

JAMES JOHN HARPELL: AN ADULT EDUCATION PIONEER¹

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Abstract

This article provides historical insight into an adult education pioneer, James John Harpell. His significant contribution to the Canadian adult education movement in the early part of the 20th century includes starting correspondence courses for industrial workers, study clubs for adults, and promoting self-study and lifelong learning; nevertheless, Harpell has received minimal recognition in adult education circles. Harpell was also an important figure in the co-operative movement, taking a leading role in starting two credit unions, an arts and crafts co-operative, a building co-operative, and two worker co-operatives. The worker co-operatives were started in 1945 when he retired from his firm and converted it to that arrangement—one in Toronto and the other in St. Anne-de-Bellevue. Harpell Press Co-operative was, until recently when financial difficulties forced its sale, one of the leading worker co-operatives in Canada and a leader in that movement. Harpell is part of a small tradition of business owners, starting with Robert Owen of New Lanark, Scotland, who have utilized their firm as a laboratory to promote social and educational innovations. Although he was successful

¹ This article is based upon a chapter about Harpell Press from Jack Quarter's forthcoming book, *Beyond the Bottom Line: Socially Innovative Business Owners* (Greenwood/Quorum). The article emphasizes Harpell's contribution to adult education to a greater extent than the book chapter.

² Paul Vincent made available his extensive collection of documents on Harpell in order to do the research. Vincent's (1984) historical summary "Historique de l'Imprimerie Coopérative Harpell" served as a valuable background source of information. Also Pierre Laberge, the Director of Finance at l'Imprimerie Coopérative Harpell, was helpful in sharing information about the company and making its facilities available for the research. During June 1995, the following persons associated with Harpell were interviewed: Simone Crévier, Jean Harpell, Pierre Laberge, Bernard Lecuyer, Laurent Legault, Georgette Prud'homme, and Paul Vincent. Non-referenced quotes are derived from these interviews, unless otherwise specified. Also Alison Davidson and B. J. Richmond helped with the library research for this article.

in business, his prolific writings indicate that his primary interests were as a social critic, social innovator, and adult educator, for which he has received some recognition; but he remains largely unknown as an adult educator. This article discusses his contribution to adult education and speculates that his location outside of the university probably reduced the influence of his ideas and the impact of his writings.

Résumé

Cet article donne un aperçu historique de l'œuvre d'un pionnier de l'andragogie, James John Harpell, dont la contribution au mouvement d'éducation des adultes au début du siècle est importante. Parmi celles-ci, notons la mise sur pied de cours par correspondance destinés aux travailleurs industriels, l'introduction de cercles d'étude pour adultes et la promotion de l'apprentissage autonome et de l'éducation permanente. Malgré cela, Harpell demeure peu connu du milieu de l'andragogie. Harpell joua aussi un rôle de premier plan dans le mouvement coopératif, inaugurant deux caisses de crédit, une coopérative d'artisanat, une coopérative d'habitation et deux coopératives de travail. Les coopératives de travail furent fondées en 1945 lorsque Harpell à la retraite transforma son entreprise en coopératives—l'une à Toronto et l'autre à Ste Anne de Bellevue. Jusqu'à sa dissolution récente pour cause de difficultés financières, Harpell Press fut l'une des plus importantes coopératives de travail au Canada et l'une des plus en vue dans le mouvement coopératif. Harpell s'inscrit dans une modeste tradition d'entrepreneurs tels que Robert Owen, de New Lanark (Écosse), ayant transformé leur entreprise en laboratoire de changement social et d'innovation en éducation. Bien qu'ayant connu le succès dans les affaires, les écrits prolifiques de Harper montrent que son identité première fut celle d'un critique de la société, innovateur social et andragogue. Cette dernière vocation cependant lui a valu peu d'honneurs. Le présent article décrit la contribution de Harper à l'éducation des adultes et soutient que son influence et ses idées eurent un impact réduit du fait d'avoir été confinés hors du milieu universitaire.

Buried in the history of the Canadian adult education movement is the fascinating story of James John Harpell who was a successful entrepreneur, a muckraking journalist and publisher, and a philanthropic spirit whose acts included the sale at discounted prices to his employees of his highly

successful businesses in Montreal and Toronto, the creation of a garden city where his employees lived, and the establishment of a community centre that he donated to the town of St. Anne-de-Bellevue. Foremost, Harpell was a pioneering adult educator who devoted himself to improving the lives of the average working person through a process that he called self-study. This article situates Harpell's work within the adult education tradition by discussing: (a) his own process of self-study and his promotion of self-study for others, including his employees; (b) his role as a social critic; (c) his influence as a social innovator; and (d) his overall legacy as an adult educator.

Self-Study

James John Harpell was born in 1874 on a farm near Inverary, about 25 kilometres north of Kingston in southeastern Ontario. His father's family (originally from Holland) were United Empire Loyalists, who left New York at the time of the American Revolution, and his mother's family came from Ireland. Harpell was one of seven children, and from boyhood he intended to become a blacksmith. He quit school at age 12 and soon after entered a nearby foundry as an apprentice. At the foundry he came under the influence of an older machinist, who bemoaned his own lack of formal education, and the owner of the foundry, both of whom encouraged Harpell to return to school. Their advice led the young Harpell not only to a profound change of attitude, but also to becoming a missionary for education throughout his life.

Although Harpell continued at the foundry, he began studying at home, a practice that he later referred to as self-study. He had shown no previous interest in schooling, and even had to learn how to read again. However, the experience of self-study led to a transformation: "This aroused such an intense desire for knowledge that at times I would study all night and work ten hours a day for six days a week in the Foundry" (Harpell 1937a, 29). Even in his adolescence, Harpell demonstrated the indefatigable energy and the tenacious drive for success that were to be hallmarks of his character throughout life.

