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Summer 2001

## Review of *Gentle Eminence: A Life of Cardinal Flahiff* By P. Wallace Platt

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Wolfart, Johannes C., "Review of *Gentle Eminence: A Life of Cardinal Flahiff* By P. Wallace Platt" (2001).  
*Great Plains Quarterly*. 2257.

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*Gentle Eminence: A Life of Cardinal Flahiff.* By P. Wallace Platt. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999. Illustrations, notes, sources, appendices, index. xv + 223 pp. \$34.95.

This is a very odd book. It is also very interesting—remarkably so. What I cannot determine is whether it is interesting merely because it is odd. Certainly its main subject, George Bernard Flahiff, once Cardinal and Archbishop of Winnipeg, does not appear to have been a very interesting man.

What is interesting, however, is the relationship of the biographer to his subject, a

man whom P. Wallace Platt obviously admires. Flahiff was Platt's Basilian confrère and spiritual director. It should be no surprise, then, that Platt has much to say about the essential goodness of the man. Indeed, he has written part encomium, part hagiography, and part historical biography. Slightly puzzling, nonetheless, are Platt's repeated allusions to Flahiff's good looks and attractiveness to women.

The puzzle, moreover, is wrapped in the enigma of the Church. Here, in particular, Platt falls short of the mark as *historical* biographer. As an outstanding participant in the Second Vatican Council and as a Cardinal during the elections of both John Paul I and John Paul II, Flahiff doubtlessly mattered. But Platt does not take the opportunity to seek or to offer insight into these momentous events. Instead, we are told that during the conclaves the Cardinals were supplied neither with towels nor soap. (During the second conclave, however, they were permitted alcohol.) Likewise, the accounts of Flahiff's life in the Basilian community of St. Michael's (Toronto), both before and after his time in Winnipeg, offer no insight—at least not for “outsiders”—into the cast and dynamics of a complex and influential religious community.

At the height of his career, when Flahiff was not in Rome, he was in Manitoba. Although he chose eventually to return to Toronto, Platt intones that “[i]n his new life Flahiff developed an attitude of belonging and even of ownership to the place [Manitoba] and its people.” And yet Flahiff's nearly twenty years as the head of the secular clergy here appear as little more than an interlude in Platt's Basilian and Ontarian story, a defect for which former Manitoba premier Duff Roblin's foreword hardly compensates.

Indeed, the small-town Ontarian context of Flahiff's youth receives considerably more attention than the place where he exercised his greatest public influence as a religious leader. Yet even here Platt's particular perspective only raises troubling questions. For example, how is one to reconcile its bourgeois Edwardianism (which Platt portrays with evi-

dent relish) with the claim that the atmosphere in Paris, Ontario, of “tolerance and mutual respect” determined the future Cardinal's ecumenism? Indeed, one could note that it was such “tolerance” (among other things, admittedly), which had stimulated mass migration from south-western Ontario to the prairies.

Ultimately this book is interesting, it seems to me, because of what it tells us about the contradictions of the now infamous “insider” versus “outsider” debate. At least it caused me to consider how the debate affects different disciplines differently. Oddly, this book strikes me as both significantly incomprehensible and uncomprehending precisely because it presents an “insider's” view of religion and an “outsider's” view of the history of a place or region. Thus, I have no idea why McGill-Queen's University Press chose to publish it in their series “Studies in the History of Religion”; but I am grateful that they did.

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