

Literacy's Heroes & Heroines: Reclaiming our forgotten past

B. Allan Quigley

Our field of literacy has too many myths and not enough history. If we had a more widely known documented history, we would be a better informed, more widely recognized field with a stronger sense of professional pride. If we could recover our past, we could be more influential at the policy level and become better mentored in our practice. Instead, many of our literacy decisions are based on political rhetoric, decontextualized statistical data and many uncontested myths.

In this article, two of today's prevailing myths will be questioned through documented history. First, there is the notion that literacy programs have somehow "*sprung up*" in recent years. Second, while the various Statistics Canada studies over the last decade have undoubtedly created much-needed international awareness, they have contributed to an emerging myth that success in literacy is empirically measurable. "*Counts and amounts*" seem to have become more important than learning how two hundred years of literacy education has changed lives, communities and entire nations.

Let's take a look at some of the founders of our field and where we've come from. Examples are from the UK, the US and Canada.

William Smith, the "Unlettered Doorman":

According to our earliest documented histories (e.g., Hudson, 1969, original printed in 1851; Martin, 1924; Pole, 1816, reprinted by Verner), the first, formal adult school having a lasting influence in the English-speaking world arose in Bristol, England, in 1812. Originally named the Bristol Institution for Instructing Adult Persons to Read the Holy Scriptures, it was later (mercifully) termed the "*Bristol School*" (Verner).

How did the Bristol School begin? The Methodists in Bristol had been providing Bibles throughout the city. Then, in February 1812, "*During the second annual meeting of the local [Methodist] auxiliary of the Bible Society*" (Martin p. 26), a letter was handed out to the congregation explaining that some of those being visited were unable to read. The question asked was: "*Why give Bibles to the illiterate?*" Then, William Smith stepped forward. Smith was "*a poor, humble and almost unlettered individual in Bristol, occupying no higher rank than that of a doorkeeper to a Methodist chapel...[yet he] conceived the idea of instructing the adult poor to read the holy scriptures*" (Hudson p. 2). With Stephen Prust, a member of the Society of Friends and a local tobacco merchant, the two collected names of those who wanted to attend "*a school for persons advanced in years*" (p. 3).

On March 8, 1812, the first two adult learners to enter Smith's rented room were William Wood, age 63, and Jane Burrace, age 40. Soon 11 men and ten women followed, "*with the numbers increasing every week, until the rooms were filled*" (p. 4). Smith "*engaged other apartments in the same neighbourhood, for the reception and instruction of the illiterate poor, who were daily applying to him for admission*" (p. 4). Tellingly, Smith "*relinquished*

three shillings weekly from his small wages of 18 shillings per week” (p. 4) to cover the expenses.

Dr. Thomas Pole, a 19th-century historian, documented the rise of the Bristol School. He forcefully argued that there were profound reasons to teach reading to adults: “*Perusal of the sacred scripture and other religious books, have a tendency to moralize and Christianize the minds of men—instead of idleness, profaneness and vice—They inculcate diligence, sobriety, frugality, piety, and heavenly-mindedness*” (Verner p. 18). Moreover, and with echoes through to today’s work-based priorities: “*Once the good seed hath been sown...how changed will be the state of our fair isle!...Our poor’s rates will be lightened; our hospitals, almshouses, dispensaries, and other public charities less encumbered*” (p. 19).

The Bristol School movement was a huge success. In just one year, adult schools were formed at Bath, Ipswich, Plymouth, Salisbury and Yarmouth (Kelly p. 150). By 1816, “*Twenty-four schools for men and 31 for women, with a total membership of 1,581, and adult schools in Ireland, New York, Philadelphia and Sierra Leone*” (Kelly p. 150) had been established. While it is simplistic to say the Bristol School movement was the singular model for the British colonies and the United States (Verner), it is remarkable how many aspects of this movement continue through to today. Besides beginning our history with a curriculum driven by ideological imperatives, it is noteworthy that formal programs were begun by ordinary, compassionate people—by volunteers—not governments, the elite or education systems. Clearly, adult literacy education is not a recent phenomenon.