Harpell's Own Self-Study

In 1898, at age 24, Harpell completed his high school and registered at Queen's University in Kingston, where he supported himself with part-time teaching, writing, and selling life insurance until he completed his BA degree. An outward-looking man who was always searching for answers to questions by studying the experiences of other societies, in mid-1909 Harpell

and his family embarked on a one year study tour of Western Europe, where they visited the major industrial centres. This experience left him with the conviction that the emphasis upon technical education in Europe was central to industrial success. That idea together with his own convictions about the value of combining work and study formed the foundation for his business principles and his views on adult and continuing education. As Paul Vincent, a Quebec historian, noted about Harpell: "the professional development of workers, their development and well being, became a priority that guided him for the rest of his life. He maintained a warm spot in his heart for self-help and study at home, and he never missed an opportunity to encourage it in others. 'Help others to help themselves,' became his motto" (Vincent 1984, 9).

In 1907, Harpell and Alexander Longwell, a fellow alumnus from Queen's University, established a life-long business relationship with the purchase of the *Canadian Mining Journal*. Shortly after his return from Europe, they entered into the publishing business in a big way, forming the Industrial and Educational Press (later renamed the Industrial and Educational Publishing Co.), and then purchasing the Biggar-Wilson company of Toronto. Their aim was to become the leading publishers of industrial and trade periodicals in Canada, a goal that they accomplished rapidly through selective acquisitions that included the *Pulp and Paper Magazine of Canada*, the *Canadian Textile Journal*, the *Canadian Mining Journal*, the *Farmers' Guide*, the *Canadian Fisherman*, the *Canadian Miller and Grain Elevator*, *Iron & Steel of Canada*, and the *Journal of Commerce* (a business publication which Harpell eventually used as a forum for his trenchant social criticism).

Harpell attributed his ability to acquire the necessary financing for these purchases to his education through self-study which he said was "inexpensive and occasioned little or no interruption in my earnings" (Harpell 1926b, 2). In short, he did not view self-study for adults as a *last* resort, but rather as a preferred strategy for acquiring an education.

Harpell and Longwell proved to be skillful at business, quickly expanding their downtown Toronto operation, managed by Longwell, to a second plant in Montreal that was under Harpell's control. Although Harpell's business decisions were designed to earn a profit and to encourage growth, his objectives were always guided by his social ideals. He wrote: "The business of the Industrial and Educational Publishing Company was not begun in 1911 as an ordinary commercial undertaking conceived in a desire

to make a business and earn profits. Of course, it has to earn a fair return on the capital invested, if it is to continue” (Harpell 1926a, 2). Rather Harpell’s goals were to build a broad movement for educating tradespeople through self-study, something he wrote about extensively.

Shortly afterwards, the company sought more space and moved in 1918 from Montreal to the nearby town of St. Anne-de-Bellevue. The foundation for the move to St. Anne was laid at a meeting at University Club of Montreal that Harpell organized in 1917 together with the Honourable W. S. Fielding, a former premier of Nova Scotia and the Minister of Finance in the federal government of Wilfrid Laurier and subsequently in the Liberal government of MacKenzie King. This business association, one of many that Harpell developed with people of influence, started in 1913 when Fielding became the publisher of the *Journal of Commerce*.

Harpell fell in love with the community of St. Anne-de-Bellevue, authoring a history in 1926b, in which he referred to it rather effusively as the “Gateway to Canada” because of its location at the junction of the St. Lawrence and Ottawa Rivers and because both of Canada’s major railways had a station in the community. Although maintaining his hard-headed attitude toward the business, Harpell was a romantic visionary in his attitude to St. Anne-de-Bellevue. Drawing on experience from his trip to Europe, this unilingual anglophone set out to build St. Anne, a tiny francophone community, into a garden city—that is, a rural community, free from urban congestion, where residences for employees were within easy access of their workplace. Harpell’s garden city, which he named Gardenvale, was based upon the English town planning movement of Sir Ebenezer Howard. Gardenvale embraced water gardens with red fish and water lilies, rock gardens with exotic plants, a huge greenhouse, tennis courts, skating rinks, and comfortable homes adorned with flower banks. The houses adjoining the press were located on Avenue Garden City, a wide street with a flowered embankment in the middle and brightly lit by globe-shaped English-style light standards running along the side. As Harpell (1926b) explained, the objective was “to give the editors, educationalists, typesetters, pressmen, bookbinders, clerks and other occupants, healthy, cheerful and comfortable working conditions. It [the press] is well lighted, has high ceilings and a perpetually running fountain of spring water on each floor” (pp. 51-52).

Although the publications bore the imprint of the Industrial and Educational Publishing Co., Ltd., the press became known as Garden City Press to reflect the image that Harpell intended for the community. In order

to construct houses for the employees, a development company was established (Garden City Development Co.). The company erected an infrastructure of streets, sidewalks, boulevards, parks, playgrounds, and sewers as well as the houses. The objective was "to assist those connected with Garden City Press to build and own their own homes on the co-partnership plan" (Harpell 1926b, 52). Thirty-five houses were eventually built.

At the 1917 meeting prominent leaders from across Canada (representing every major business association in the country from primary industry to manufacturing, banking, and insurance) had come together to support Harpell's desire to create programs that would upgrade their employees' education. To that end, the Institute of Industrial Arts was established by Harpell in 1922, "the main purpose of which is to encourage the industrial worker to 'study his job' and provide courses of instruction and study best calculated to assist the young industrial worker to make the transition from the classroom of the school, where he has been in the habit of being taught through lectures, to industry, where he must learn to improve himself through self-study" (Harpell 1926b, 2). In his program, Harpell targeted the "many people who have either never had or who have missed the opportunity of getting an education. The Institute is designed to encourage study and supply information that will assist the worker, irrespective of the class of work in which he or she is engaged and irrespective of the amount of education he or she may have" (Harpell 1926b, 2-3). Harpell argued that real learning began after formal schooling was complete and employment started, because, in a Dewian sense, employment opened the door for people to use ideas that they had been taught in school. "Up to the age of 14 every child has abundant opportunity for obtaining a free education in the public schools. But up to this age the average child is incapable of doing more than learning or obtaining the keys to knowledge. The power of making use of these keys begins to develop in the average boy or girl only about the time he or she is leaving the public school" (Harpell 1916, 13).

