

**McGill Journal of Education**  
**Revue des sciences de l'éducation de McGill**



**ANTHONY DI MASCIO. *The Idea of Popular Schooling in Upper Canada: Print Culture, Public Discourse, and the Demand for Education*. Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen's University Press. (2012). 243 pp. \$32.95 (paperback). (ISBN 978-0-7735-4046-0)**

Chloe Garcia

Volume 49, numéro 1, winter 2014

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1025783ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1025783ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Education, McGill University

ISSN

1916-0666 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Garcia, C. (2014). Compte rendu de [ANTHONY DI MASCIO. *The Idea of Popular Schooling in Upper Canada: Print Culture, Public Discourse, and the Demand for Education*. Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen's University Press. (2012). 243 pp. \$32.95 (paperback). (ISBN 978-0-7735-4046-0)]. *McGill Journal of Education / Revue des sciences de l'éducation de McGill*, 49(1), 259–261.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1025783ar>

ANTHONY DI MASCIO. *The Idea of Popular Schooling in Upper Canada: Print Culture, Public Discourse, and the Demand for Education*. Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen's University Press. (2012). 243 pp. \$32.95 (paperback). (ISBN 978-0-7735-4046-0).

In *The Idea of Popular Schooling in Upper Canada: Print Culture, Public Discourse, and the Demand for Education*, Anthony Di Mascio shows us how the concept of popular schooling – broadly defined by the author as “a common system of schooling available to all inhabitants” (p. 3) – was burgeoning in the public discourse of Upper Canada long before and between the School Acts of 1807, 1816 and 1846. His rigorous analysis of print culture from 1784 to 1832 paints a vivid portrait of the debate circling popular schooling at a time when Upper Canadian inhabitants faced the political, economic and ideological influences of both the British Empire and the United States. Di Mascio achieves his aim to reflect the progress of an idea outside the legislative world in Upper Canada, immersing readers in the divergent voices of political leaders, religious figures and journalists who participated in the creation of a philosophical foundation for Canada's schooling system.

The book stands out with its frequent use of non-governmental documents as primary sources, including newspapers, pamphlets and reports. Di Mascio quotes from newspapers such as William Lyon Mackenzie's *The Colonial Advocate*, known for its radical views, and the conservative *Kingston Gazette*, to engage readers with the people's concerns about schooling. Unfortunately, as the author states in his introduction, numerous populations were excluded from, or rarely present in print discourse, including Aboriginal people and women. Thus, he presents the question; to what extent did the newspapers reflect “public” discourse? Di Mascio tries to overcome this challenge by using a variety of sources, but it remains a contentious issue throughout the book. Chapter 1 explores how the Upper Canada elite sought to address the need for “government-aided schooling [which was] increasingly considered central to the colony's development and ability to survive on its own” (p. 28). In Chapter 2, Di Mascio focuses on the print literature surrounding school acts and demands for reform before addressing the relationship between the war

of 1812 and the Common School Act of 1816, Upper Canada's "first legislated universal school act" (p. 6). The latter was designed to provide accessible, government-funded schooling to all children in Upper Canada. The act and the subsequent amendments received some criticism from inhabitants of Upper Canada regarding the lack of financial support from the government and the American influence in schools. Di Mascio discusses the eventual demise of the Common School Act of 1816 in Chapters 3 and 4. Major shifts in educational discourse in the 1820s, spearheaded by personalities such as William Mackenzie and the bishop John Strachan, are explored in Chapters 5 and 6. Di Mascio investigates the reforms in popular schooling that occurred between 1828 and 1832 in the final two chapters.

Di Mascio's work is strategically structured as a linear narrative, drawing readers to see connections between the events in Upper Canada and the winds of change sweeping the education system. He uses a conversational style to present the back-and-forth dialogues on education. Readers get a good sense of the diversity of opinions shared in the public forum; however, due to the sheer density of sources, it becomes easy to lose track of the arguments. Di Mascio frequently employs questions to lead his readers through the chapters. While this tactic did clarify the author's intent at times, I found the sheer number of questions in the text excessive, and it was often unclear whether they were rhetorical or not.

This book is ideal for academics looking into the history of education or politics in Upper Canada, and contributions of the press to the development of education legislation. In addition to addressing how public discourse helped shape public schooling in Upper Canada, Di Mascio points out that his work fills another gap in the literature by focusing on education in early Upper Canada (pre-1846). He also claims that the lack of state records between 1784 and 1832 left little information about the progress of the idea of popular schooling. Yet, the newspapers he uncovers offer valuable insight on the latter. What is missing from Di Mascio's work, however, is a better idea of his sources' backgrounds. He refers to some newspapers as 'moderate', and others as 'radical', but he fails to give these terms meaning. I was often left with questions such as, what readership did this source have? How recognized were its journalists? Giving the readers a better sense of the newspapers' influence and power would have emphasized their relevance in print discourse.

A major strength in the book is how Di Mascio connects the political and social contexts of Britain and the USA with the discourse of education. He argues that the War of 1812 brought on new ways of thinking, due to the influx of Americans into Upper Canada and to the Loyalists' growing fear that a similar conflict would arise in the north. His analysis of the effects of the war on education in Upper Canada builds on existing theories that "the pattern of settlement in the colony, the comparative poverty of colonial

society, and the failure of traditional institutions to carry the burdens they were expected to bear in England” (Gidney, 1980, p. 103) contributed to the numerous changes in the school system. Surprisingly, Di Mascio does not delve into the state of schooling in Lower Canada, although there was also a growing public discourse about education emerging in the newspapers between 1814 and 1823. Curtis (2011) claims that “issues of pedagogy, class and market relations were at the fore in the press debate” (p. 617) in Lower Canada at that time. An interesting aspect of his work is Di Mascio’s critique of the recognition attributed to Ryerson and Strachan for their contributions to educational legislation. In his introduction and conclusion, he argues that the credit for popular schooling should include the print discourse in which the idea was developed, and throughout his book, successfully proves this point.

To summarize, *The Idea of Popular Schooling in Upper Canada: Print Culture, Public Discourse, and the Demand for Education* makes the compelling case that our education system today is not just the product of a few well-developed school acts from the hands of a few reformers. The adoption of public schooling in Upper Canada resulted from complex and ongoing conversations between the press, political groups, and religious authorities in the public arena regarding education, accessibility and the needs of the inhabitants. Overall, the book provides readers with a good sense of how Upper Canada was progressing as a nation in the process of developing its own identity and structure.

CHLOE GARCIA *McGill University*

#### REFERENCES

- Curtis, B. (2011). My brothers were all ‘learnt out’ and my sons soon would be: Public debate over schooling in Quebec, 1814–1823. *History of Education: Journal of the History of Education Society*, 40(5), 615-633. doi: 10.1080/0046760X.2011.565809
- Gidney, R. D. (1980). Making nineteenth-century school systems: The Upper Canadian experience and its relevance to English historiography, *History of Education: Journal of the History of Education Society*, 9(2), 101-116. doi: 10.1080/0046760800090202