

In Memoriam: R. D. Gidney

R. D. (Bob) Gidney died at home on November 11, 2025, at the age of 86. In a career spanning six decades, he wrote extensively, deeply, and innovatively on the history of education in Canada, frequently co-authoring with his life and academic partner, Wyn Millar (herself an esteemed historian).

The history of Canadian education came into its own as a field of study in the 1970s and 1980s. Gidney and Millar were at the centre of that evolution. In 1989, they joined Rebecca Coulter and Ruby Heap as the founding editors of this journal¹ (*Historical Studies in Education/Revue d'histoire de l'éducation*), which thrives today. They both contributed immensely and continuously to the Canadian History of Education Association, founded in 1980, and were awarded the association's Distinguished Contribution Award together in 2014.

Gidney first established his presence in the field with several articles in the early 1970s that set new standards for Canadian educational historiography. In "Upper Canadian Public Opinion and Common School Improvement in the 1830s"² and "Elementary Education in Upper Canada: A Reassessment,"³ he traced the growing interest in public schooling. Departing from the radical revisionism popular at the time, Gidney argued that public schooling was not solely a project that certain political elites imposed, but that it also found wide support within the population at large, particularly among farming communities, which came to appreciate the practical benefits of literacy. His work skilfully charted the gradual emergence of state-run schooling, emphasizing the tensions and compromises between reformers and families of different class backgrounds and between centralized authority and local power in shaping educational policy,⁴ themes that he and Millar refined in "From Voluntarism to State Schooling: The Middle Class and the Creation of the Public School System in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Ontario."⁵

Earlier, Gidney and his University of Western Ontario colleague Douglas Lawr published *Educating Canadians: A Documentary History of Public Education*. It was designed in their words to "meet the difficulties we experienced in finding suitable research materials for our seminars and tutorials in Canadian educational history."⁶ The volume also aimed to identify national—rather than purely provincial—patterns in the development of Canadian education. Thanks to the careful selection of documents and the coherent narrative that linked them, the book remains an impressive—and still useful—contribution more than five decades after its publication.

Far more scholarship was yet to come. Gidney and Millar co-authored three extraordinary books that will likely endure for generations as foundational to the history of Canadian education: *Inventing Secondary Education: The Rise of the High School in Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (1990); *Professional Gentlemen: The Professions in Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (1994); and *How Schools Worked: Public Education in English Canada, 1900–1940* (2012).⁷

In each of these books, the empirical research was both exhaustive and imaginative. *How Schools Worked* is a veritable encyclopedia of data on who attended school, who taught, how teachers were supervised, and how schools were funded and governed. Across all of their projects, Gidney and Millar drew on an exceptionally wide range of sources, including census material, assessment rolls, government and school board records, magazines, newspapers, and biographies. Excelling at breadth, they were also masters of the illustrative case study. *Inventing Secondary Education* and *Professional Gentlemen* avoided a narrow Toronto focus, with the authors taking their readers to Cobourg, Guelph, Simcoe, and other Ontario communities of similar size and characteristics. In *How Schools Worked*, Gidney and Millar intentionally selected four distinctive English-Canadian communities to focus on: Winnipeg, Fredericton, Blairmore, Alberta, and the Kipp School District 1589 in rural Saskatchewan. “They are not necessarily more ‘typical,’ than any other place,” they wrote, “but these four communities offer an opportunity to describe in some depth, and to allow comparisons between, educational developments in one big city, one more modest urban community, one medium-sized village, and one rural school district.”⁸ This was Gidney and Millar at their best, using vivid local stories to capture everyday national trends in a giant country.

