

Comptes rendus — Book Reviews

ALISON PRENTICE. — *The School Promoters: Education and Social Class in Mid-Nineteenth Century Upper Canada*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1977.

The educational system in Canada West changed dramatically between 1840 and 1870, particularly at the primary level. By 1871 and the introduction of compulsory attendance laws, Ontario provided an extensive system of publicly financed schools open to most of its citizens. The latest offering in McClelland and Stewart's Canadian Social History Series focuses our attention on this critical period in the development of public education. Alison Prentice has gone well beyond the standard literature in her analysis of the intellectual and ideological preconceptions which help explain the motives of those who promoted educational reform, the militants grouped around Egerton Ryerson. She asks what these school promoters wanted to achieve and advances the thesis that they were attempting to reinforce social control by developing institutions which could "contain, suppress or avoid what they found unacceptable in the wider society" (p. 46).

The argument presented in *The School Promoters* involves several elements. Reformers believed that human nature was weak, impressionable and unstable. Children in particular, according to these reformers, were susceptible to potentially dangerous and destructive social influences. This perception of the vulnerability of children was then coupled with the assertion that the environment in which children found themselves left much to be desired thus necessitating the creation of controlled environments which would protect children and at the same time train them in "respectable" attitudes and behaviour. For Ryerson and his compatriots, schools were the preferred institutions in which to achieve these basic social objectives.

A second element in Prentice's argument involves the analysis of mid-nineteenth century Canadian society advanced by educational reformers. These boosters of public schools believed, and apparently Prentice also believes, that industrialization was producing a very different type of society. This transition, we are told, was marked by upheaval and social instability. The promoters, meanwhile, were uneasy about the type of society which they believed to be emerging. In particular they feared the consequences of the further division of society between rich and poor and the potential for class conflict, or even class warfare, which they saw as endemic to the new industrial order. Again the educational reformers favoured public schools, and eventually compulsory attendance, as an institutional safeguard against these perceived dangers. Public education would equip children with the tools — more in terms of "respectable" social attitudes than in terms of specific job training — to adjust to the new order. At the same time "respectability" would reinforce "social harmony" and eliminate the potential for class warfare.

The strength and the value of *The School Promoters* lies in this thorough analysis of the ideas which governed attitudes and help explain the projected solutions offered by the educational reformers. It is an excellent study which makes a welcome contribution to our understanding of the Canadian past. Yet despite the generally superior quality of the work, there are minor flaws.

Prentice places a great deal of emphasis on the question of class, but in the end she has not employed the concept as a tool of social analysis. Rather Prentice seems content to "let the school promoters speak for themselves. It is their gradual formulation of a definition of class that this study seeks to explain" (p. 22). During the course of the narrative we discover that promoters could mean almost anything when they used the term ranging from various religious sects to the several grades they introduced into the schools. Only rarely did they use the term "class" to refer to specific groups within a social structure, and, even here, their use of the term remained confused and excessively ambiguous. In addition, "respectable" cannot easily be used as a surrogate for socio-economic class as Prentice is too often tempted to do.

The School Promoters, then, is not essentially social history; it is rather intellectual history. Too often Prentice fails to clearly distinguish between the social reality and the perceptions of the reformers. She relies, for example, upon Harold Perkin's analysis of Britain to set the social context in Canada West. The assumption, however, that the traditional deferential and hierarchical society which Perkins sees disintegrating in Britain had existed in Upper Canada is at best an exaggeration. Similarly the new industrial society which Perkin finds in place in Britain was only barely discernible in Canada West as late as 1871. During the Union of the Canadas only about 20 per cent of the population of Canada West was urban, and of these people only perhaps a quarter were in the industrial sector — a sector still dominated by the small workshop rather than by factory production. Prentice correctly points out the urban bias of the reformers, yet the point needs greater stress. We can accept the analysis of the intellectual and ideological perspectives which motivated reformers, but we may not assume that the analysis forwarded by Ryerson and his friends was an accurate description of the social reality in Canada West.

Prentice has, in short, tended to exaggerate the social changes in Canada West perhaps because she has placed too much faith in the reliability of the analysis offered by the reformers. These propagandists were apparently as strongly influenced by what they saw happening in Britain and the United States as by what they saw happening in their own environment. The classic example of this exaggeration can be found in the constant references to the instability of Canadian society. One would not wish to deny the existence of conflict, yet one cannot but be impressed by Canada's remarkable stability if viewed in a larger context. Compare, for example, the struggle for liberal democracy in the 1840s or the struggle for national unity in the 1860s and early 1870s to similar events in Europe which produced the revolutions of 1848, the wars of unification in Germany and Italy or the Civil War in the United States. Canada, then, was not a particularly unstable society engulfed in social chaos brought on by the rapid industrialization of the province.

In conclusion, then, *The Social Promoters* is not social history. It is, rather, a good example of intellectual history; it is a thorough analysis of the ideas of one group of activists. As such the book makes an important and significant contribution to Canadian historiography in general as well as educational historiography in particular. The book will be welcomed by all who are concerned with developing our understanding of the Canadian past.

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