doomed from the start? Why did St. John's not thrive while Trinity College in Toronto did? How did the federative University of Toronto manage to find a place for church colleges while the University of Manitoba did not?

It is in this area—the comparative history of higher education—that the book provides more questions than answers. In the introduction, Bumsted states that "none of the usual models for a church-related liberal arts college in the historical literature of higher education quite fit the St. John's College situation" (p. viii), but he does not fully explore these examples. When discussing a reference to "mistakes" made in the development of higher education in Ontario and the Maritimes, he seems unclear as to what they were but assumes they were financial (p. 20). The eastern experience before the 1860s should have made it clear to Manitobans that a multiplicity of small, poorly funded colleges could not educate a province. In this context, Bumsted should not chide Machry for "buying into" arguments for public secular education (p. 21), as this has been the only successful long-term Canadian model. He calls the provincial government's refusal to integrate higher education within the University of Manitoba "one of the great mysteries of the history of Manitoba" (p. 53); yet he misses the opportunity to note that no Canadian province adequately funded higher education for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

When Bumsted tackles these issues, he provides some debatable explanations. He calls "the notion that denominational education was an impediment to educa-

tional progress" part of the "mythology" of the history of Canadian higher education, and says that the secular university was an idea "from the stable of Upper Canadian Clear Grit ideology," which was somehow imposed on Manitoba from Ontario (pp. 20-21). These claims would come as a surprise to the Rev. Thomas Liddell of Queen's, William Henry Draper, Francis Hinks, and Robert Baldwin, all of whom supported, at one time or another, secularization and/or rationalization of Canadian education, and none of whom were associated with the Clear Grit movement.[3] There is nothing mythological about the problems which church-based education caused for Canadian higher education, nor was its abolishment the private property of a single political ideology.

As Bumsted moves into the twentieth century, similar conceptual problems continue. He remarks that St. John's College in the 1960s was susceptible to "new ways" involving international standards, research, graduate degrees, and tenure (pp. 157-158)—all of which were present in Germany by 1895 and in Canada by the 1920s. By the time St. John's realized these directions, they were hardly "new." While Bumsted criticizes the hesitation among constituent colleges to move to a central university campus, he does not note that Trinity College in Toronto was in the same situation from 1903 to 1925. Additionally, he suggests that a college whose officers were paid by the university was "unprecedented" (p. 179), even though certain parts of the University of Toronto, and all of York University, evolved in this manner in the 1960s and early 1970s. This reviewer may engage in hegemony when he invokes the University of Toronto in his writings, but to ignore it—when much of Manitoba has been an extension of Ontario (a point David Gagan made twenty-five years ago) and which Bumsted himself concedes (p. 21)—is to make a serious omission which poses a problem for the history of higher education.[4] From Bumsted's introductory reference to Christ Church College, Oxford (p. viii) and later invocations of English examples (pp. 31-34, 58) it is clear that Bumsted is aware of some possible comparisons, but it is not clear that they are the right ones for a Canadian church college.

Despite these issues, and the lack of footnotes or index (although Bumsted includes a single page wherein he discusses the sources used), there is much to recommend in *St. John's College: Faith and Education in Western Canada*. Bumsted does integrate the history of the college into the larger history of the province, making socio-historical connections as required. He notes that

the decline of the college matched the decline of the Anglican establishment in the province, and that the fortunes of the college were tied to the fortunes of Winnipeg as a city (p. 75). If Winnipeg had “made it,” then so would St. John’s, perhaps. The story is also told very well. The student perspective is featured and their activities are related in detail. Women, when they were present at the college, are noted. The byzantine internal politics of a small religious college are given full exposition, and academic freedom even makes a brief cameo appearance.

Paul Stortz’s desires, as well as those of this reviewer, are well satisfied. Bumsted’s dispassionate and critical approach to St. John’s College, which clearly “did not make it” (except in name) within the overall context of higher education in Manitoba and the general Manitoban society, truly is “something.” The next task is clear. Bumsted should now expand his research across Western Canada. St. John’s history might be better justified in such a context. Perhaps there are other such colleges which do not even have a building to their name in 2007.

What are their stories?

Notes

[1]. Paul Stortz, “Review of *The College on the Hill*,” *Canadian Historical Review* 85, no.1 (March 2004): 165-167.

[2]. By way of contrast, Trinity College in Toronto reached an enrollment of 247 in 1926-27 and 296 in 1927-28. See T. A. Reed, ed., *A History of the University of Trinity College Toronto 1852-1952* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1952), 161. The population of Ontario in the 1920s was three times that of Manitoba in the 1960s.

[3]. With regard to Liddell, see Hilda Neatby, *Queen’s University 1841-1917* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1978), 49-50.

[4]. On the extension of Ontario into Manitoba, see David Gagan, *Hopeful Travellers: Families, Land and Social Change in Mid-Victorian Peel County, Canada West* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 123-126.

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