

**KNOWLEDGE FOR THE PEOPLE: THE STRUGGLE FOR
ADULT LEARNING IN ENGLISH-SPEAKING CANADA,
1828-1973.**

Michael R. Welton (ed.) 1987. Symposium Series/18. Toronto:
OISE Press, The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

What a delight -- and a rarity, too -- a scholarly book in adult education that is intelligently and carefully edited!

Has Dalhousie University professor Michael Welton assembled ten authors including himself who just happen to get it together so that their joint book, Knowledge for the People, sends out a well-integrated, clear, and cogent message? Not likely. What is more likely is that editor Welton had to bite the bullet and risk the ire of his authors by getting them to rewrite, alter, and otherwise shape up their work here and there. That's what good editors do -- and Michael Welton seems to qualify as one of these in an era when editing is widely and wrongly considered a mere frill in the process of producing a sound academic volume. Sloppy presentation even of sound research and analysis has too often been the result.

But editing is not the only virtue here. Welton and his colleagues have an eye for content and talents for analysis that make this an essential book for any Canadian wanting to understand (from a revisionist historian perspective) "the struggle for adult learning in English-speaking Canada."

Welton gets Knowledge for the People off to a running start with an often biting introduction. His intentions are those of grappling with the problem of the "invisibility of adult educational thought and practice within mainstream Canadian historical writing" and the "historical amnesia of the Canadian adult education community." These problems unfortunately bedevil adult educators in more southerly North American latitudes as well.

Welton selected essays written by persons he considers "sensitive to the need to contextualize educational history and to break from our romantic historiography." He chose case studies from English-speaking Canada that "examine, implicitly or explicitly, the complex question of how adults in a range of learning sites

develop their own understandings and skills to control their life situation within a particular set of constraints..."

The history of the Montreal Mechanics' Institute is taken on by Nora Robins. George L. Cook examines Alfred Fitzpatrick and the founding of Frontier College -- a fascinating educational endeavour aimed at alleviating wretched conditions facing "campmen" in mining, lumber, and railway camps of the Canadian frontier. In "Housekeepers of the Community," Carol J. Dennison takes a feminist look at the British Columbia Women's Institutes. The Workers' Educational Association in Ontario is the focus of the essay by Ian Radforth and Joan Sangster. Sandra Souchotte's article takes on drama as used as adult education by the Workers' theatre to expose and ridicule what they believed to be an exploitive bourgeois society. Juliet Pollard's "Propaganda for Democracy: John Grierson and Adult Education During the Second World War" is the most insightful examination of the relationship between adult education and propaganda since the pioneering work of Eduard Lindeman in the United States in the late 1930's. Ian MacPherson describes and analyzes the rather intricate history of a cooperative college in western Canada between 1951 and 1973. Welton himself writes about an episode in the politics of adult education in Saskatchewan when Watson Thomson in 1944 and 1945 was called in for the purpose of "mobilizing the people for socialism" -- a cause that seems close to Welton's own heart. Welton also, with Jim Lotz, writes about the Antigonish Movement which was based in the Extension Department of St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia.

How do essentially revisionist historians view Antigonish, the movement generally recognized as a unique and significant Canadian contribution to adult education and community development theory and practice? Because of its worldwide visibility and Pollyanna image, Antigonish is perhaps the best window in which to view the historical approach used in Welton's book. Interestingly, not too many balloons get punctured. Still, the approach is appropriately critical -- if a shade less hard-nosed than is typical in some of the other essays.

Antigonish emerges as "moderately successful as a social movement" oriented toward reform rather than revolution. It may not have toppled "monopoly capitalism" but it "achieved limited but significant reforms within capitalist political and economic structures." Its methods were "nothing new, startling, or radical." It did, however, result in "development of a network

that linked together scattered individuals and groups with common goals, and provided them with access to the information and resources they needed."

There is a refreshing lack of the usual palaver and syrup in describing the principal leaders of the Antigonish Movement -- though Lotz and Welton believe that one of them, Father Jimmy Tompkins, was "a typical prophet, a truly holy man." They are careful also to point out that he could be "extremely abrasive... forever prodding people to read a book, discuss a pamphlet, take some action."

The charismatic Father Moses Michael Coady was a kind of irresistible force who, like Father Tompkins, was unexcelled at stimulating, inspiring, talking, and teaching. Neither of them, however, was much good at organizing -- a function delegated by Coady to A. B. MacDonald.

Father Coady, as a Roman Catholic, was not a socialist in any Marxist sense. Lotz and Welton say he was strongly influenced in this view by its "perversion in practice." Instead, he offered a "vision of a participatory democracy which confronted the anti-democratic currents in the communist movement and strategy of education for economic co-operation."

Nonetheless, Coady dreamed of a transformed society. He didn't succeed in creating one. Still, the Antigonish Movement as Alexander Laidlaw pointed out, achieved economic uplift of the poor, implementation of a philosophy of adult education that focused on ordinary people in group action, improved labour organization, greater relevance for the university in relating to everyday life, and support for the social teachings of the Catholic Church. Lotz and Welton add that the Movement created a new opportunity structure for people with ability. All of this was "no small achievement," according to the authors. Canadians and the rest of the world, it seems, can rest easily in their admiration of the Antigonish Movement.

Is anything wrong with this book? Not much. Revisionist historians, especially those with a socialist orientation, are sometimes insufferably arrogant and holier than thou. Welton occasionally sounds a bit arrogant but never insufferably so. Even the methods of the revisionists aren't quite good enough for him. He says, for example, that the essayists in Knowledge for the People "have learned from the social control paradigm

(developed by revisionists) without becoming its captive." Well maybe. Welton seems to have a few of his own doubts.

He declares himself aware that in identifying with the struggles of the "common people," against those perceived as oppressors, the historian may move "inside the protagonist's world view and [take] over the blindnesses!" Accordingly, in his "Introduction," he questions his own co-authors about "silences and significances in their texts" that he believes might hinder "rigorous analysis of the forces opposing human redemption through educational practice." He does it well, too -- very systematically.

Professor Welton is a literate man, and his writing shows it. The language is occasionally taxing (I could do without "hive" used as a verb). Still, he has the art of good -- sometimes elegant -- writing and somehow even with occasionally exotic word selections, the effect is seldom muddled or ostentatious.

Each essay in the book is strong, clearly-written, and has excellent bibliographic documentation. A few photographs spice up an already spicy text. An index would be helpful but is not included.

Canadians who are trying to become adult educators or who have any claim to being called adult educators should certainly buy and read this book -- and then behave as if they have read it. Adult educators in the United States, Latin America, Europe, Africa, Asia, Australia, the Pacific Islands, and for that matter on the Antarctic ice pack could improve their professional understandings by reading it too. It is good enough that it ought to cross international boundaries.

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