EDUCATING L.J. BREITHAUPT: ONE STUDENT’S EXPERIENCE OF COMMERCIAL COLLEGE IN TORONTO, 1872.

The diary of L.J. Breithaupt of Berlin, Ontario provides a summary of his experience at Day’s commercial College in 1872. The diary provides a look at the nature of the studies and the expectations of the students at one of the early commercial colleges in Toronto.

On the afternoon of Monday, January 15, 1872, young L.J. Breithaupt and his parents visited Toronto from their home in Berlin Ontario. The purpose of the trip was to enroll L.J. in a commercial college run by James E. Day, late of the Toronto campus of the Bryant and Stratton school. When he and his wife returned to Berlin that evening Louis Breithaupt had set their oldest son on a program of study designed to make him a successful businessman. The younger Breithaupt would record his impressions of his six-month course of study in a diary he kept faithfully. His experiences help to explain the nature of the education he received and hint at the reasons behind, and results of, the decision to educate L.J.

L.J.’s father, Louis Breithaupt, had been born in Germany and immigrated to the United States with his parents in 1843 when Louis was sixteen. The family had settled in Buffalo, New York and established a tannery, pursuing the craft that had been the family’s livelihood for several generations. Like his father and grandfather, Louis had been an apprentice in the tanning craft in Germany, developing his skills within the family and applying them under the supervision of his father. This was the pattern the family followed in Buffalo. (Thomson, 1992, 25-30)

In 1853 Louis married a young woman from Berlin and in 1861 business and family circumstances led the couple to move their family to the small but thriving Upper Canadian community. (Thomson, 1992 37-43) By the time he arrived in Berlin Breithaupt had experienced both the growth of the family business and its absorption by a larger firm. He had mastered not only the English language, but the vagaries and complexities of North American business. His education had been practical, the lessons learned as part of his business life rather than in a class room.

The lack of formal education did not seem to hamper Louis’ business success. As L.J. considered his future in 1872 his father’s leather tanning firm had grown into a significant business in the bustling community of Berlin. Breithaupt had also invested widely in real estate, including a hotel and a commercial block in the core of the town. (English and McLaughlin, 1983, 27-8). Why then, given this success did Louis Breithaupt decide that his eldest son needed more than the elementary and early secondary education he received in Berlin? At first it seemed that he did not see further education as necessary. At age sixteen L.J had assumed an active role in the family business. His diary records a wide variety of tasks performed for, or with, his father. In January 1871, L.J. accompanied his father to a Berlin council meeting where they argued their case for a municipal bonus for the re-construction necessitated by a fire. (Breithaupt Hewetson Clark Collection: L.J. Breithaupt Diary, January 16, 1871) A month later L.J. was part of the negotiations to sub-contract some leather tanning to outside sources until the fire damage was repaired. (L.J. Breithaupt Diary, February 8, 1871) Throughout the year L.J worked in both the tannery and the leather store, but he performed a myriad of other tasks as well. These included meeting train shipments of hides to insure quality and accompanying family members collecting rents and mortgage payments. (L.J.B. Diary, 1871 passim) It seemed that the basic education Berlin schools afforded his son was enough for Louis. The real education would take place in the workplace.

The family’s view seemed to change at the beginning of 1872. In his diary entry for January 5 L.J. finished his discussion of the day with the information about his future.

I wrote to Toronto on Tuesday last (January 2) to Day’s Commercial College for one of their circulars and received it on Thursday. I intend to go to college there for about six months, starting next week if nothing happens. (L.J.B. Diary, January 5, 1872)

It appears that “nothing happened” as L.J. began his college career on Monday, January 15, 1872.

The choice to attend a specialized commercial college reflects many of the currents in both business circles and the field of business education at the time. In A Living Profit: Studies in the Social History of Canadian Business Michael Bliss outlined the disappointment many in the business community felt with Canada’s education system. He cites the Canadian Bankers’ Association and their lament that the system wasted months on “the indiscriminate study of algebra and mathematics and dead languages” while the Journal of Commerce is quoted in its view that, “As to all practical affairs of daily life, the minds of vast numbers of those who have gone through our high schools and universities are usually as blank as though they had been trained on a distant star.” (Bliss, 1974, 118) Paul Moreland’s history of business education in Canada makes clear that this concern was not restricted to the university system. Even the public schools
were found wanting as sources of young men (and it was most often young men at this stage) who could cope with the rudiments of business. (Moreland, 1977, 101)

