

James D. Cameron. (1996). *For the People: A History of St. Francis Xavier University*. Montréal PQ: McGill-Queen's University Press. Pp. xx, 551; Price: \$39.95 Cdn.

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Canadian higher education's debt to Scotland has been well documented: John Strachan's involvement in the foundation of three different colleges, and the Scottish antecedents of Dalhousie and Queen's are among the better-known examples. But what is often overlooked is that for a sizable proportion of the early Scottish immigrants to Canada, the Catholic Highlanders, this tradition of "the democratic intellect" was a foreign concept. As Gaelic-speaking Catholics, their access to education had been severely restricted in Britain. Many of them settled in eastern Nova Scotia on their arrival in Canada with the goal of improving their economic status. But by the 1850s their descendants had progressed well past the pioneer stage, and the Bishop of Arichat (later Antigonish) began exploring the possibilities of founding an institution for training a Nova Scotia clergy, providing an avenue for social advancement through the learned professions for Scottish Catholics, and better preparing teachers for local schools.

St. Francis Xavier University (referred to throughout this book by the familiar "St. F.X.") resulted from these aspirations. Begun in 1853 as a seminary for theological studies, it soon expanded into preparatory and liberal subjects as well. Government funding was obtained at the start, degree-granting powers were acquired in 1866, and studies for women became possible starting in 1883 with an association with Mount St. Bernard College. With growing industrialization in the area the college expanded into law and applied science at the turn of the century. Following World War I pressure came from several sources, including some faculty and the Alumni Association, for the university to break out of its elitist mould and to "[expand] its mandate beyond the Catholic formation of youth to include the uplift of the entire region through adult education and economic cooperation" (p. 234); the result was the Antigonish Movement. Postwar expansion after 1945 brought increasing laicization of the institution and the eventual hiving off of the University College of Cape Breton around 1970, when the book's coverage ends.

In *For the People*, St. F.X. history professor James D. Cameron sets out to chronicle and interpret the development of the university's principal phases, emphasizing its relationships with the Roman Catholic Church and the people of eastern Nova Scotia. The book is intended to be both scholarly and of appeal to a general audience; endnotes are provided for the specialist. He largely succeeds in his goals. *For the People* makes a particularly strong contribution to revealing the human side of a number of academic issues. In particular, in its summary of the various maritime university federation proposals it presents an even-handed picture of the competing interests of a small, locally based institution and more cost-effective and productive larger universities, including the role played by the clashes of personalities and strong wills. At times the book approaches iconoclasm – we learn, for instance, that St. F.X.'s well-known Celtic studies program was actually a belated and marginal development.

It is difficult for a single institutional history to completely describe its subject; despite its length (almost 400 pages of text and close to 140 pages of endnotes), the omissions in *For the People* may disappoint some readers. As the author warns in the Preface, the St. F.X. Extension Department, the Coady International Institute, and the university's sports program are among many topics that deserve separate histories to do them justice. However, students of the institutional development of Canadian higher education may feel that the book's coverage of St. F.X.'s formal structure is not only deficient but misleading. Although strictly speaking this is not one of the goals the author explicitly sets for the book, and while he summarizes an abundance of relevant data in the endnotes, several of the generalizations he offers about St. F.X. are at odds with his facts. In particular, his picture of the institution's metamorphosis from seminary to university misrepresents the distinctiveness of its character. St. F.X.'s founder clearly intended the institution to be primarily a seminary for training priests, while educating the laity for secular purposes was a secondary concern. A major theme of the book is how these priorities quickly became reversed. The author suggests that St. F.X. was a college/seminary for only eight (p. 408, n.1) or ten years (p.414, n. 1) after its beginning in 1853, a college until 1945, and from then on a university. It was reportedly headed by a "rector" until 1906

and a “president” thereafter. Yet we are given a quotation from 1868 referring to the “double office of Rector of the Seminary and President of the College. . .” (p. 424, n. 10), five years after the supposed disappearance of the seminary. Whenever the seminary met its official end, it seems to have lived on for some time later in the hearts of the administration. For instance, when it was learned in 1938 that some American universities no longer recognized St. F.X. degrees as preparation for graduate work, the bishop/chancellor was lukewarm about taking action on academic upgrading since the institution’s “primary purpose, in his view, remained preparing ‘worthy candidates’ for seminary training” (p. 253). As late as 1954 the president of St. F.X. (a physicist) wrote that “St. Francis Xavier was first organized as a seminary and although theological studies have been a part of its curriculum only during a very few years of its existence, the fact remains that its primary function is to direct young men to the priesthood” (p. 268).

If St. F.X. ceased to be a seminary early in its history by some purely technical criterion, on technical grounds it was not a typical denominational Canadian college until well after its inception (if then), contrary to the representation in *For the People*. A college is a group of people incorporated for some public good, usually (but not necessarily) education. The first North American colonial colleges were boards (either of colonial officials or of church members) incorporated on a permanent basis by legislative charters to govern the operations of educational institutions. By contrast, St. F.X. began life as the creature of the Bishop of Antigonish, and although the author informs us that it moved in the direction of “a broader involvement of people in college administration” (p. 76), he is vague and unconvincing about that process. When, two years after it began operation in 1853, some form of corporate status seemed desirable to get government funding, the bishop incorporated his diocese rather than St. F.X. The college itself was officially incorporated in 1882, almost 30 years after its inception, when the government college grants were discontinued and the bishop had to replace the lost funding through public subscription. No doubt mindful of the negative publicity ensuing from past accusations of misappropriations of funds by the diocese, he engineered the creation of a board of governors to administer donations. However, the board seemed to exercise little authority for some time; the bishop had

veto power over them, and he continued to appoint and remove the president-rector, sometimes on whimsical grounds. As late as 1956 the bishop over-rode a board decision to finance a campus expansion with a bond issue. Even when records were available, little can be learned of the board's activities from this book.

The author had an immense problem with trying to establish the roles of the early boards and presidents, as there are few extant early records for the institution; documentation for the college administration is little better than that for the student dramatic society (founded in 1893). To create his picture of the institution's first years he had to resort to contemporary newspaper articles, oral reports of local tradition, and correspondence in the Vatican's archives by Church officials. However, this silence seems to be mute testimony in itself to the college's nature. We are not told that documents were lost in some accident such as a fire; rather, apparently no early official other than the bishop considered it worthwhile to record his activities for posterity. Virtually the first presidential papers date from 1893 (forty years after the institution's founding), when, two years into his term, the incumbent began filing the correspondence he received. It was not until his successor took office five years later that the further innovation of keeping copies of the president's outgoing letters was made.

Interestingly, St. F.X.'s origins appear to parallel an institution that pre-dates even the medieval college and university: the cathedral school. In the eighth century Charlemagne ordered all bishops in his empire to create schools as part of their cathedral establishments for the education of both the secular clergy and the laity. A study of St. F.X.'s similarities to these pre-medieval Christian schools would have been a more fruitful exercise than the author's Procrustean attempts to compare it to colonial colleges, based as they were on institutions that arose as a result of the Protestant Reformation.

However, these shortcomings can be remedied by future research, and do not detract seriously from the contributions of *For the People*. The author has set out to present the human side of a unique institution, and he succeeds admirably.