Promoting Self-Study

The Institute started producing correspondence courses for tradespeople in the various industries for which Garden City Press publishes periodicals. These courses were prepared by the highly skilled professional staff of Garden City Press. The general principle behind the courses was to apply basic theoretical concepts to the industry in which the participants of a

particular course were employed. In the course for the pulp and paper industry, for example, the component on general science applied the concepts of arithmetic, reading drawings, physics, mechanics, hydraulics, electricity, and chemistry to pulp and paper making. The general orientation of the course was both to assist workers better understand their jobs, and to help with the development of their basic education. "Three magic words" that Harpell urged people to consider were "Study your job!" (Harpell n.d.a, 7). The section on chemistry for pulp and paper workers dealt with laws that govern the behaviour of the chemicals used in the manufacture of pulp and paper. "The student learned, for instance, why the strong fibre of spruce may be changed to a mass of powder by incorrect handling of the bleaching operation" (Institute of Industrial Arts n.d., 9). Harpell recognized that theoretical concepts in and of themselves often lack interest for students, but if the concepts are applied in a context that has meaning, they can become exciting. "The study of mathematics itself," he wrote, "is dry and uninteresting. It is drudgery. But the study of it as applied to the work one is doing is a revelation and immensely interesting" (Harpell n.d.a, 8-9).

The correspondence courses were graded from basic to more advanced; for example, those in the pulp and paper industry had four levels. Students received a textbook which was subdivided into course components; at the end of each were examination questions. The student completed the questions and mailed them to the Institute, where they were graded. Upon completion of a course, students received a diploma, printed on heavy plate paper suitable for framing; the intention was that receiving a diploma would lead to more pay. Therefore, the motto on the cover of each course was: "Learn More, Earn More."

Courses for Harpell's Employees

Harpell also arranged night courses for his own employees, covered the cost, and hired an instructor. He did not require his employees to attend, but he made it clear that he viewed these courses as a means for advancement. At Garden City Press, he had the manner of a strict but kindly patriarch who took responsibility for his employees, much like a father in the family. The night courses, which dealt with all of the basic topics, were held three evenings a week—a very demanding schedule as in the 1920s the workday was from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. Of 40 tradespeople working at the company at the time, about 25 attended. Simone Crévier, who started working at Garden City in 1930 and eventually became the press's accountant, recalls that Harpell "didn't like the employees who did not want to take the courses." When

students completed a course, they took an exam, and successful completion typically resulted in a pay increase of 10 to 15 cents per hour.

Harpell felt a special responsibility for the education of new employees. He wrote: "What is done for the young employee at his [*sic*] entrance to industry invariably decides whether he is to be a loyal craftsman, a mere worker, or a perpetual sore head and clock watcher. Failure of employers to do their part...has been responsible, to a considerable extent, for the troubles and hardships of the industrial world" (1937a, 3). The model that Harpell had in mind for industrial training was similar to that used by craft unions to train apprentices: "The craft system exercises a healthy influence upon the rising generation. Every boy and girl knows that, if he [or she] desires to become a craft worker for the production of either goods or services, he must study his job; and, the greater use he makes of his apprenticeship, the finer and more successful craft producer of goods and services is he likely to become" (p. 17). Harpell likened the apprenticeship system for crafts to a university, with the professors as the master craftspersons and the students as the apprentices learning the trade. It was this model that he attempted to apply to industry. Although Harpell's philosophy of education was traditional in many respects, there were aspects of his approach that drew upon progressive theories, and he did refer to progressive education in his writings. "It is generally recognized by progressive educationists that there should be more individual work in school, and less class work than has been customary. A considerable part of the day should be set apart for voluntary self-study" (Harpell 1937a, 53).

Self-study, the edict that guided Harpell in his personal development, was what he advocated for others. From personal experience, he understood that it was not possible to force education upon an unwilling recipient. "In the final analysis, self-help is the only way to create an intellect or acquire knowledge. You may build a school and drive a boy [*sic*] to it; but you cannot make him study. It is only when he himself opens his mind and tries to get something into it that he begins to make progress. Self-effort, whether made in the presence or absence of a teacher, is the only way to acquire mental development" (Harpell 1937a, 53). Harpell's primary orientation was how to inculcate in the adult a love for learning that would be sustained throughout one's lifetime. He wrote: "Unfortunately, when the average boy or girl leaves school, he [or she] quits studying. He quits at the very time when he should begin....As the hours of labour become shorter, more time should be spent in self-study. After a little practice it becomes a pleasure to

acquire knowledge, to learn about new things and develop new ideas....Many of the most cultured and highly intellectual men and women owe very little to schools of any kind. They taught themselves by self-study” (1937a, 55-56). Harpell believed in self-study, but felt it was the employer’s responsibility to provide the facilities and the incentives for it to occur.

Encouraging Study Clubs

Harpell’s involvement in education extended to the community as well, and as early as 1922 he helped to organize the Study Club of St. Anne-de-Bellevue. “Every community,” he wrote, “should have a Study Club, and all citizens should be members for their own benefit and to give example and encouragement to others....As the boys and girls leave school, they should pass into their community Study Club. Through it they make themselves and their abilities known to those they wish to reach; in it they begin to take part in the practical affairs of life and to shape themselves into intelligent, responsible citizens (Harpell n.d.b, 5). When it first started, the St. Anne’s Study Club had an uphill struggle enlisting members, who were expected to study such subjects as Everyday Science, to attend a schedule of lectures, and to take an examination. But by the winter of 1934, the Study Club was in big demand; its French section filled the Town Hall to capacity and its English section filled the board room of Garden City Press. That year a total of 114 wrote the final examination, of whom one-third attained the 67 per cent average needed for graduate membership in the Club.