Interpretively, *Inventing Secondary Education*, *Professional Gentlemen*, and *How Schools Worked* each followed its own path, making major contributions to the new social history that reshaped Canadian historiography from the 1970s onward. Gidney and Millar habitually eschewed the theoretical and ideological frameworks that informed much academic writing. *Inventing Secondary Education*, like Gidney’s earlier work on elementary education, challenged the view that the rise of public education in the mid nineteenth century was simply a topdown project by elites to control other people’s children. Egerton Ryerson and his departmental officials promoted a rigid “Georgian” ideal at the secondary level, emphasizing classical education for boys only. Parents, on the other hand, increasingly demanded both more utilitarian forms of high school and advanced education for their daughters. The system that officials built adapted in significant ways to these community-based pressures.

In *Inventing Secondary Education*, Gidney and Millar also addressed the complicated genesis and non-linear development of high schools. Once enrolling everyone from young children to middle-aged adults, and not organized into subjects, credits, and grades as they are today, secondary schools historically had no “fixed meaning.”⁹ As if assembling a jigsaw puzzle, Gidney and Millar tirelessly pieced together the Ontario high school’s institutional origins as they coalesced from a clutter of varying pedigrees. Researchers require this volume to fully comprehend the transition of common schools to public schools, and grammar schools to high schools that

occurred across the nineteenth century.

Like *Inventing Secondary Education, Professional Gentlemen* is a nuanced and indispensable source for understanding how privileged occupational groups acquired and consolidated professional status in the nineteenth century. Through effective political lobbying, close ties with universities, and growing confidence drawn from the rise of science, medical associations, for example, repelled challenges to their exclusive licensing powers. This was a strategy that other professional practitioners then tried to emulate, with mixed success. Historian Colin Howell praised this “meticulously researched and gracefully written” study, but suggested that the book might have achieved a greater historiographical significance if it had analyzed professionalization not only as the “waxing and waning of cultural authority and status,” but as “an aspect of a broader process of class formation and reformulation in a constantly changing capitalist system of production and state formation.”¹⁰ Gidney and Millar might well have responded that while class tension and reproduction mattered greatly in the period they examined, the cultural components of professional identity formation had been understudied or overlooked in the literature. Such a debate would still be worth having.

In a fourth book, *From Hope to Harris: The Reshaping of Ontario's Schools* (1999), Gidney surveyed major policy shifts in education from the 1950s to the 1990s.¹¹ He built this volume from his decades of teaching about the post-Second World War transformations in Ontario education, a number of which Gidney experienced as a professor of education at Althouse College of Education, which later became the Faculty of Education at Western University. (It was formerly the University of Western Ontario, a name change he deplored.)

Hope to Harris has many themes and audiences. It is a far-reaching study of the development of the late nineteenth and twentieth-century “experiment with universal education, including secondary education for all.”¹² However, the book’s analysis of contemporary events was just as thorough, just as important. Gidney effectively traced the genesis and impact of the Mike Harris Progressive Conservative government’s “Common Sense Revolution,” which was still unfolding as he completed the book. As loudly as opposition critics denounced Harris’s reforms, Gidney made it clear that controversial policies—such as the amalgamation of school boards, the limiting of school trustee salaries, the creation of the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) to independently measure school quality, and the forming of a College of Teachers—had all been proposed, though never entirely enacted, by previous Liberal and New Democratic Party administrations. Gidney also described the financial and political turmoil sparked by new initiatives, including Bill 160, which stripped school boards of their long-held authority to set local property taxes. The erosion of local governance today sweeping across Ontario can be directly linked to the (neo-)conservative vision of the Harris era, a topic Gidney deftly explored.

The style of *Hope to Harris* is breezier and more argumentative than that of other publications. At heart, Gidney was a traditionalist who privately questioned educational progressivism in the post-1960s era, which he described in this book as “The Pedagogy of Joy.” Facts matter. Drill is not a dirty word, Gidney would have said. *How Schools Worked* asked rhetorically, “Does it matter if students can’t tell a

gerund from a gerbil?"¹³ Yet such views, and private comments, were friendly jabs, never angry rants. As with his other scholarship, Gidney's writing in *From Hope to Harris* was clear-eyed, thorough, and insightful. It should be among the first recommended readings for students of late twentieth-century education. Like much of Gidney's scholarship, it was published after his 1996 retirement from Western.