Rev. William Richardson, “The Liberator”:

The first documented program to receive federal funding in the US (Rachal)—indeed in North America—occurred at Port Royal, South Carolina, from 1862 to 1865, during the Civil War. When the gunships of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron of the Union Army sailed into Port Royal Sound on November 7, 1861, Commander Sherman found 10,000 freed slaves standing in rags, many near starvation. All were assumedly unable to read or write, since, in 1740, South Carolina was the first state to make it illegal to teach slaves to write. In 1834, it became illegal to teach slaves to read. The consequences of breaking these laws ranged from having fingers chopped off, to being branded, to being hanged (DeBoer).

Seeing the desperate situation, Sherman asked Washington headquarters to dispatch instructors. This was a milestone in US literacy since northerners were far from convinced that the freed slaves were even capable of learning (DeBoer). Nevertheless, Rev. William T. Richardson and members of the Gideonite religion answered the call and sailed from New York on March 3, 1862 (Rachal). Their “*religious and teaching instruction*” (p. 16) was both religious and secular in content and purpose. And thousands of freed slaves came forward. According to Rachal, they came carrying their children on their hips or backs, walking miles along dusty roads. They came with “*an instinctive sense of literacy’s value*” (p. 16).

How were the efforts of such missionaries received by the black leaders? W. E. B. DuBois, a major intellectual black leader and radical activist of the day, wrote: “*The teachers came... not to keep Negroes in their place, but to raise them out of the places of defilement where slavery had sealed them*” (DeBoer, Preface). Another black leader, Booker T. Washington, stated: “*Whenever it is written—and I hope it will be—the part the Yankee teachers played in*

the education of the Negroes immediately after the war will make one of the most thrilling parts of the history of this country” (DeBoer, Preface).

Throughout, Rev. Richardson and his wife continually made it clear to their northern audience that African-American adults were their intellectual equals. As Rachal points out, “[i]n that context, Richardson’s conclusion [on intelligence] was ahead of its time” (p. 19). Richardson, however, plagued by illness and endless struggle, ultimately worked himself to death. And the freed men were to experience a backlash of violence during Reconstruction by members of the Southern slaveocracy who would not accept slaves as free beings. As W. J. Cash recounts, lynching that was “*unthinkable when blacks were valuable property, occurred with grisly regularity*” (Rachal p. 20) during Reconstruction. Yet, the seeds of literacy had been sown in the Southern states.

Alfred Fitzpatrick and the Frontier:

Begun some 30 years later, in 1899, Frontier College still takes literacy to the remotest corners of Canada. In recent years, it has been going to the “*frontiers*” of city streets with programs for, and with, street people. Labourer-teachers work on farms and in market gardens. Others have taken white-collar roles or are working with the physically and mentally challenged, and some build learning partnerships with Aboriginals or are engaged with prison literacy. Alfred Fitzpatrick’s vision of taking literacy to the people is alive and well.

At the turn of the 20th century, the truly forgotten were the workers in Canada’s mines, remote lumber camps and those on the railway construction gangs that moved across Canada’s vast expanses. Believing knowledge was “*the God-given right of every person, not the exclusive privilege of the favoured few*” (Morrison p. 8), Fitzpatrick began his work in a lumber camp near Nairn Centre in Northern Ontario with his first Reading Camp. Eventually, he established 24 reading rooms in log structures or canvas tents throughout this region. The teaching model evolved into recruiting young university graduates who worked beside labourers during the day, then taught them in the evenings. Reading tents, boxcars, construction huts, anyplace they could gather, became the college’s classrooms. By 1920, some 100,000 workmen had been taught by over 500 labourer-teachers.

In 1919, degree-granting authority was granted to Frontier College but, to Fitzpatrick’s dismay, most of the largest universities, colleges and the provincial departments of education across Canada would not accept the idea of a national degree-granting college. The charter was approved but “*little or no financial support was forthcoming from [the] government*” (Morrison p. 15) to support it. Fitzpatrick died along with his dream of a degree-granting institution in 1925. Edmund Bradwin continued as president, doing what Frontier College has always done best: sending volunteers throughout Canada to take literacy to the very hardest to reach.