The conflict between the vision of public education that sought the combination of mental discipline and general knowledge and that which preferred more pragmatic commercial education had existed in Ontario for many years. (Boothman, 2000, 19-20) The discussion on what constituted the best use of public education funds after the elementary level was influenced not just by the obvious class implications but also by gender. Nancy S. Jackson and Jane S. Gaskell have explored the reluctance of Egerton Ryerson to expand the commercial aspects of grammar school education and connected it clearly to his similar reluctance to allow young girls to go to those schools. (Jackson and Gaskell, 1987, 181) R.D. Gidney and D.A. Lawr note the inclusion of bookkeeping in the curriculum for the new secondary schools in Ontario in 1871, but also note the haphazard nature of meeting that curriculum that plagued its early years. (Gidney and Lawr, 1979, 461) If, as Bliss and others make clear, the business community was left unhappy by the results of this attempt to create a school system that met their needs among many, then the private sector was more than willing to step into the breech.

Paul Moreland begins his examination of business education with a lengthy background stretching back to the Middle Ages, but his focus becomes clear in a discussion on the small private schools that developed in the north eastern United States in the early part of the nineteenth century. Moreland connects the expansion of the United States, and of its economy, to the increasing need for pragmatic business education. (Moreland, 1977, 45-6) By the 1850s, these schools had become widespread in the United States, and the partnership of H.B. Bryant and H.D. Stratton moved this trend to its next logical step with a chain of private business colleges that numbered more than fifty by the time the partners opened a college in Toronto in 1862. (Moreland, 1977, 47)

When the Bryant and Stratton School arrived in Toronto it not only competed with the British American Commercial College, the city’s first such school, it also expanded on the informal lectures and classes that were taking place in Mechanics Institutes and elsewhere in the city. (Jackson and Gaskell, 1987, 185) It was introduced during a special evening address at the Toronto Mechanics Institute entitled “The Higher Law and Mission of Commerce”. As the Toronto Globe enthusiastically reported, speaker Elihu Burritt linked the great march of mankind, the westward expansion of the North America and the future harmony of nations to the continued expansion of commerce. (Toronto Globe, November 25, 1862, 2) At the conclusion of Burritt’s talk H.B. Bryant himself was introduced and announced the opening of the Toronto branch of the school under the control of Mr. James E. Day, a graduate of the Bryant and Stratton Cleveland campus. Within a decade it had been joined by at least five other colleges across the province. (Moreland, 1977, 111) Even as Ontario was moving to introduce aspects of commercial education into the secondary school curriculum, more and more young men like L.J. Breithaupt were drawn to programs which were specialized to the new challenges of the business world.
On Monday, January 15, 1872, L.J. Breithaupt recorded a momentous day in his diary.

Father, Mother and myself went to Toronto today with the 10:30 train, arriving here at about 1 o’clock and after taking dinner in the American Hotel, proceeded to our business. We were at Mr. Days Commercial College in the afternoon and also in the evening, when father paid Mr. Day the Tuition fee for me to go to college, which is $45.00 including the books. (L.J.B. Diary, 15 January 1872)

The major textbook for L.J.’s studies in Toronto was Duffy’s Book-keeping, which would be supplemented by lectures and arithmetic exercises. The family also arranged room in a boarding house for L.J. Having established their son in the city, his parents departed for Berlin.

The tuition charged for L.J. seems to have been within the standard range for schools like Day’s. In her examination of similar schools in the United States Janice Weiss found that most charged between $10.00 and $35.00 for a three-month course while charges for longer terms, or the “perpetual scholarship” ranged higher. (Weiss, 1981, 409) L.J.’s decision to start in mid-January was also not unusual. Weiss found that most schools allowed students to begin at any point in the year. (Weiss, 1981, 409) Day’s system allowed the student to study at their own speed and apply to take examinations in various subjects when they felt ready to do so. The Breithaupts’ estimate of six months proved a bit cautious as L.J. would complete his studies by early June 1872.

L.J. began classes on Wednesday, January 17, 1872. He was joined in his studies by a young man from Grafton County Ontario, C.A. Lapp. The two students had begun class the same day and, as L.J. later noted, “We have been constantly working together which enables us to get on better and faster.” (L.J.B. Diary, 18 April, 1872) The first day provided hints at the nature of the education L.J. would receive. The day was taken up with lessons in book-keeping followed by exercises from his book. (L.J.B. Diary, 17 January, 1872) The rest of the week was much the same. Arithmetic exercises and book-keeping exercises filled L.J.’s days and his diary. The following Monday, L.J. grumbled to his diary. “My lessons might have been a little better in college today,” but whether the student or the teacher was the target of this mild critique is unclear. (L.J. B. Diary, 22 January, 1872) In any case, it did not detract from a steady regimen of arithmetic exercises.