The St. Anne’s Study Club was a contemporary of those organized through the Antigonish Movement in Nova Scotia. Garden City Press published the Antigonish Movement’s *Masters of their Own Destiny* in French, promoted the English edition, and the Study Club used the book. Unlike the St. Anne’s group, which was initially had a more conventional view of education, the Antigonish clubs had an explicit socio-economic purpose— to analyze and to improve the conditions in which people were living, particularly the hardships brought on by the Great Depression, and to help them organize credit unions and other co-operatives. By the mid-1930s, the St. Anne’s Study Club had adopted a more socio-economic posture as well, tackling such issues as the municipalization of electric power. Harpell was critical of the “huge fortunes” that were being made through private ownership of electrical utilities and “the impoverishing of the municipalities and their citizens,” and he became an advocate of municipal ownership (Harpell n.d.c, 9). Harpell wrote educational materials about economics for use by students of the St. Anne’s Study Club and of other clubs. Titled

"Letters from a Business Man to a Student of Economics," his arguments ranged over such issues as "involuntary unemployment was not necessary," that the debts of the western provinces were too high, and that monetary and banking reforms were needed (Harpell n.d.c).

These arguments led toward a political perspective. Largely through the influence of Louis Even, one of Harpell's associates in the Institute of Industrial Arts, the newsletter of the St. Anne's Study Club began to publish material from the Social Credit Party, particularly its views on monetary reform. In the federal election of 1935, the Study Club's newsletter advocated voting for the "left wing of the Liberal Party" (Gardenvale Study Club 1935, 60). There was a shift in Harpell's thinking to one that viewed education as a tool of political analysis, as subsequently advocated by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire.

A primary reason for this change in thinking was his frustration with the lack of progress in overcoming the Depression and the need he felt to mobilize people in response to the hardships that were being caused. In the main, though, the driving force behind his philosophy of education was that better educated workers make for better industries and communities. He viewed education as not only improving the quality of work and of community life but also as helping people to realize their potential. In his later writings, he became caught up with the image of the self-made person, by which he meant people who bypassed formal schooling and studied on their own. Among the self-made people he referred to were Abraham Lincoln, Henry Ford, Andrew Carnegie, and Robert Owen—whose experiments at New Lanark, Scotland, were not dissimilar to his own at Gardenvale (Harpell 1937a, 102).

Harpell's interests were not confined to youth; he was an early advocate of lifelong and continuing education. "A successful producer," he wrote, "must forever continue, by study and instruction, to improve his methods of production" (Harpell 1937a, 104). As he neared retirement and reflected upon his own career, he noted that "from the age of 13 to the age of 68 over half of my waking hours were spent in study, the accumulation of scientific knowledge and in preparing it for dissemination among my co-workers and others" (Harpell 1942a, 30).

For his 80th birthday, Harpell's daughter Jean treated him to a trip to New Zealand, a country that he admired because of its social policies—for example, it was the first to grant women universal suffrage. When she asked him what he wanted to do on the trip, he said he would like to visit all the

libraries. Harpell was sick at the time with cancer of the bowel, the disease that would lead to his death five years later. Jean, the only of his seven children who is still alive, recalls that for her father, "Education was always first!" The irony of Harpell being a lifelong missionary of education is that at age 12 he had dropped out of school for lack of interest.

Harpell as a Social Critic

For Harpell, the publishing business was not simply a means to earn a living but an opportunity to fulfill his social goals. Owning a publishing business also provided a venue for his extensive writings, many of which represented a trenchant critique of inequality and exploitation.

Fighting Financial Exploitation

Most of Harpell's writings date from before his entry into business (1906 to 1911) and from the late-1920s to the mid-1930s after his business was well established. Throughout his writings he maintained a populist orientation, his primary concern being the exploitation of the "average Canadian" by large financial and commercial interests, particularly the insurance and banking industries. Some of his writings, reflecting his educational bent, attempted to explain to the public the complexities of commerce and finance so that they would understand and support policies that were in the interests of the country. For example, in the introduction to a 431-page book called *Canadian Industry, Commerce and Finance*, Harpell (1916) explained:

Many people are apt to regard the ways of commerce and finance as something that can be understood only by specialists and, hence, delay in acquiring a knowledge of them. This is a great mistake. Nothing is more simple or more easy of comprehension....If, therefore, these pages succeed in giving some such useful information and convey some idea of the opportunities that lie before the average Canadian as a result of the resources of his country and of the facilities which her institutions offer for education, trade and commerce, some good will have been accomplished. (preface; p. 11)

Harpell's book was replete with dry statistical information about Canada's economy and included a comprehensive directory of businesses organized by market sector. It was naive of him to believe that the average Canadian would have any interest in the text.

