overview of “The Sixties in Quebec”, Peter S. McInnis explores the role of the wildcat strike in labour activism in the era, and Bryan D. Palmer explores the Red Power movement and some of its manifestations.

The only major complaint I have, and which I imagine many of my colleagues (if not our students) will share, is that in order to produce a slim, manageable volume, these essays are all quite brief. Indeed, many feel badly truncated, as though deeper conclusions and analyses were available, but had to be excised somewhere along the line. This is unfortunate (if understandable given the constraints of the publishing industry in these difficult times). However, if you are looking for a collection of introductory essays on a broad range of topics on the Canadian 1960s, there is no book I would recommend ahead of Debating Dissent.

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While most historians and scholars of education generally take for granted that the concept of progressive education has existed for more than a century, its history in Canada has yet to be written. Christou’s Progressive Education: Revisioning and Reframing Ontario’s Public Schools, 1919-1942 attempts to address this absence through an examination of what he calls “progressivist language” during the interwar years. A former school teacher and rising scholar in the field of educational history, Christou informs the reader that undertaking this study was a very personal pursuit for him. As a teacher, he had been “accused of being a progressive on three different occasions” (p. 3), and for three different reasons. The question that lingered in his mind after each accusation was: what exactly is a progressive? This question led him to graduate school and the writing of the most in depth study of progressive education in Ontario to date.

Christou uses a number of primary and secondary sources in his study, but two in particular inform the bulk of his probe into progressivist language in the interwar period: The School, an educational journal written for teachers, teacher candidates, and school administrators; and, The Canadian School Journal, the official organ of the Ontario Educational Association. From the beginning of his analysis Christou concedes that there was a confusion and lack of clarity in these journals regarding what progressive education meant (p. 36). Nevertheless, Christou is able to weave consistency and order out of the various definitions attributed to it. By probing the language used in the two journals for common themes or domains, the author identifies three: the promotion of active learning, the shift toward individualized instruction, and the progressive educator’s concerns for closer bonds between school and society.
Christou analyses those three themes in three separate chapters, which form the bulk of the book. Each theme is furthermore examined more closely from three orientations: child study, social efficiency, and social meliorism. In his analysis, Christou finds the birth of child-centred teaching, the rise of economic terminology and aims in education, and the promotion of critical thinking to reinforce democratic civic engagement. A single chapter highlights the opposing rhetoric of “humanist” educational thinkers (a term Christou prefers to “anti-progressivist”), who desperately attempted to hold onto a classical curriculum in an educational world where practical skills and “relevant” lessons triumphed the teaching of Latin and Greek. Ultimately, Christou points out, humanists were grasping at straws. Progressive rhetoric was “intertwined with the decline of the classical, academic model of schooling” (p. 112) espoused by humanists, which “elevated content over individual interest,” promoted “rote memorization and recall,” and encouraged teaching “that bore no relation to contemporary life;” humanist concerns were ultimately “at odds with the core sensibilities of Ontario’s progressivists” (p. 114). According to Christou, the rhetoric of progressive education would prevail, and eventually find its way into public policy as well, with a major overhaul of the curricula introduced in 1937 and 1938. Christou analyzes this overhaul through to its revisions in 1942 in the final chapter, and demonstrates how it reflected the ideas of progressive educators found in The School and The Canadian School Journal. Among the major reforms, health study was woven into curriculum, a new social studies program promised to replace the history and geography curricula, and the study of English would remove the classics from Ontario’s schools. Experiential and project-based learning would be promoted as well, and all academic undertakings would have to have actual relevance outside of the classroom.

Despite keen insight combined with graceful writing, there are some limitations to Progressive Education. In concentrating on the examination of only two school journals, to what extent can we be sure that Christou’s analysis of “progressivist language” accurately reflects that with which the educational public in Ontario was engaged? Could the same educational language be found in the pages of newspapers and other sources of print media shaping public discourse at the time? Can we be certain that the discourse in these two school journals carried more political weight, and impacted public policy, to a greater extent than mainstream print media? And what were separate (mainly Catholic) school leaders asking about progressive education? Christou cites the writing of a few Catholic educational thinkers, such as the humanist reaction from Reverend L.J. Bondy of St. Michael’s College in Toronto (p. 103), but otherwise ignores the rhetoric emanating from a very large portion of Ontario’s publicly-supported school system. To his credit, Christou acknowledges that Catholic voices are virtually absent from the two journals examined in his study (p. 25), but considering the importance of separate schooling in Ontario, were Catholic ideas about progressive education not worth seeking out?

Much of the discourse that fascinates Christou in the interwar years is, curiously, still shaping the world of education today. Teachers and school leaders continue
to promote active learning, individualized instruction, and links between school and society. Teacher candidates are still being reminded to move away from the lecture podium and to engage their students, parents are continually called upon to take a more active role in their children’s learning, and demands continue to be placed upon curriculum developers to make an interminably out-of-date school curriculum relevant to students’ lives. Indeed, whether progressive education has found, or will ever find, its way into the schools is still a matter of debate. Is the history of progressive education, then, the history of failed promises? That is, why do school reformers continue to push for the educational changes that Christou first locates nearly a century ago? Christou concludes that his study “opens exciting apertures for future historical research” (p. 141), and he is right. Did progressive education remain a defining feature of educational discourse in the post-war years? To what extent did the discourse on progressive education affect public policy? Did teachers actually buy into it, and to what extent was progressive education practiced in the schools? Did parents support it? And, perhaps most importantly, did students accept it? These are only a few questions raised by a superb study on education in Ontario in the interwar period. Progressive Education has indeed become required reading for any student of educational history.

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James Daschuk’s work has gained considerable favourable attention, from academics and non-academics alike, for its vast temporal scope, its similarly broad source base, and its discussion of the scope of European disease and marginalization of Aboriginal peoples within the formative years of a nation. Indeed, Daschuk suggests a national narrative that acknowledges the “chasm between the health conditions of First Nations peoples and mainstream Canadians.” (p. ix) Daschuk’s project, which began two decades ago as his PhD dissertation, has grown out of connections to public health and economic history research: connections that speak to a theme of interconnectedness among diverse First Nations-government interactions over time. Yet Daschuk also seeks to distinguish his work from policy-focused studies of the marginalization of Aboriginal peoples, focusing instead on the economic and environmental conditions that worked together to reinforce disparity. He argues that Europeans increasingly exploited these conditions, even while realizing that Aboriginal peoples were suffering as a result. The book is therefore also a call for a re-evaluation of existing narratives in Canadian historical consciousnesses.

Clearing the Plains considers the regions that would become Rupert’s Land and later western Canada. One of the particular strengths of this work is