One distraction that would arise regularly during L.J.’s college career made its first appearance in the form of a letter from home that he received in his second week in Toronto. The letter asked L.J. to visit some Toronto stores and place orders for his father for some household goods. (L.J.B. Diary, 25 January, 1872). This minor inconvenience was accentuated the following week when Breithaupt took a full day off from his lessons to escort his aunt on a shopping trip in the city. By March, the interruptions had become less personal and more focused on the Breithaupt business. When the company’s
commercial traveler came to Toronto, L.J. spent the day visiting Toronto leather houses with him. On these occasions the young student would often return to the college in the evening to catch up, but that was not always possible. (L.J.B. Diary, 7 March, 1872) The diary records five times in March which saw Breithaupt leather business superseded the college. On one of those occasions L.J. returned to Berlin to work in the tannery and store to meet a short term staff crisis. (L.J.B. Diary, March 1872)

Weiss notes in her study that at most schools students were required to attend every day while enrolled, a rule that Day clearly did not enforce - if it existed at his school. (Weiss, 1981, 409) The diary indicates no overt frustration with the family visits and commercial duties that took L.J. away from class, but it is significant that as he approached the examination stage of his course in May and June of 1872 the visits and requests stopped. It might be tempting to suggest that the requests from home indicate a lack of appreciation for the challenges of the course, or the seriousness of L.J.’s intentions, but the temptation for the growing family business to use the presence of a family member in Toronto must have been enormous. In the end, the family withdrew somewhat to allow him to focus on the conclusion of the course, which is, perhaps, a better indication of their attitude.

The course of study at Day’s school touched on the many aspects of business life a young man might encounter in his working life. Students studied book-keeping, styles of business letters and aspects of business law. By the end of the course the student was expected to have completed the books for a hypothetical business for a full year, as well as other challenges. L.J. struggled with some of this. His first attempt at a monthly trial balance was, he found, “a little difficult to do.” (L.J.B. Diary, 2 February, 1872) Eventual success was noted clearly in an entry which summarized the chore. “I was to college this evening and finished up the first month on my card, balancing the cash book, Bank book etc. I am now ready to start the second month.” (L.J.B. Diary, 7 February, 1872) The successful completion of each month’s “card” was noted in the diary and an April entry noted, “I got out my trial balance for 6 months this forenoon after trying only once.” (L.J.B. Diary, 4 April, 1872)

One aspect of the course of study in which L.J. excelled was the commercial law segment. His success is indicated by the scarcity of reference to the subject in the diary until early April when the young student decided to “go up for” the examination in commercial law. The examination, which ran over several days, consisted of one hundred and fifteen questions, each of which L.J. answered correctly. This placed him alone at the head of the class in that subject. (L.J.B. Diary, 30 April, 1872) A further indication of L.J.’s embrace of the topic came a month after his completion of the course. The young businessman need his pigeon coop expanded. He prepared a legal contract and gave the job to two of his younger brothers and a friend. Each expectation of the workers was detailed in the contract and the youngsters were required to sign. (L.J.B. Diary, 27 July 1872)

By May, L.J. had begun to write the examinations in many of the areas of study. This did not mean that classes stopped, but it did require his constant attention. Double
entry books, single entry cards, ledgers and business forms and business letters each required the completion of class exercises and an exam. In early May, L.J. took the exam on the course text, Duff's Book-keeping, and was annoyed to have missed two questions, but passed none-the-less. (L.J.B. Diary, May 6-10, 1972) L.J. might be forgiven some distraction given the news that accompanied his studies in the diary. Toronto was in the midst of a smallpox epidemic, which took the lives of two boarders in L.J.'s neighborhood. Eventually L.J. determined that action was needed and noted that he had been vaccinated in both arms, at the cost of $1.00. (L.J.B. Diary, 11 May 1872) While this proved successful in keeping L.J. from suffering from smallpox, the “vaccinates”, as he called the wounds, caused him much discomfort. As late as a month later the scars had not dried.

