

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

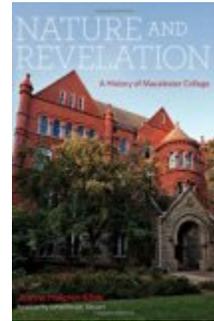


Jeanne Halgren Kilde. *Nature and Revelation: A History of Macalester College*. Foreword by James Brewer Stewart. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010. Illustrations. xii + 400 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8166-5626-4.

Reviewed by Michael Tworek (Harvard University)

Published on H-Education (January, 2012)

Commissioned by Jonathan Anuik



## Negotiating Nature, Resisting Revelation?

When founded in the 1880s, Macalester College was one of many Protestant institutions established in the United States to educate godly citizens in preparation to evangelize the world. These colleges aimed to create good character and religious piety over intellectual sophistication. However, this did not mean that study of empirical knowledge (secular or profane knowledge more broadly) was contrary to the study of revelation. For the earliest overseers of Macalester, as well as similar colleges, this meant finding a careful and appropriate balance, which was ultimately in alignment with Christian beliefs. Moving forward a century, we, as historians, find the same college changed into a practically secular place of learning, which strives for multiculturalism, intellectual curiosity, and originality. This metamorphosis entailed not just superficial changes in the types of students and the course of studies offered at Macalester but also a systematic reinvention of the college's application of its mission, in light of developments and demands foisted onto it by society. Jeanne Halgren Kilde seeks to understand that complex, interwoven relationship between education and religion at Macalester College, in its wider historical context, in her book *Nature and Revelation*.

As James Brewer Stewart points out in his foreword to Kilde's book, "the history of Macalester College involves a highly instructive moral problem ... the paradoxical necessity to negotiate and, simultaneously, to resist" (p. vii). These two ideas of negotiation and resistance, in

respect to religion and education, underlie the main arguments and themes of *Nature and Revelation*. Kilde uses Macalester as a case study to trace how its own transformations institutionally, religiously, politically, socially, and culturally shed light on larger trends affecting U.S. Protestant colleges during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She argues that Macalester's identity as an institution has "proved to be highly fluid throughout its entire existence" and "tightly linked to cultural crises and changes" facing U.S. society at different eras (p. 6). She constructs her overall history of the college from the individual stories of its important actors, such as administrators, students, and alumni. She places the college into a wider context by including local residents, and their shared and respective interactions with developments within Protestantism, as well as local and national events. Unlike many institutional histories of college, this is no triumphalist story of inevitable success. Rather, she emphasizes rightly the importance of contingency and fluidity in the founding, growth, survival, and reinvention of Macalester as a nondenominational and globally minded institution of higher learning. These processes and trends within the history of Macalester College, as Kilde argues, are intrinsic parts of the larger process of secularization of Christian colleges and in fact, contributed to the category of secular thought itself in the United States.

Using archival along with a wide range of primary and secondary sources, Kilde divides her history of Macalester College into three parts. In part 1, she details

expertly the difficult and, at times, haphazard founding of Macalester in the context of nineteenth-century U.S. history. Macalester's roots are crucial in understanding its Christian heritage, as well as its place within the larger processes of community building on the frontier. Though Macalester was not established fully as a postsecondary institution until 1885, its earlier iterations (chiefly, the Baldwin School) were founded with the hope of being a beacon of Christian education on the edges of civilization. The key figure who epitomizes the legacy and challenges of the earliest period of the college's history is Edward Duffield Neill (1823-93), in many respects the college's architect of its Christian heritage. Kilde uses Neill as a hinge to unravel and examine interconnected factors, developments, and influences surrounding the founding of Macalester as a Christian college. Religiously, Neill desired to build a center of learning modeled on the ones in the eastern United States, ones in which he was educated. Such colleges provided a Christian (Protestant, albeit nonsectarian) education. However, he had to combat pressures from secular (the University of Minnesota) and other religious (Catholic) institutions. Indeed, the founding and subsequent survival of Macalester up to 1915 was in no way inevitable.

Part 2 of Kilde's book examines the crucial period of constant transition and stabilization (1915-60) in the college's history. Kilde illustrates well the growth, debate, and constant redefinition of Macalester's institutional identity in respect to Christian roots among its leaders. The college's leaders debated the role(s) of the institution, as a place of higher learning. Maneuvering among social changes, economic difficulties, religious commitments, and benefactors' demands characterize the tenures of Macalester's presidents, such as John Carey Acheson and Charles Joseph Turck. Wider debates on the role of education in society defined the college's leaders' discussions of Macalester's curriculum, the needs of its students, and the place of the liberal arts.