Throughout his writings Harpell maintained an unyielding faith in the power of knowledge. In a 1931 volume of *Canadian Industry, Commerce and Finance*, he reiterates his faith in education:

The text in this volume has grown out of the author's efforts to find a material of sufficient interest and simplicity for the beginner in a course of self-study. Without a teacher it is so easy for students to lose their way in almost any subject they undertake to study, and yet everyone with ambition must learn how to acquire knowledge for himself [*sic*] and to develop his intellectual faculties without assistance from others. No one can have a teacher standing over him always, and the sooner he acquires the knack and habit of self-study, the sooner he will get on the road trodden by all successful men and women. (foreword)

However, only a few of Harpell's writings were attempts to load people with information. Most were trenchant polemics against Canada's commercial and financial interests ("the selfish few") who were exploiting the "average Canadian." His favourite targets were the insurance companies and banks, which he began to attack as far back as 1906. That year Harpell published two monographs—"Improper and Extravagant Management of a Number of Canadian Life Insurance Companies" and "The Rights of Policyholders"—both criticizing the insurance industry in the strongest terms and suggesting reforms that were needed. His negative impressions of the insurance industry started while he was an agent of North American Life Insurance during the time that he was at Queen's University studying for his BA degree. As an agent, he was offended by an offer from the managing director of the company to participate in an illegal rebating scheme, and rejected life insurance as a career even though he was one of North American's most successful agents. Although North American Life, the company by whom Harpell had been employed, was the primary target for his criticism, his analysis was directed at many of the leading companies in the industry, including Sun Life which he referred to "as the worst example" in making illegal loans (Harpell 1906a, 9).

On January 20, 1906, Harpell sent a letter to newspapers across the country in which he summarized his concerns about the handling of life insurance in Canada; and five days later, he appeared at the annual general meeting of North American Life, peppering the president and managing director with questions. He called on policyholders to petition government for "a proper investigation" and to form a bureau to represent their interests (Harpell 1906a). Later that year, the Policyholders' Association was formed,

a vehicle through which Harpell voiced his concerns about the insurance industry and lobbied the government for reform. He referred to the Policyholders' Association as "a protective and educational movement," part of a broader movement for social change. He believed "self-improvement through increased knowledge" to be "the first step in the direction of righting wrongs and improving general conditions. Wrongs do not right themselves; they await the action of men and women and improvements in conditions come only as the result of an organized effort on the part of men and women" (1932a, 8).

Throughout his critique of the insurance industry, Harpell (1932a) viewed problems from the standpoint of the policyholders. Life insurance, he argued, was "the most sacred of all trust funds" (p. 1). Similarly, he viewed profits as "nothing more than the over-charges made in the premiums above the amount required to meet the mortuary and endowment elements of the policy and to provide for the expenses" (Harpell 1906a, 15). Harpell argued that life insurance reaches its ideal condition when it furnishes absolutely perfect protection, and at the lowest possible cost. After studying the insurance systems of the United States, England, France, Germany, New Zealand and Australia, he advocated two approaches. The first was fraternal or mutual insurance (that is, companies owned by the policyholders), which he argued (in a paraphrase of Abraham Lincoln) was "far more than any other system insurance by the people, for the people" (Harpell 1932a, 21). The second was "strict government regulation of the business of life insurance." The regulation in Canada, he felt, was "weak and inefficient" (Harpell 1932a, 82).

Harpell's critique of Canada's banks was no less forceful. In a 1908 monograph titled "Canadian Banking and Insurance Under Hon. W. S. Fielding, Finance Minister," he undertook a detailed analysis of the shortcomings of Canadian banks. Fielding must have been impressed with Harpell's critique because he solicited his assistance in framing the Dominion Life Insurance Act of 1910, and three years after that he became Harpell's business partner. Harpell's critique of Canada's banks, however, did not exonerate Fielding. Harpell (1908) wrote: "It is true that many irregularities and much extravagance, dishonesty and graft has been discovered in connection with many of the banks that have failed. But there is also no lack of evidence to show that an investigation into the affairs of many of the surviving banks would reveal a state of affairs equally revolting. This condition has been largely created during the last eight or nine years,

and is due to the unwise banking legislation and lax administration of the Finance Minister" (p. 15). Then to remind the Finance Minister that nothing was forgiven with respect to the insurance industry, he added: "It will be three years next February since the Royal Insurance Commission was appointed, and two years since they made their report to the Finance Minister, and yet the insurance companies are permitted to go on grafting, thieving and spending the people's money even worse than they did before the investigation" (p. 17).

In formulating his solution to these problems, Harpell did not operate from any particular political school of thought. Rather he searched for policies that had worked in other countries and attempted to apply them to Canada. He was impressed by New Zealand (his almost romantic attachment coming from his readings as he had not visited the country at that point), because of its high standard of living and because "there are neither millionaires nor beggars" (1906a, 82). Although at no time does he refer to himself as a socialist or use the label socialism to describe his ideas, as far back as 1906 Harpell called for national systems of accident insurance, healthcare, and old age pensions. "If the reader feels that there is no great need for considering, from a national point of view, the question of properly looking after the health of the people and of carefully nursing the sick and injured back to their normal condition, he has failed entirely to appreciate the utter backwardness of Canada in this respect as compared with other countries, or to understand the economic and social value which the health of the individual is to the state" (1906b, 89).

The common denominator upon which Harpell's proposals were based was his inexorable desire to improve the conditions of the average Canadian. When that goal could be achieved through government intervention, he called for it; and when community and individual action was required, that was what he proposed. Among the community-based initiatives that he supported were co-operatives—a mode of organization that he alluded to in his earlier critique of insurance companies. In his 1911 book he discussed co-operatives more extensively: "Results in every country have demonstrated that there is no economic or social force of greater value to producers and consumers than Co-operation. It enhances the value of industry and increases production. In no sense is it a charitable or paternal movement since it simply provides the opportunity for, and encourages self-help" (p. 134). By 1911, Harpell had also turned to co-operatives as an alternative to banks. He was familiar with the credit union system started in Quebec in 1900 by

Alphonse Desjardins, initially around church parishes, and also studied co-operative banking in Germany, which by 1911 was a well developed system. He wrote:

The whole of the Canadian banking business is controlled by about one-half a dozen people, really by about two. By the existing system, the savings of the whole country are drawn to two or three centres, where they are too frequently used for stock gambling purposes, or from where they are shipped out of the country to be loaned on foreign stock exchanges. A system of co-operative banks would keep within each community the savings of its people to be used in increasing production and for the general upbuilding of the community. Furthermore, a system of co-operative banks would bring to each community its fair share of outside credit, which would be used to greater advantage for productive purposes than it is at present. (Harpell 1911, 151-152).