Cora Wilson Stewart and the Moonlight Schools:

In 1911, Cora Wilson Stewart was a teacher in Rowan County—Kentucky’s poorest county. By her own account her interest in adult literacy began when she was asked by a mother for help so she could write to a daughter who had recently moved to Chicago. And a man “*with tears in his eyes*” (Mandrell p. 14) begged to be helped to read and write so he could feel “*whole.*” An aspiring local musician asked for help so he might pursue his dream of

becoming a musician. Like so many today, Stewart was moved by the needs of adult learners and discovered her life's work in the helping process.

The idea Stewart conceived was a simple one. If the moon was shining bright, it was a signal to adults they were welcome to come down from the hills to learn to read and write in the local schoolhouses. With no funding, basically no encouragement and no models to draw upon, she opened the doors of the schoolhouses in 1911, hoping perhaps 150 adults would come. Instead, 1,200 enrolled in the first year 1,600 the second, and, by 1913, 25 counties had established Moonlight Schools for adult learners (Baldwin). Sitting in children's desks, local men and women learned to read and write. The night's lessons were then printed in the local Rowan County Messenger. Besides being a school superintendent and, at one point, principal of two schools, Stewart was also editor of the local newspaper.

Within four years, Alabama used the Moonlight model for their "*Adult Schools*," South Carolina for their "*Lay-By Schools*." "*Community Schools*" began in North Carolina, "*Schools for Grown-Ups*" appeared in Georgia, and Oklahoma started offering credit in its Normal Schools for adult literacy teachers. Then, Washington state followed with adult night schools. Minnesota and New Mexico came next (Taylor pp. 24-25). The Moonlight School movement, according to Cook, "*might well be classified as the official beginning of literacy education in the United States*" (p. 13). Stewart wrote the CountryLife Reader, the main teaching material for the Moonlight Schools. She also wrote The Prisoner's First Book. Years ahead of her time, she included Native Indians and African-American adults in her schools. She was later invited to become official adviser to the US Army on adult literacy in World War I and wrote The Soldier's First Book. Through her efforts, thousands of American soldiers learned how to write letters home and read the letters sent to them on the battlefield. She was named to the Kentucky Illiteracy Commission in 1914 and became its chairperson. She was named chair of the Illiteracy Commission of the National Education Association in 1919 and, in 1923, chair of the World Illiteracy Commission. She "*presided over conferences in Edinburgh, Geneva, Toronto, San Francisco and Denver*" (Taylor p. 25). In 1926, President Coolidge named Stewart director of the first federal National Illiteracy Crusade and director of the new National Illiteracy Commission—a commission based on the very model she had created in Rowan County some 25 years earlier.

However, in 1920, threatened by her success, the state's school superintendents voted down a bill before the Kentucky legislature for \$75,000 to continue the work of the Moonlight Schools. Some even attacked Stewart insisting her cause was quixotic, adding she should "*channel her effort*" elsewhere (Estes p. 251). As with Fitzpatrick, the status quo dominated. Stewart continued her work as best she could, but, in December 1958, she died in relative obscurity in a North Carolina nursing home at the age of 61. Today few know her name.

Moses Coady, the Revolutionary:

By the 1920s, the "*golden age of wind and sail*" of the Canadian Maritime provinces was over. Fishermen, coal miners and steelworkers were effectively owned by absentee company proprietors, in the sense that the "*company*" owned the fishing boats, the fishing gear and the annual catch of the fishermen. Miners' families lived in dilapidated houses provided by the company. The "*company store*" was where many Maritimers spent the few dollars they had left at month's end. Such feudal conditions extended into the steel mills where workers laboured in dangerous conditions. Meanwhile, in the pastoral countryside, farmers turned

their products over to companies connected to “*the outside world.*” In December 1925, following a tour of northern Nova Scotia, the Bishop of the Catholic diocese of Antigonish wrote to his priests saying he had “*direct evidence that there is a large number of people who are [on] the verge of starvation*” (Welton p. 45).