James Wallace was one of the most important protagonists of Macalester's earliest struggles and its subsequent institutional negotiation and evolutions in the twentieth century. Wallace's effect on Macalester was incalculable, whether as one of its presidents; later as a semiretired adviser to the trustees; or above all, as the father of its most generous benefactor and founder of *Reader's Digest* magazine, Dewitt Wallace. As Kilde shows, Macalester's emphasis on service and internationalism and its commitment to becoming a nationally recognized liberal arts college (the last one a dream of Wallace) were equally born of negotiations and re-

sistance between administrative, financial, and religious considerations driven by individuals, larger contextual factors, and events (such as the world wars). Religion was still important to most major players of the college but became an ever-lessening priority in light of the changing perspectives of Liberal Protestantism and societal demands for education.

These dynamics continue in the third and final part of Kilde's book, which examines the rise of Macalester to its place of national prominence today, and the various challenges encountered along the way. The importance of Wallace as the college's chief benefactor comes to the fore here. His involvement financially had a disproportionate influence on all aspects of Macalester's life. Though technically a well-endowed institution, Macalester was beset by budgetary difficulties and might have defaulted if not for Wallace's occasional interventions and the leadership of John Davis in the 1970s. In addition to detailing Wallace's role, Kilde also examines the profound effect of major developments, such as the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, and economic crises, on the students and administration of the college. Indeed, the independent and socially conscious spirit for which Macalester students are often known can be found in earlier generations' activism during the 1960s and 1970s. Equally, Kilde illustrates how the changes in educational and institutional aims as well as the makeup of the students and faculty over the decades redefined Macalester's current relationship to the Presbyterian Synod. With the growth of diversity and pluralism, Presbyterianism, much less Christianity, has become one voice of many on Macalester's campus.

Kilde's history of Macalester College is an important scholarly contribution and an avenue to further research in two important ways. Firstly, it provides a valuable case study of the historical process of secularization of Christian colleges in the United States. Highlighting the importance of changes in belief in the U.S. religious landscape, Kilde also weaves together how financial, social, and political factors shaped Macalester's institutional identity. Macalester did not simply de-Christianize its foundations, curriculum, and practices because U.S. society at large became less Christian/Protestant. Rather, Macalester's leaders' perceptions of societal expectations for a good education had changed. In this case, Kilde's paradigm of resistance and negotiation is very apt and certainly applicable to many other nominally or formerly Christian liberal arts colleges. Moreover, Kilde does not fall into an overly simplified "secular vs. religious" dichotomy in her interpretation of why Macalester de-

Christianized, as an institution. Rather, she highlights the significance of liberal and progressive voices among the Christian administrators in this process. As Kilde puts it succinctly, “no secularization process eliminated religion; instead the two arenas were redefined in relation to one another” (p. 320).

Secondly, Kilde’s book provides a valuable insight into the role of wealthy benefactors, namely, Wallace in this case, in higher education. In many respects, Macalester College could have been (and almost was) a victim of its own success, because of the dual blessing and curse of Wallace’s generous support and frequent interference in the college’s affairs. Macalester thus serves as an example for further study of the role of wealthy alumni and donors in universities and colleges. I would, however, have liked to know more about Wallace’s motivations, not just personal but also financial. Why did he invest so much money in Macalester? What did he hope to gain in making Macalester a nationally recognized liberal arts college? More comparative insights into Wallace’s relationship with Macalester in relationship to other philanthropists and their relationships to liberal arts colleges could have added to Kilde’s already impressive achievement.

There are several minor points that detract slightly from Kilde’s contribution. Frequently, Kilde drowns the reader in the details of Macalester’s history. With so many names and events, it is easy for a reader to get

lost. A list of presidents and trustees, as an appendix, would have helped. Also, Kilde’s familiarity with European notions of higher education seems uneven and superficial. To claim that European higher education in the nineteenth century, much as her protagonists do, was completely aristocratic and that it did not produce good citizens is not representative of the tremendous activities and mobility among major institutions in Europe.[1] Her lack of familiarity leads to such infelicities as “Hitler’s invasion of Europe” (p. 186). Lastly, the translation of Macalester College’s Latin motto needs to read as “Twins of Heaven,” not “Heavenly Twins” (p. 25).

Nevertheless, Kilde has made a thorough and outstanding contribution with her history of Macalester College. Her history of an postsecondary educational institution serves as a model for histories of other universities and colleges. Balancing a celebration of achievements with a critical understanding of the institution’s past, Kilde’s book is surely to be of interest to students and alumni of Macalester, as well as those of us who admire the college from afar.

#### Note

[1]. For a general overview of educational trends concerning European universities at this time, see Walter Rüegg, ed., *Universities in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries (1800-1945)*, vol. 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-education>

**Citation:** Michael Tworek. Review of Kilde, Jeanne Halgren, *Nature and Revelation: A History of Macalester College*. H-Education, H-Net Reviews. January, 2012.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=33732>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.