His Crusade Against Sun Life

From 1911 until 1928, Harpell the polemicist took a break to concentrate upon building his business into one of the most successful presses in Canada. However, it was not Harpell's mission just to be a successful business person. His primary objective in life was to rectify the problems of society, and in 1928 when he took over the editorship of the *Journal of Commerce* he resumed his critique of the insurance industry. This time Sun Life became the primary focus of his attention. Sun Life was no ordinary insurance company. When Harpell mounted his attack, it was the largest in Canada, with assets representing 37 per cent of the entire Canadian industry. The directors of Sun Life were from the elite of Quebec business and politics and included the premier of the province, L. A. Taschereau. T. B. Macaulay, the president of the company, and the object of Harpell's venom, was the son of the founder and one of the wealthiest men in the country.

Harpell did not pull any punches. From December 1928 until October 1932 (when Sun Life obtained an injunction forcing the *Journal of Commerce* to cease publication and also charged Harpell with defamatory libel) he attacked both Sun Life and its president for such "irregularities" as "misrepresentation" and "falsifying"; ultimately he referred to Macaulay as a "swindler" and one of the "world's worst crooks" (Harpell 1932a, 9). He argued that "over \$130,000,000 of the good money of policyholders has been given to a few stock manipulators for their inflated securities. The manipulators have the policyholders' money and the Sun Life holds their

worthless paper" (p. 3). Harpell asked Prime Minister Bennett to set up a Royal Commission to examine the affairs of Sun Life. In concluding one of his lengthy letters to Prime Minister Bennett he stated: "By postponing an investigation into the affairs of the Sun Life the policyholders will continue to be robbed, and the robbers be allowed to get away with their loot. Do you think this is fair to the policyholders, to the Canadian people, and to the reputation which this country enjoys for fair dealing?" (Harpell 1932b, 31).

There was not a lot of support for Harpell's crusade against Sun Life, but neither was he ignored. Although there was no direct personal support for him in parliament, the matters that he raised did become an issue in the House of Commons in May 1932, when the Conservative government of R. B. Bennett introduced legislation placing a ceiling of 15 per cent upon the proportion of an insurance company's assets that could be invested in stocks. Members of the opposition parties criticized the government for setting such a high limit, and without referring to Harpell, utilized his arguments about Sun Life. As one member stated, "we should no longer allow these companies to invest in common stocks trust funds held for widows and orphans. I think the experience of the last three years certainly proves that this is a situation that should be corrected" (Hansard 1932, 3294). Another urged, as Harpell had done, that the government "bring down legislation nationalizing the entire insurance business in this country (p. 3290). In defending the government's position, the Finance Minister E. N. Rhodes would only say that "we have gone a long way in the right direction," and signalled that greater restrictions were forthcoming" (p. 3294). Among politicians who took up the issue was Mitchell Hepburn, soon to become the premier of Ontario. In a letter to the Minister of Finance (May 4, 1932), he questioned whether Sun Life had sufficient assets to cover its obligations to its policyholders. Harpell also received some support from *The Economist*, a respected British publication, which also raised questions about the inflated evaluations of Sun Life's investments. However, as noted by the International Labour News Service (1930: n.p.): "the disclosures [in the *Journal of Commerce*], drawn directly from the reports of the Canadian Superintendent of Insurance, ought to have provided a first sensation for the daily papers, but nearly all have ignored them."

In December 1932, Harpell was convicted of defamatory libel for his comments about Macaulay and sentenced to three months in Montreal's Bordeaux Jail, a term that he served in the summer of 1933 after losing an appeal of his conviction. His daughter Jean recalls that he was phoned by the

governor of the jail to come in a day early so as to avoid reporters, and that he was allowed to leave a day early for the same reason. While in prison, Harpell, true to his love for education, started a library for the inmates. He also wrote letters to the governor on behalf of prisoners, arguing that “there are many young men in this prison as first offenders who should not be here, if the object desired is correction” (Harpell 1933a, 88).

Harpell as a Social Innovator

Although he was unrepentant about Sun Life, after being released from jail Harpell turned his energies elsewhere. Much of his focus was on the terrible suffering resulting from the Great Depression. During its final years, the *Journal of Commerce* (which ceased publication after Sun Life obtained its injunction) ran front-page editorials on unemployment: “Unemployment Problem Requires Sympathetic Action of All Classes,” “Government Responsibility to Prevent Industrial Breakdown.” Harpell was proud that his press had “come through the third year of a severe industrial depression without having to consign a single worthy worker to the ranks of the unemployed” (1937b, 15). Not only that, but Garden City Press continued to modernize and became the first printer in Canada to install web presses and other expensive equipment necessary to produce large editions.

An Employer's Moral Obligation

Because of the harsh conditions of the 1930s, Harpell believed that employers had a moral obligation to help their employees retain their jobs. In April 1933(b), he wrote a series of letters to the president of the Banque Canadienne Nationale in Montreal criticizing the dismissal by the bank of the son of a typesetter at Garden City Press. He stated: “An institution such as the Banque Canadienne Nationale has no valid reason for a policy calculated to enlarge the number of unemployed while it continues to pay dividends to its stockholders” (p. 1). In one of his many follow-up letters to the bank president, he (1933b) asked: “Who is to feed, clothe and house this man Gauthier you dismissed a few days ago? How much will you contribute to his keep? He has been in your employ for many years at wages so small that he was unable to lay anything by for an emergency such as you now visit upon him” (p. 1). The bank manager, who probably was not used to such correspondence, neither replied to Harpell nor rehired his former employee.

