

History of Pentecostal Schools in Newfoundland and Labrador. F. David Rideout.

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REVIEWS

F. David Rideout. *History of Pentecostal Schools in Newfoundland and Labrador*. St. John's: Good Tidings Press, 1992, 375 p. \$17.95 paperback, \$27.95 hardcover.

WILLIAM MCKIM

ALL PENTECOSTALS, MANY historians and some school teachers will have their own reasons for reading this book, but for those of us who are not one of the above, a title like *History of Pentecostal Schools in Newfoundland and Labrador* engenders the same sort of excitement as watching paint dry. The title notwithstanding, Rideout tells a remarkable story, a story that previously has not been told with this authority and detail. It is a story with all the elements required to make it lively and exciting: blatant injustice and discrimination against a helpless minority, a seemingly hopeless struggle against oppression and indifference, ultimate victory achieved by hard work, dedication and faith, and a final ironic twist. But be warned, this is still a history and histories are supposed to be dull – otherwise no one will take them seriously. So, it would seem, believes F. David Rideout. He can hardly be blamed. Many before him who have ventured to write histories of Newfoundland education have set remarkable standards of boredom.

While boredom stalks the reader at every turn, the book does offer substantial rewards for those willing to wade through the tedious bits, and provides valuable insights into the nature of religion and its relationship to political power. These insights are especially useful for anyone who has entertained the fantasy of reforming the Newfoundland education system.

History starts off well with two fascinating chapters. The first is a far too brief account of the history of education in Newfoundland. Historians provide us with two different accounts of how Newfoundland's peculiar state-supported, church-run education system came to be. Those who support the system tend to

believe that it is an inevitable result of “the tradition established by the churches’ involvement long before the state entered the picture.” An alternative, less flattering explanation is that it grew out of bickering and jealousy as rival denominations scrambled to get control over government support for public education.

Rideout’s history clearly supports the former view, although he presents a fair account of the wrangling between denominations that characterized the early days of the system when the Provincial Legislature set up what they planned to be a completely secular education system. Although Rideout does not draw it to our attention, the reader should note this chapter carefully, as there are many parallels between the religious intolerance that characterized the evolution of the denominational system in the nineteenth century and the religious intolerance that spawned the Pentecostal system in the twentieth.

The second chapter traces the history of Pentecostalism from its roots in Topeka, Kansas to Newfoundland via the mission of the remarkable Alice B. Garrigus who was instructed by God to come to this province. (The message was actually delivered by an acquaintance speaking in tongues who uttered the clearly recognizable, although baffling word, “Newfoundland.”) In 1911 Garrigus started the Bethesda Mission on New Gower Street. The movement grew and in 1925 the Pentecostal Assemblies of Newfoundland was formed.

Chapter two also tells something I never knew before about Joey Smallwood. While he always claimed to be a “Wesleyan,” Smallwood had an early association with the Pentecostal Church that started when his mother was converted in the New Gower Street mission. The young Joe was hired for a dollar a week by Alice Garrigus as a water boy and to fetch and carry for the mission. Rideout suggests that this early positive association with the Pentecostal Church made Smallwood a “formidable ally” in the Church’s struggle for status within Newfoundland’s educational system. I suspect that Joey’s public speaking style was influenced considerably by this association as well.

The remaining nine chapters cover the specifics of the development of the Pentecostal education system, including an account of each and every Pentecostal school that ever existed in the province. This must have been a monumental task for the writer and, unfortunately, because of Rideout’s peculiar way of organizing the material, it is an equally monumental job for the reader. In the Preface, Rideout explains that he attempted to blend his account of the general organizational growth of the Pentecostal system with the histories of individual schools. The result is more of a patchwork than a blend. Each chapter is divided into many smaller units separated by a logo of three churches. Each unit contains the history of a particular school, but some units describe developments in the system, political events, general meetings, etc. This clearly was a mistake because it forces the reader to wade through interminable school histories to find out only occasionally what was happening at head office or on

the political front. Little effort is made to integrate these units.

This confusing patchwork of stories is then segregated into chapters corresponding to certain stages of development of the system such as "Rapid Expansion", "Struggle for Recognition", and "Centralization," and this creates more problems. The author acknowledges that each school story spans a time frame much wider than the chapter divisions, forcing the reader into a time warp. When you see the three little churches you could be zinging backward or forward in time. This is dizzying and confusing, and often demands more from the reader than the stories make worthwhile.

While I believe it is important that the history of every school be told, I suspect that Rideout could have found a better way of presenting them, maybe in an appendix.

There are numerous appendices, many of marginal interest. They include submissions to governments and Royal Commissions, school sizes and insured values, and the agreement between the NTA and the Pentecostal Teachers' Fellowship. Who can say when this sort of information might come in handy?

The book concludes with a single level index which is limited primarily to people and places, although references to some institutions are indexed. The Salvation Army and the Seventh Day Adventist Churches are indexed, but the United and Anglican Churches are not. We can easily find the one reference to The Newfoundland and Labrador School Trustees Association, but the index ignores The Newfoundland Teachers' Association. I did a quick unsystematic check for accuracy and found one name in the text omitted from the index. I also noted that the names of the people in the photos, although carefully in the captions, are not indexed.

