

The United Church of Canada: A History By Don Schweitzer (editor)

James Tyler Robertson

Volume 104, Number 2, Fall 2012

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065447ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065447ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Robertson, J. T. (2012). Review of [*The United Church of Canada: A History* By Don Schweitzer (editor)]. *Ontario History*, 104(2), 165–167.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1065447ar>

sued the colonial province for the return of his investment in the seized ship.

Bell illuminates in his book a critical moment in international military law where the distinction between “terrorism” or “piracy” and “naval commando warfare” was put to the test. Confederate Navy commandos operating from Canada, if captured in US territory, faced the death penalty as “spies” or “guerrillas.” Bell recounts in detail the capture on the Suspension Bridge at Niagara Falls of the Confederate naval officer John Yates Beall attempting to return to Canada from an operation to intercept a train carrying POWs in Buffalo. Beall had previously led some of the Lake Erie missions from Canada and Federal authorities were determined to make an example of him. Bell covers in detail Beall’s

subsequent trial and execution in February 1865.

Although Bell near the end of his book begins to overreach with an inconclusive chapter speculating on John Wilkes Booth’s presence in Canada, overall his book is an excellent treatment of Confederate operations on the Great Lakes and a valuable addition to understanding the scope of the impact that the American Civil War had on Canada, the issue of border security and ‘terrorism’ in the mid-nineteenth century and the evolving definition of ‘unlawful combatant.’ Bell’s history has resonance in the post-9/11 world.

Peter Vronsky,
Department of History,
Ryerson University

The United Church of Canada: A History

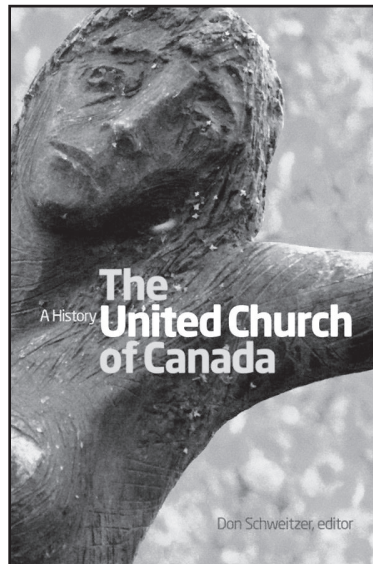
By Don Schweitzer (editor)

Kitchener-Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2012. 330 pages. \$39.95 hardcover.
ISBN 978-1-55458-331-7. (www.wlupress.ca)

Featuring chronological and thematic sections, this collection of essays, edited by Don Schweitzer, attempts to tell the story of the United Church of Canada in ways that are faithful to its past, in the hopes that it can inform those who have a vested interest in the church’s future. In the opening section, Schweitzer notes that while the United Church looms large over the field of Canadian studies in areas as diverse as feminism, church history, national policy, cul-

tural issues, education, foreign policy and multiculturalism “there exists no academic history of the United Church of Canada itself.” (xii).

Obviously, looking at over eighty years of a denomination’s history is a daunting task and so this review will begin with comments on the basic layout of the book. The index, while not exhaustive, is satisfactory for quick referencing. However, it is more advisable to examine the table of contents in order to access any partic-



ular time or topic of interest to the reader. The first eight chapters follow a chronological path in order to explore more fully the developments of the church from the nineteenth-century genesis of the union idea—ably detailed by C.T. McIntire—to the church's changing identity in the twenty first, aptly titled and explained by Bartlett as the church heading into the new millennium. As with any survey work, the time being covered is too long a period for one chapter to cover with much depth. Such large expanses of time necessitate either cursory treatments of major events or deeper reflections of a few key items as determined by the author. As with all surveys this is not necessarily detrimental to the intentions of the book but does leave the reader pining for more information. One of the strongest features of this section is the list of influential leaders, key reports, actions, statements, and demography present on the first page of each chapter. Their presence proved very helpful and did much to further clarify the time period under examination.

The thematic section seeks to explore and explain the ideas that have helped define the character of the United Church. The great strength of this section is that it covers some ground in addressing the oversights of the chronological section. Anyone who has read surveys has encountered either authors who attempt to put too much into one chapter at the cost of coherence or the over-simplifying of complex issues in the interest of space. Schweitzer and the authors should be praised for their ability to avoid redundancy and create an accessible volume with historical integrity.

Finally, the contributors each have strong connections to both the United Church and various aspects of academia. Each chapter is well-written and researched and introduces the reader to the unique academic process and prose of its contributor,

and this helps to accomplish Schweitzer's desire for a book that in its multi-vocal yet united construction imitates the church it seeks to explore.

McIntire's opening chapter reminds the reader that Local Union Churches are the oft-forgotten fourth church in the union as well as informing the subsequent chapters' discussions on the desires of the church to be both a united and uniting denomination. Manson's chapter on the Second World (Chapter three) is an interesting departure from the broader chronological approach of other chapters in the first section and gives focus to the global conflict that consumed the first half of the decade. Stebner's preceding chapter on the 1930s provides a solid argument for the need to focus on that conflict and its ramifications and Young's subsequent chapter ably picks up in 1946 as he explores the so-called "Golden Age" of the church. Following on Young, Beardsall's explanation of the sixties as the decade of decline from which the church would never fully recover succinctly introduces the cultural issues that are further illuminated in the remaining chapters of the section. Chapter eleven (*United Church Mission Goals and First Nations Peoples*) proves unique in that it is penned by two authors who collaborate not as writing in one voice but as two separate writers each informing the other in order to provide original scholarship and extended readings from Native sources. Caron's, Bourgeois' and Kerwin's challenging and insightful chapters (nine, ten, and thirteen) offer food for thought for scholars, clergy and laity as they examine the ramifications of worship and theological developments, and Davies' treatment of the Jewish-Palestinian tensions within the United Church (Chapter twelve) reflects the church's desire to be a thoughtful Canadian voice in global contexts.

While there are references to the importance of congregational life and, in some cases, congregational ignorance of national church decisions and culture, the focus of this book remains firmly ensconced within the writings of the governing bodies of the United Church. The examination of “elite” sources could open this volume up to a

methodological critique from social historians but such a comment only strengthens Schweitzer’s hope that this work, “will be supplemented in the future by many more studies.” (xviii).

James Tyler Robertson,
McMaster University