Despite his disappointment with the inaction on unemployment by the Canadian government, Harpell maintained a buoyant outlook, pinning his hopes on American President Franklin D. Roosevelt (for whom he had a

great admiration) and his New Deal. In his 1937b book, *The New Deal vs The Old System of Exploitation*, he argued that "Our forces are intact and more fit than ever for the day of prosperity which, we feel, will begin to dawn on this continent within a few months, largely as a result of the New Deal inaugurated by our great neighbour to the south" (p. 15). Harpell's repeated forecasts that the Depression was about to end reflected his optimistic and at times romantic outlook.

In line with his commitment to helping to ameliorate the problems of the Depression, Harpell in 1936 organized an Arts and Crafts Co-operative (also referred to as a "Co-operative Community of Student Workers") to help young men and women work with their hands. He stated that the co-operative "will show the rising generation how to make use of the knowledge and the keys to greater knowledge which the schools give them. Such an institution...should stand as a bridge over which the rising generation passes from school life into a life of industry" (Harpell 1936, 4). The plan for the co-op included a community centre where the members would display and market their products, as well as a restaurant and hall where young people could congregate. However, the plan was shelved because of differences with the town.

Reinforced Community Focus

Harpell, having reached age 60, organized several others projects for the community and his employees, including two credit unions—la Caisse populaire de Gardenvale and la Caisse populaire de Ste.-Anne-de-Bellevue). The former, which is still in operation, was for Garden City Press's employees and their families. In order to encourage savings, Harpell paid the \$5 deposit required for membership and also deposited 25 cents a week into each employee's account, and 10 cents a week for each child of an employee. He then added \$5 per year to the accounts of his employees. A strong advocate of thrift, Harpell stated with some satisfaction that: "Some men at the Garden City Press will have paid for their home, costing about \$6,000, in less than seven years" (Harpell n.d.d, 4).

Harpell's commitment to co-operatives, which was quite explicit by the mid-1930s, resulted in other initiatives: the St. Anne's Home-Builders, a co-operative organization designed for assisting in the financing of homes, shops, libraries, gardens, schools, recreation grounds; and in 1940 the Catholic Press of the Americas, to publish and distribute religious materials. (Garden City Press was later given exclusive manufacturing, distributing, and printing rights in Canada for all liturgical works of the Catholic Church.)

Even as he prepared himself for retirement, he did it in a manner that reflected his idealism and commitment both to his employees and the community of St. Anne.

Transferring His Assets to His Employees and the Community

When his lifelong business partner Alexander Longwell died in 1940, the future of their business became of paramount concern for Harpell. Although at age 65 he was still in good health and able to work a full day, he recognized that unless a plan was put in place for the future of the business, its continuation would be in jeopardy. "My life work is nearing completion and with a view to its perpetuation, I wish to strengthen the foundation upon which it rests or, if necessary, to build a new foundation upon which it may be securely placed before I relinquish control" (Harpell 1942b, 12). In his writings, Harpell reflected upon the demise of Robert Owen's experiment at New Lanark, Scotland, and was determined that Gardenvale should avoid the same fate.

The first transfer of Harpell's assets had occurred in 1929 when he sold his major trade publications to six of his employees associated with the Institute of Industrial Arts (the educational wing of the business). The purchase by National Business Publications Ltd. (to be paid in installments from the company's revenues) was negotiated before the onset of the Great Depression. In an act of extraordinary generosity, Harpell reduced the price by \$161,881 in 1933 to take account of the downturn in the economy. National Business Publications carried on for 50 years as a publisher of newspapers and annuals before it was bought out in 1979.

Next Harpell transferred ownership to his employees of the houses built by the Gardenvale Development Company. Originally these houses were rented at a reduced charge. In 1940 they were sold to the employees living in them at a net cost of \$23 per month for a period of 10 years.

With respect to the Industrial & Educational Publishing Co. and the related Garden City Press, Harpell (1937b) first expressed his intentions when he wrote: "An industry belongs essentially to the community in which it is situated and there the ownership and control of that industry should always reside. The contract we are working upon, by which the ownership and control of the Garden City Press will pass in perpetuity from the stockholders to those who have been employed in the Garden City Press for a period of at least ten years, is calculated to give permanency and stability to that business" (pp. 25-26). Five years later, he elaborated upon his intentions. Sounding much like a Marxist (ironically so, because his only commentary

on that philosophy was highly critical), he (1942b, 19) stated, "labour is the only factor that creates goods and services as well as the tools and machinery and other facilities necessary to their creation and distribution." He lamented that over the past 23 years, his company had paid over \$750,000 in dividends and interest "for the loan of capital. What a magnificent job could have been done," he argued, "had this been ploughed back into the business for the creation of additional opportunities for employment and additional facilities for the training of the rising generation, as well as for the creation of homes and social security of the workers. In the future, all those on the payroll of the Industrial & Educational Publishing Company, Limited, acting as a unit, will be their own employer and each will partake of the entire fruits of the joint efforts proportionate to the quantity and quality of his or her production."

After acquiring Mr. Longwell's shares from his estate, Harpell organized the sale of his business to his employees in two separate worker co-operatives: one in Toronto and the other in St. Anne. The Toronto operation became Garden City Press Co-operative in May of 1945, with 38 of its 120 employees as members. Employees held one \$100 common share which permitted them to cast one vote at general meetings of the company. In the application for incorporation (1945), which Harpell signed, it stated that the purpose of the sale was "largely to convey to our employees benefits of their long and faithful services to the organization" (p. 1). Garden City Press continued as a co-operative until 1975 when it was purchased by Canada Law Books, Inc., and converted to a corporation under the Business Corporations Act. The company continued with about 40 employees and closed in 1994.