Gidney also served as an expert witness in several education cases, including the appeal to the Supreme Court of Canada of Bill 30, which fully funded separate schools in Ontario.¹⁴ At the time of his passing, he was working with Millar on two books: a history of education in Canada since 1900, and an examination of the historical role and significance of Egerton Ryerson. Gidney's extensive encyclopedia entry on Ryerson, an update of his original contribution,¹⁵ will appear in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*.

Among a number of awards for their scholarship, Gidney and Millar received two prestigious Floyd S. Chalmers prizes, one for *Inventing Secondary Education* and the other for *Professional Gentlemen*.

Apart from their own scholarly work, Gidney and Millar encouraged, mentored, and directly assisted younger academics as they found their way in the profession, including those with whom they differed intellectually. Their priority was building and strengthening historical writing, and they appreciated high-quality research from all perspectives, reflected as well, in their exemplary editing of *Historical Studies in Education/Revue d'histoire de l'éducation*.

R. D. (Bob) Gidney and W. P. J. (Wyn) Millar have left an indelible mark on educational historiography. Bob's work has enriched the discipline and the profession, and his absence will be profound and lamented.

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Notes

- 1 Winnifred Millar, Rebecca Coulter, Robert Gidney, and Ruby Heap, "To Our Readers," *Historical Studies in Education/Revue d'histoire de l'éducation* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 1–2.
- 2 R. D. Gidney, "Upper Canadian Public Opinion and Common School Improvement in the 1830s," *Histoire sociale/Social History* 5 (April 1972): 48–60.
- 3 R. D. Gidney, "Elementary Education in Upper Canada: A Reassessment," *Ontario History* 65, no. 3 (March 1973): 169–85.
- 4 R. D. Gidney, "Centralization and Education: The Origins of an Ontario Tradition," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 7 (1972): 33–47. See also R. D. Gidney and Douglas Lawr, "Who Ran the Schools? Local Influence on Education Policy in Nineteenth-Century Ontario," *Ontario History* 72, no. 3 (March 1980): 131–43.
- 5 R. D. Gidney and W. P. J. Millar, "From Voluntarism to State Schooling: The Middle Class and the Creation of the Public School System in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Ontario," *Canadian Historical Review* 66, no. 4 (December 1985): 443–73.
- 6 Douglas Lawr and Robert Gidney, *Educating Canadians: A Documentary History of Public Education* (Van Nostrand Reinhold Ltd., 1973), 6.

- 7 R. D. Gidney and W. P. J. Millar, *Inventing Secondary Education: The Rise of the High School in Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990); R. D. Gidney and W. P. J. Millar, *Professional Gentlemen: The Professions in Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (University of Toronto Press, 1994); R. D. Gidney and W. P. J. Millar, *How Schools Worked: Public Education in English Canada, 1900–1940* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012).
- 8 Gidney and Millar, *How Schools Worked*, xxii.
- 9 Gidney and Millar, *Inventing Secondary Education*, 6.
- 10 Colin Howell, review of *Professional Gentlemen: The Professions in Nineteenth-Century Ontario*, by R. D. Gidney and W. P. J. Millar, *Historical Studies in Education/Revue d'histoire de l'éducation* 8, no. 1 (1996): 100–01.
- 11 R. D. Gidney, *From Hope to Harris: The Reshaping of Ontario's Schools* (University of Toronto Press, 1999).
- 12 Gidney, *From Hope to Harris*, 286.
- 13 Gidney and Millar, *How Schools Worked*, 345.
- 14 G. M. Dickinson and R. D. Gidney, "History and Advocacy: Some Reflections on the Historian's Role in Litigation," *Canadian Historical Review* 68, no. 4 (December 1987): 576–85.
- 15 R. D. Gidney, "Egerton Ryerson," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. 11, 1881–1899 (University of Toronto Press and Les presses de l'Université Laval, 1987). https://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/ryerson_egerton_11E.html.