Throughout the course, L.J. struggled with arithmetic and clearly this exam caused him concern. By June, he was immersed in this dreaded exam. “I find the arithmetic Examinations very tough and I have come to the conclusion that it is about the hardest of all examinations.” (L.J.B Diary, 11 June, 1872) This situation was not helped by the continued irritation of the “vaccinates”. The difficulty of arithmetic convinced L.J. to leave that exam almost to the last. On June 13, 1872 L.J. finished the arithmetic exam in the afternoon, came back to school in the evening to write a final examination on renewal notes and proclaimed himselffinished: “I am now done and am a free man again.” (L.J.B. Diary, 13 June, 1872)

L.J. had done well. As he himself noted, he had done better than he expected. He had passed all of his examinations, some with 100% scores. By his own calculation, he had answered more than 96 questions out of every 100 correctly. This score qualified L.J. for a grade B diploma. In the time that L.J. attended the school no student had achieved an A. L.J. and Lapp and one other student had B status while one further student achieved a C. L.J. noted that “Most of the students did not get a diploma at all and a great many did not try for one either.” (L.J.B. Diary, 13 June, 1872) This is not surprising. Weiss noted that not all students completed even the shorter courses. She quotes one school master as suggesting that for many students it was a question not of “how much learning can I get, but rather how little can I get along with?” (Weiss, 1981, 411) L.J. had noted that as the weather improved attendance at the school had declined, especially among rural students. (L.J.B. Diary 28 May, 1872) For some the challenges of the course were likely too great, while other students may not have felt the necessity for the formal diploma, but it is clear that in L.J.’s era the graduation rate was small at Day’s College.

On the day following his successful completion of his final exam, L.J. packed his trunk and prepared to return to Berlin. Real life had already begun to intrude as his first stop that morning was to conduct some business for his father. After his business call L.J. paid a last visit to the College. He went to “bid good-bye to Mr. Day and the students,” but was somewhat disappointed that he could not collect his diploma then. Day promised to mail it to him as soon as possible. (L.J.B. Diary, 14 June, 1872) The next day saw L.J. back at work at the tannery.
L.J. Breithaupt was in some ways an atypical student for a business college. His age might have set him apart, as he celebrated his seventeenth birthday while a student, but Weiss notes that in this period a shift was occurring in the school business, which saw fewer men who were already in business upgrading their skills and more young men seeking an entry to the business world attending schools such as Day’s. (Weiss, 1981, 411) L.J. was different in that he knew, even at that age, what his future held. As the eldest of the Breithaupt boys he would assume his father’s place at the head of the company. L.J. was not learning skills to help him find work; rather he was gaining skills to help him in the career he had already launched.

L.J.’s skills were put to use almost right away by the family. In the summer after graduation Louis Breithaupt fired his store clerk (who had, as L.J. noted, a drinking problem) and gave over more of those tasks to his son. L.J. spent less time with the other Breithaupt children at the mundane tasks, such as belt cutting and more time applying the lessons learned in Toronto. In a short period of years he would assume duties as salesman, book-keeper and manager for the family’s business interests.

L.J.’s experience suggests that he, and his father, saw the commercial skills he acquired in Berlin’s schools inadequate to their requirements. The six months at Day’s college can been seen as a necessary adjunct to that education. Given that circumstance did the school meet his and the family’s needs? An affirmative answer is suggested by the family’s decision to send the next oldest son, W.H. Breithaupt to complete the same course the following year. That experience also suggests another factor in the development of business education, however. While W.H. Breithaupt enjoyed similar success to his brother’s in Toronto, he chose to go on to Northwestern University after completing the course. A third brother, Carl Ezra Breithaupt, omitted the business college stage completely and went directly to university. (Parry, 1990, 123-4) This reflects a trend that Moreland, Boothman and others have discussed towards more professional university education at the managerial level and the relegation of commercial colleges to the training of clerks and secretarial assistance. (Moreland 1977, 151; Boothman 2000, 24-29) Jackson and Gaskell have noted that as this trend developed the schools tended to attract more women as students. (Jackson and Gaskell, 1987, passim) In the early 1870s, however, the choice of a commercial college was seen by the family as most appropriate for the heir apparent.

L.J.’s education served him well. All too soon he was called upon to assume control of the family business when his father died unexpectedly in 1880, suffering serious liver damage caused, no doubt, by a lifetime working in tanning. At age twenty-five L.J. assumed control of the company and built it into a firm that sold leather across North America and into Europe. He expanded the family holdings, served as mayor of Berlin and a term as a member of the Ontario Legislature. During a long and successful career his time at Day’s receives little mention in L.J.’s diary after his graduation. Once or twice he encounters a fellow graduate, and a brief correspondence with Lapp followed his student days, but for the most part new concerns absorbed his attention. His record of those months in Toronto are important, however, in that they provide a glimpse into the
educational system of the time and the skill set that at least one business family found essential.
References