Harpell Press Co-operative/ l'Imprimerie Coopérative Harpell

Although Garden City Press was important to Harpell, the jewel in his crown was the operation at St. Anne. It was converted to a worker co-operative in September of 1945, under the name Harpell Press Co-operative (the name changed to l'Imprimerie Coopérative Harpell in 1977). Harpell had written on several occasions about his intentions, but when he made them official, his employees were astonished. Georgette Prud'homme, who worked in the office and was a member of the first board of directors, recalls that: "We couldn't believe it." A similar sentiment was expressed by Laurent Legault, who started in the company as a typesetter in 1922 at age 16 and who worked his way up to become the president and general manager from 1949 to 1974: "Everybody was surprised he gave us that!"

The original price of the company was \$500,000—to be paid out of the company's revenues in monthly installments over 10 years. Of the total amount, \$300,000 was to be paid directly to Harpell and the remainder into the co-operative's Educational and Welfare Fund. This fund was intended to promote the principles and practices of co-operation both among the members and among the population generally. In 1953, prior to his departure to New Zealand, Harpell settled with the co-operative for \$412,000 and forgave the remaining amount. It is generally acknowledged that the price paid by the employees was much less than the value of the company.

In addition to settling with his employees, Harpell was also very generous with the town of St. Anne. In 1940 he donated land for a community centre (the Harpell Community Centre), and then after the Second World War donated money for the construction of the building (dedicated as a Memorial Hall for victims of the World Wars); it has become the location for community activities such as meetings, bridge, lawn bowling, and celebrations for wedding receptions and holidays such as St. Jean Baptiste Day. The centre serves as a meeting place for youth; there is an outdoor pool and day camp in the summer. Upstairs in the centre is Harpell's most cherished institution: the local library.

Although Harpell could readily transfer his assets to his employees, it was not as simple to transfer the skills necessary to ensure the continued success of the enterprise. In part that was because he was a hands-on manager who controlled all aspects of the business. As such, the transition from a structure of benign paternalism to a worker co-operative, based on a philosophy of workers' democratic control, was not an easy one. Courses on the functioning of a worker co-operative were held two nights a week. "It was helpful," recalls Laurent Legault, "because many of us didn't know what a co-operative was." Even though the employees of the company were ill-prepared to function in the new structure, the co-operative started with a solid business foundation. It was one of the largest printing and binding companies in Canada, with an excellent reputation for the quality of its work and a large financial reserve. The year after the transfer, it realized a profit of \$557,000 on sales of \$10.5 million.

Harpell Press Co-operative was able to continue as an independent firm until 1996, but after Harpell retired the business lacked the dynamism that marked his tenure and gradually it lost its strong position in a highly competitive industry. In spring of 1996 the members agreed to sell the company to a Montreal firm, Ultimate Electronics, which produces software

for printing companies. The Harpell name still remains but only as a reminder of its founder.

Harpell's Legacy as an Adult Educator

As is evident from this article, James John Harpell was much more than an adult educator. He was a social critic who mounted a fierce battle against the monopolistic control of the insurance companies and banks, and he was also a social innovator whose used his organizing skills and generosity to create a legacy of co-operatives and other community institutions in St. Anne-de-Bellevue and the Montreal area. Until its purchase in 1996, Harpell Press Co-operative was one the leading worker co-operatives in Canada and a monument to Harpell's faith in his employees and his idealism about human potential.

Harpell's contributions as an adult educator, although not well known, are equally profound. On a practical level, he was a pioneer in developing correspondence courses in Canada. He was also a pioneer in convincing employers of the value of upgrading their employees' education. Although one could argue that Harpell had a self-interest in this strategy because it formed the basis of his business, he also set an example by setting up courses for his employees. Harpell was also a pioneer in the creation of study clubs in which adults (primarily working people with limited schooling) could upgrade their skills and develop understandings that are typically associated with a liberal education. He was an advocate of lifelong learning at a time when the average working person did not complete elementary school.

From a theoretical perspective, Harpell wrote extensively about self-directed education for adults well in advance of the main work in that area by such adult education theorists as Allen Tough. Self-study, as Harpell labelled it, was also a statement of faith in the potential of working people to educate themselves. Harpell developed his confidence in self-study from his own experience, and assumed that if he could educate himself in this way others could as well. Furthermore, he was more of a pragmatist than an ideologue. The night courses that were offered to his employees were based upon more conventional approaches to education. Although he recognized that self-study was an approach to adult education worth promoting, he understood that not everyone learned in the same way.

Harpell's willingness to experiment with differing approaches is perhaps his greatest strength as an adult educator. For example, when the study clubs in St. Anne-de-Bellevue were initiated in 1922, the approach to

education was conventional, both in the curriculum and the teaching. But as the social problems of the Great Depression became entrenched, Harpell encouraged a shift so that the curriculum of the study clubs was used to examine such issues as unemployment and to stimulate insights as to how it might best be addressed. In that respect, there is a striking similarity between Harpell's approach and the popular education advocated by such adult educators as Paulo Freire.

Harpell left behind an extensive legacy of his writings as well as community organizations that bear the labour and financial resources that he invested in them. In St. Anne-de-Bellevue, the Harpell Community Centre with its library and recreation centre remains a legacy to his contribution, as does the unique design of Avenue Garden City where the employees of the Press lived. Yet, within adult education circles, James John Harpell is an unknown figure. If he had been an academic, perhaps his work would have received greater recognition. However, if he had been an academic, it is unlikely that he would have pioneered correspondence courses and study clubs. That perhaps is the irony of Harpell's circumstance—his social location as a well-known businessman (and the related connections that he had with important political figures) gave him an entrée that allowed him to organize adult education programs that an academic might not have been able to do. However, his location outside of the university probably reduced his theoretical influence and the impact of his writings. It is hoped that this article will contribute in a small way to bringing some recognition to Harpell's adult education contribution.

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