

***The University of Manitoba: An Illustrated History.* By J. M. Bumsted (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2001. 240 p. ISBN 0-88755-653-1 \$34.95)**

Malcolm Macleod

Volume 25, 2001

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/800429ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/800429ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

CSTHA/AHSTC

ISSN

0829-2507 (imprimé)

1918-7750 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Macleod, M. (2001). Compte rendu de [*The University of Manitoba: An Illustrated History.* By J. M. Bumsted (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2001. 240 p. ISBN 0-88755-653-1 \$34.95)]. *Scientia Canadensis*, 25, 75–77.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/800429ar>

Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

The University of Manitoba: An Illustrated History. By J. M. Bumsted. (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2001. 240 p. ISBN 0-88755-653-1 \$34.95)

Serious students of Canadian university history will assume, from its appearance, that this book has little of value to offer. Filled with photographs, insets and exhibits, it seems a mere coffee-table item. This appearance, of devotion to appearance, is a little misleading. True, half the space is given to over 200 photos and sketches, reproductions of campus souvenirs and cute quotations from former students' memoirs. That still leaves good space—about 50,000 words—for the author to tell his story.

The subject is Winnipeg's largest college, University of Manitoba (UM), during its first 100 years, 1877–1977. There is also a brief epilogue bringing the account nearly up to date. Text that averages less than 500 words per year can not match the deeply-probed explanations provided in established double-volume benchmarks of sound university history, such as Reid's *Mount Allison* and Johnston's *McMaster*. Bumsted, however, uses his restricted space quite wisely, to not just proclaim the achievements, but also set forth the socio-economic and political context, of those decades in which UM enjoyed the status of largest of Canada's prairie universities, before being eclipsed in size and reputation by University of Alberta.

The highlights of this story are many and various campus crises—floods and feuds, strikes and stunts; along with celebrity graduates, famous sports squads and a half-century struggle, over where the best permanent location for the university might be. In its first several decades, an amalgam of small colleges mostly devoted to undergraduate teaching, Manitoba had no particular achievements in research. Since the late 1940s, however, there were some spectacular developments, especially in medicine and agriculture.

In the years immediately following World War Two, a research team led by Bruce Chown and Harry Medovy pioneered new methods of diagnosis and treatment for Rh haemolytic disease among newborn infants. Their discoveries have saved thousands of young lives (pp. 131–32). Henry Friesen—medical school graduate in 1958, faculty member in the 1970s and 1980s—is the discoverer of prolactin and other

hormones, manipulation of which has helped couples with reproductive problems and children with growth deficiencies (pp. 165–96).

Later, appointed president of the Medical Research Council, Friesen introduced reforms that transformed patterns for funding of medical research right across Canada. The university's impact reached even further from Winnipeg in the work of Frank Plummer. His research at a human-immunodeficiency-virus (HIV) clinic in Kenya—among prostitutes who seem to have a natural immunity to the disease—is leading the global search for a possible HIV vaccine (p. 216).

Other important science-technology breakthroughs have come from UM's agricultural college. Starting in the mid-1950s crossing wheat with rye, Manitoba agronomists eventually arrived at triticale, the first man-made cereal, richer than wheat in the growth hormone lysine. At the time of the book's publication, triticale was grown on two and one-half million hectares around the globe, and still spreading (pp. 174, 177–78). Twice as much acreage, Bumsted boasts, is now devoted to UM's other new crop. Baldur Stefansson's research team began improving rapeseed in the 1960s (increasing its oil and meal protein content). The new strain they achieved, trademarked as "canola," not only won quick acceptance everywhere, but soon became the most valuable field crop raised in Manitoba itself (p. 196).

Among the university's academics who have made notable contributions in the arts, Bumsted might well have mentioned himself. His studies of Scots settlement in North America, Lord Selkirk, Louis Riel and the 1919 Winnipeg strike, along with a widely-admired survey textbook, place him in the top rank of scholars active in the late 20th century. Because of this solid reputation, it is disappointing to note that in this book Bumsted sometimes fails to judge, explain, or approach sources critically.

For example, left-leaning professor Salem Bland was dismissed in 1918 after fourteen years' service. University governors said it was for budgetary reasons; critics claimed it was really because Bland espoused radical opinions (p. 47). That is all Bumsted tells us. He entirely ducks the historian's responsibility to point a pathway through the clutter of controversy. Again, he cites with a straight face a 1932 federal survey that found UM had the second-largest enrolment in all Canada (p. 73). Because of University of British Columbia, University of Toronto, and Université de Montréal, one strongly doubts this statistic. It certainly calls for discussion; but there is none.

Again, presentation of a table giving "Ethnic composition of the student body" for 1939 is flawed. Its two dozen categories range from

36% English, 22% Scottish down to very small numbers of Mennonites and Chinese. How did these proportions compare with the overall community? Eleven students were American. None, the table shows, were "Canadian" (p. 89). The statistics come from the period before census-takers would accept Canadian as a statement of nationality. Bumsted seems true to his sources, but gives no sign of recognizing how unhelpful they can be for readers who—thinking of the rapidly-developing West—would like to know what part of the student body was born in this country, if any, and what the numbers mean.

This *University of Manitoba* is, therefore, a great record of events and moods (and what things looked like) but holds back, often, from providing in-depth discussion or analysis. The book thus represents a certain triumph of decoration over explanation. Bumsted the historian probably leaned towards answering or at least probing questions raised by his subject—but the project was *an illustrated history*, and being thoughtful or reflective about things might have crowded out some of the pretty pictures.

MALCOLM MACLEOD

Biographical Note: Malcolm Macleod is the author of *A Bridge Built Halfway: A History of Memorial University College, 1925–1950* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990). Address: History Department, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's (Newfoundland) A1C 5S7, Canada.