In the small town of Antigonish, Father Jimmy Tompkins, vice-president of St. Francis Xavier University, had written a pamphlet entitled *Knowledge for the People* urging the community to share their labour. He also insisted that his academic colleagues go out to the people. In 1930, StFX established an Extension Department under the direction of Tompkins’ young cousin, Father Moses Coady, and the Antigonish Movement was born. Coady travelled tirelessly from town to town, speaking in town halls, churches, anywhere he could assemble a crowd. He talked of co-operatives, pooling resources and marketing products directly. Above all, he talked of hope. Study clubs were created in hundreds of communities and the Extension Department provided discussion materials. Within a decade, Moses Coady and hundreds of participants had begun turning the economy of the entire region around (Lotz).

Despite the fact that Coady was acutely aware of the question of illiteracy, his grassroots movement did not include formal literacy courses. Instead, families helped families, neighbours helped neighbours. Literacy was a tool, not a school. After its first full year of operation in 1930-31, 192 general meetings had been held with 14,856 people attending. By 1935, there were 940 clubs with 10,650 members, and 84 co-operatives or credit unions were making small business loans. People could arrange small loans to buy their own fishing equipment and co-operatives took farm products directly to the larger markets. Housing co-operatives followed with local people building their own homes—homes that stand today throughout the Maritimes.

With his booming voice, Coady turned despair into action. His vision influenced co-operative movements across the US and throughout Canada. In 1949, he addressed the United Nations. But, following years of heart problems, he collapsed at the microphone before a Wisconsin audience and died in St. Martha’s Hospital in Antigonish, N.S., on July 28, 1959. His casket was carried to its final resting place by a steelworker, a coal miner, two farmers and two fishermen.

Coady believed that all people could be masters of their own destiny; the means was adult education. Yet, although historians Selman et al. say the Antigonish Movement is “*the most famous adult education project in Canada*” (p. 45), how many in Canada’s literacy movement know the story of Father Jimmy and Father Coady?

WHAT WILL OUR LEGACY BE?

It could be argued that these men and women were religious evangelists or ideological missionaries—not heroes or heroines at all. The Bristol Methodists taught the Bible for salvation, and the Gideonites sailed carrying the dominant attitudes of the day on religious and cultural colonization. Alfred Fitzpatrick worked out of the prevailing social gospel movement, as did the revolutionary Moses Coady. One can argue this is simply a romanticized recounting of “*brainwashing-by-pedagogy.*” Yet, I argue that these are indeed our heroes and heroines. Actually, the questions raised about our founders’ motives could also be raised concerning the overt purposes of so many of our own sponsor-based programs. In fact, it is only in the past few decades that learners’ voices have begun to be heard in many

—although far from all—literacy programs. Moreover, historians tell us that judging the past through the lens of today’s values ‘*decontextualizes*’ history and can lead to unfair judgements about those who simply lived according to the values of their day. As do we. As Carlson concluded, in the final analysis “*Progressives still need heroes*” (p. 59).

However one chooses to look upon our founders, or appraise the efforts of literacy educators today, there can be little question that these teachers—among so many others through time—dedicated their lives to literacy. And millions of lives have since been utterly changed by their vision. In closing, why not document our own local histories and learn from them? Why not share our stories so we can open more democratic spaces for the future? Why not begin to redress the injustice of the countless lost stories of learners who have been given little or no space in the few documented histories we have? Surely we can do better—surely we can be better—if we reclaim our past.

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literacies: researching practice, practising research

[Adult education is a] system that has been described as an "archipelago without bridges."

But building bridges is not enough.

The whole notion of adult education as a group of islands is limiting.

Why should adult education be an archipelago when it can be the mainland?

Guy Ewing, *Literacies* #4, fall 2004

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