Apart from organizational difficulties, the book has other problems. *History* is published by Good Tidings Press which, it appears, is not quite up to the task. The book desperately needs the services of a good copy editor. There are innumerable errors in type and grammar, and inconsistencies in style which make the book look unprofessional. I am not a good proofreader so I rarely notice such things, but I have no doubt that the readership of *Newfoundland Studies* has impeccable standards, much more demanding than mine, and will find such errors distracting or even irritating. Rideout has obviously put much hard work and dedication into his research and so it is unfortunate that he did not find a more conventional publisher who would have been experienced enough to avoid these organizational, typographical and stylistic problems, and present Rideout's scholarship in a more professional package.

A remarkable and redeeming feature of the book, apart from the fact that it exists at all, is the photographs, 293 I am told. I do not know where Rideout got them, but the photos are a treasure. They go a long way to save this book from the quagmire of boredom it would otherwise have been. We get to look into the faces of the people we are reading about, not just the faces of the big wheels

like Eugene Vaters, but we get to see the unbelievably youthful features of Mr. Claude Jeans, the first Pentecostal teacher in Miles Cove, who started teaching with just grade 11. He stares out at the reader with the cocky naivety of youth. We see all the students attending the Pentecostal school in Salt Pond in 1937. One picture each for male and female students – all with cherubic grins for the camera. We get to see the Queen Elizabeth Coronation Day school parade in Samson's Island led by teacher Miss Rebe Burton. Few of these photos are professional, some are tattered, folded and worn. Many seem to have come directly from someone's wallet or family album. I suspect most of them did.

In the final chapter, however, Rideout gets a bit carried away with the pictures when he shows us the front cover of *The School Board Boundaries Report* and the *Small Schools Study Report*.

It would be too much to expect Rideout to treat his subject with complete objectivity. After all, the book is published by Good Tidings Press (owned and operated by the Pentecostal Assemblies) and written by someone who is currently an Assistant Superintendent of Education with the Pentecostal Assemblies Board of Education, and the son of Yvonne Rideout, the first principal-teacher of the Middle Arm Pentecostal School (blurry photo, page 118). There can be no doubt that the book is written by a believer in both Pentecostalism and Newfoundland's denominational education system. Rideout does not apologize or pretend otherwise.

Yet his point of view finds its way into *History* in ways that are not always predictable, in ways which, if anything, enhance the humanity of the story being told, and illustrate the mentality of the pioneers of Pentecostal education in Newfoundland.

In 1924, when Eugene Vaters and his wife were travelling across Newfoundland by train after attending a Pentecostal Bible School in Rochester, New York, Vaters realized that he had only five cents for their supper. Nevertheless, Vaters was confident that God would provide them with a meal. Sure enough, as he was scanning the other passengers, wondering which one would be God's instrument, an American actor and his wife entered the compartment and invited the impoverished couple to eat supper with them at the American's expense. So it would seem to be for Newfoundland's Pentecostal School system, according to Rideout.

This is not to say that this province's early Pentecostals simply waited for God to provide them with their own school system, nothing could be further from the truth, but there is a sense throughout the *History* that it was the will of God that such a system should exist, and so, as naturally as night follows the day, He saw to it that it came to pass, working, of course, through the faith, dedication and toil of His church and its people, not to mention the intolerance of other denominations.

I did not understand this when I started reading *History* and so I was a bit

baffled by parts of it as a consequence. Why, for example, did I detect no resentment in Rideout's account of how the United Church in many cases refused to maintain their schools in communities whose people converted to Pentecostalism, and left Pentecostal children without any access to education. I expected a healthy dose of righteous indignation. It is not there. Why no bitterness toward the instrument of Pentecostal persecution? Like Pastor Vaters' American acquaintances, the mean spirit of the United Church is seen as an instrument of God's will, without which there would be no Pentecostal School System. And besides, the Bible tells us how we should treat persecutors (Matthew 5:44, etc.), and that a good case of persecution can even get us into heaven (Matthew 5:10).

Then there is the near deification of Eugene Vaters and his son-in-law, Geoffrey Shaw. Just a few of Vaters' saintly characteristics were that he never uttered a profane word in his life, he never kissed his wife until after they were married, and he left eight dollars to his family when he died, the rest of his money having been given to Gospel works. It is gratifying to know, not that such people actually exist, but that there are people who actually believe that such people exist.

Finally, Rideout makes no effort to hide the great irony in the story he tells. I suspect he doesn't even see it.

...(We) have at no time felt (sic) nor desired our separate school system. We have seen the ills of this antiquated system all too plainly and have been too often the victims of such ills...

(T)he school question is not a church question but a civil one...

Believe it or not, these are quotes from the official school policy of the Executive of the Pentecostal Assemblies of Newfoundland...in 1936 (p. 52).

On June 21, 1988, at a special ceremony at Government House, the Pentecostal church was presented with a handsomely framed document: a copy of an amendment to the Constitution of Canada which granted the Pentecostal Assemblies of Newfoundland full and equal membership in the system they had deemed "antiquated" fifty-two years earlier.

Isn't it remarkable how things change! To Rideout it is a clear and inevitable testimony to the power of faith and a triumph of the will of God. But to the more cynical it illustrates a different principle of secular power. When the increasing influence of the Pentecostals became a threat to the established churches, Pentecostal cooperation with the system was assured by offering them a partnership in power. This "fanatical movement" recognized from the beginning that our education system is basically evil and unfair and desperately needed reform. Now they are comfortable insiders rabidly defending the system, and their zeal and dedication has made it stronger.

This is a discouraging lesson for those of us who are struggling to change the system.