

## Book Reviews/Recensions

### *Little Mosie From the Margaree: A Biography of Michael Moses Coady*

Michael R. Welton (2001). Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing.

People in rural Maritime Canada learned how to organize institutions such as credit unions and co-operatives through a programme of group self-study, organized by the extension department of St. Francis Xavier University. These institutions contributed to improving the material circumstances of their lives. Reverend Moses Michael Coady from the Margaree Valley in Cape Breton, along with a team of extension workers, led this movement for peoples' education from its inception in the 1920s through its peak in the late 1930s and its decline starting in the late 1940s. Coady and the Antigonish Movement have inspired adult educators across North America and have been instrumental in the development of a global co-operative movement.

Michael Welton draws upon previously un-utilized sources to give a detailed account of the life of Moses Coady and to develop a critical analysis of Coady's role in shaping the Antigonish Movement. He uses unpublished chapters of the original manuscript copy of Coady's book *Masters of their Own Destiny* (published in 1939) along with extensive notes that Coady made in preparing an autobiographical work that remained unfinished. Using these and other archival documents and published texts he tries to explicate the myths that make up Coady, and the personal assumptions that underlie his values and his actions in shaping the Antigonish Movement. He tries to develop a deeper understanding of Coady as a person, but it is a risky venture to attempt to give personality to Coady strictly through archival documents. For example, Welton uses letters between Coady and his nephew Leo to explicate some of the contradictions and complexities of Coady's life. These letters indicate that Coady's family—either the late Leo Coady's wife Mary or their children—are important sources of information on his life. Yet there is a striking absence of references to interviews or direct communication with any of them. Further, because so much of Welton's research draws from documents related to the Antigonish Movement, he tends to push to the periphery the work of others who were part of the movement, including the women who worked at St. FX extension. Just as he collapses the Antigonish Movement into Coady's life, he also makes it appear that Coady's life was only about the Antigonish Movement.

However, Welton does present a cogent analysis of Coady's life and the context that shaped his values and ideas. He provides an important description of the state of economic decline that was underway in Maritime Canada during Coady's early life (p. 54). He also beautifully describes how Coady saw a vision of how the world should be in the subsistence practices of farming, fishing, and working in the woods, by which many people in rural Cape Breton made their livings (p. 25).

In addition, Welton provides an important critique of how Coady's religious training shaped his vision of co-operative education. Coady had been schooled in the ideas of St. Thomas Aquinas while he was a student in Rome (p. 33). Within Thomism, God is knowable, to know nature is to know God, and through science it is possible to ascend to God (p. 34). His ideas fused religion and the idea of co-operation into a social programme that conformed to what he saw as God's great plan, and he saw it as his job to see that this plan was implemented (p. 261).

It is widely perceived that one of Coady's great strengths was his ability to present complex ideas in such a way that they could be understood and put into action by ordinary people. He was at ease with the practicalities of farm work or of marketing lobster. He insisted that people come to ideas and actions on their own terms (p. 217). Yet the great contradiction was that he could often be blunt and dictatorial. Welton writes:

This great proponent of democracy was willing, in a dark moment, to engineer both the people and their leaders to control their destiny. If the Truth pre-exists communally validated learning processes and procedures, then the leader (or educator) is pressed towards instrumental and anti-democratic practices (p. 261).

It was the loss of democratic control among its members that Welton suggests was one of the factors in the decline of the Antigonish Movement in the late 1940s. As the movement grew the Extension Department came to focus less on working directly within communities and more on training managers and leaders (p. 160). Welton suggests that in his emphatic critique of the structural inequalities of capitalism, Coady failed to pay attention to the internal dynamics of cooperative organizations, which were often less than democratic (p. 246). Welton suggests that Coady's ultimate failing was his insistence on having found the magic formula and his consequent attempts to create universal institutional structures that, in the end, alienated the very people whom they were supposed to serve (p. 257).

In addition, the widespread attention it received from outside the region often resulted in its misrepresentation. For many of the "journalists, liberal-minded religious leaders ... social reformers, wild-eyed dreamers, co-operative leaders" and others who were captivated by it, the Antigonish Movement became a rich "imaginative space" upon which they projected their "social fantasies" (p. 95). Welton writes that one couple approached Coady wanting to spend their honeymoon "working in the slums" (p. 114) after sitting at his feet. To outsiders, its communities were models of success. Those who lived there often still struggle with many of the problems that the Antigonish Movement was purported to alleviate (p. 107).

Welton probes deeply into the ideas and assumptions that underlie Coady's ideas and his work. He also looks at why these ideas became popular with people outside the region, and what the implications of this popularity were for

cooperative development within the region. He asserts that the Antigonish Movement, however flawed, was a deeply radical movement and that it was not a middle-way, as it has often been described. Its essential premise was the radical notion that people must have control over the economic forces of production and distribution (p. 117). By exploring the more troubling side of Coady's life—his lack of hesitation at forcing his ideas on others (including his family in Margaree, whom he pressured to serve as a model of cooperative success) and his eventual alienation of the movement from the people who were supposed to be its constituents—Welton reveals some of the personal contradictions that Coady embodied.

Some researchers may argue that Welton criticizes Coady from a point of history unknown to Coady; however, I think this critique is important. Welton writes:

The horrors and illusions of the past century warn us that our transformative visions ought to be self-limiting, modest and respectful of mystery. Aghast at the horrors of the twentieth-century utopian experiments and our evident inability to master complexity, a modest utopianism is in order (p. 263).

Coady lived during a time when the world's problems were seen to be solvable through great modern visions, whether they were of the church, the state, or the people. Welton writes during a time when it is academic *de rigueur* to expose the provisionality of supposed universal schemes. Yet this line of analysis is important if adult educators are to account successfully for the limitations of the Antigonish Movement and to adapt Coady's ideas to a contemporary context.

Welton presents an important criticism that although the Antigonish Movement provided a model for social action, "it did not have an adequate theory of citizenship, of the way collective learning originates within civil society and influences policy making and formation once inside the gates of governance" (p. 260). Such theories are not easily come by; perhaps this should be read as a purposeful challenge to contemporary adult educators.

Welton writes in language that is neither filled with religious metaphor, as is much of Coady's own writing, nor laden with theories of adult learning or cooperative development, as is much of the current writing on the Antigonish Movement. Furthermore, the ideas he presents are challenging. This book is a necessary read for those interested in the Antigonish Movement and adult education in general. It allows us to see through some of the myths that have been built up around Coady. However, Welton fails to carry this methodological strategy through fully by not reflecting on his own process of trying to know Coady. We can only read Coady and the Antigonish Movement through contemporary eyes; to pretend otherwise would be naive. Ultimately I think that Welton helps us to do this, and in the end gives us both a deeper understanding of Coady and a clearer picture of the present.

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