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[See table of contents](#)

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Elise A. Corbet

Frontiers of Medicine: A History of Medical Education and Research at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, University of Alberta Press, 1990. Pp xx + 196, appendix, notes, bibliography, index, illustrated. ISBN 0-88864-231-8.

Elise Corbet's history of the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Alberta was prepared to commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the school. Her account is rich in detail and atmosphere. Corbet traces the transformation of the "parochial medical school in the hinterland of medical activity," founded in 1913, into "a dynamic learning centre with a firmly established national position."

One of Corbet's great strengths is her ability to evoke the spirit of the school in its early years as the only medical faculty west of Manitoba. She makes good use of archival materials to capture the colourful personalities of the faculty, their conflicts, dreams and problems. She vividly describes the medical students who travelled to the remote campus on horseback or by treading carefully on the girders of a railway bridge, and who took their anatomy classes in the power plant. The small band of early faculty members, several of whom were talented researchers, had to conduct their investigations with few resources and find what time they could outside their busy teaching schedules. Henry Marshall Tory, president of the university and later president of the National Research Council, was instrumental in building up the school because he strongly believed in providing medical training for western students who would otherwise have had to make the long, expensive trip to Central Canada. One of the enduring themes in the book is that the early faculty and students experienced a great sense of isolation from the more established medical circles of "the East." This isolation only began to lift in the 1950s and 60s with improved communications and more opportunities for travel.

The author examines several different facets of the medical school: education, research activities, and student life. Corbet avoids one of the downfalls of many commemorative histories—that of describing the institution as if it were in a vacuum. She integrates developments at the faculty with broader changes, from the dramatic shifts of Albertan politics and the devastation wrought by two world wars and the Great Depression, to the evolving philosophies of medical education, increasing specialization, and changing public expectations of medicine. She gives special attention to the Alberta Heritage Foundation for Medical Research, a product of the province's oil wealth, which fostered a phenomenal boom in medical research in Alberta in the 1980s. There is a short but effective account of the obstacles that women faced as medical students in the early years, from de facto admission quotas, to the discriminatory attitudes of their male classmates and professors. Unfortunately, this discussion does not extend to the status of women on faculty, nor does it provide more than a sketch of the changes that have occurred since the 1950s with the dramatic influx of women into medicine.

Corbet is not uniformly successful in her efforts. Her account of the later years suffers somewhat in comparison to her lively presentation of the early decades. The review of the school's history from

post-war expansion to the present day is drier and less exhaustive, perhaps because it is more difficult to depict the larger and more complex institution the school has become. Emphasis is placed on administrative changes. Corbet explores the school's reaction to such landmarks in the development of medical curriculum as the Flexner Report of 1910, the systems method initiated by Case Western Reserve in Cleveland in the 1950s, and the GPEP report of the Association of American Medical Colleges of 1984, but curiously neglects to discuss the challenge posed by the problem-based learning programme pioneered at McMaster University and practised closer to home at the University of Calgary. She also, mentions but fails to examine the school's response to the very great problems posed to today's medical educators by increasingly complex technology and growing restrictions on health care spending. The first half of the book is a chronological overview while the second half contains separate chapters on student life, education, and research; unfortunately, this structure leads to some awkward repetition.

There are few histories of medical schools in Canada and this book is certainly a welcome contribution to the history of medical education in Canada and to western Canadian history. It provides the special perspective of a school that began far from the principal centres of medical education and research in Central Canada and grew to become a respected institution in its own right. An appendix provides the dates of the founding of Canadian medical schools and the names of presidents, deans, department heads, award winners and student society presidents.

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