

## Articles

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### "A MOST INSISTENT DEMAND": THE PAS EXPERIMENT IN COMMUNITY EDUCATION, 1938-1940

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#### Abstract

Initiated in January 1938 by the CAAE under Harry and Mary Avison's leadership, The Pas experiment was created to demonstrate the power of adult education to solve community problems. This did not occur, and the collapse of The Pas experiment in community education in 1940 ended a controversial chapter in Manitoban adult education history. The narration and analysis of the experiment enables us to understand more clearly the intellectual formation of the CAAE at an axial moment in its history. We are also confronted with some uncomfortable truths. The Pas experiment shatters the easy optimism of mainstream adult education and invites us to think more radically about the structural constraints on the achievement of a communal life based on undistorted communication, dialogue, communal judgment and rational persuasion.

#### Résumé

Le projet expérimental Pas a commencé avec l'ACEEA, en janvier 1938, sous la direction de Mary et Harry Avison, afin de démontrer comment l'éducation pour adultes pouvait aider à trouver des solutions aux crises de la communauté. Sans succès l'expérience s'est écroulée pendant l'année 1940 et a mis fin à un chapitre discutable de l'histoire de l'éducation pour adultes au Manitoba. L'histoire de cette expérience et son analyse nous permettent de mieux comprendre la formation intellectuelle de l'ACEEA. Nous devons aussi faire face à des vérités inquiétantes. L'expérience Pas a détruit l'optimisme facile des méthodes conventionnelles de l'éducation pour adultes et nous invite à remettre radicalement en question les contraintes structurales empêchant la réalisation de la vie communautaire fondée sur le dialogue, les décisions prises en communauté, et la persuasion raisonnable.

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To remember is to seek not the most accurate or the  
'best' interpretation but the one most 'powerful' for the  
purpose of illuminating our projects for the future.

- Walter Adamson

## **Introduction**

The residents of The Pas, a rough and tumble lumbering and railway town in northern Manitoba, could not have imagined the depth and intensity of the debates that precipitated the arrival of Harry and Mary Avison in their town in January 1938 to "inaugurate an experiment in community education along the lines of the Scandinavian folk school."<sup>1</sup> Nor could the Avisons have imagined how difficult it would be "to serve the interests of the whole community."<sup>2</sup> In February 1940 Harry Avison would confess to his friend and mentor E.A. ("Ned") Corbett that he and his wife had been "singularly unsuccessful in bridging the sad gaps between the radical groups . . ."<sup>3</sup>

The collapse of The Pas experiment in June 1940 ended a controversial chapter in the history of adult education in Manitoba. The story of The Pas experiment is worth narrating and analyzing for several reasons. First, The Pas experiment occurred at a pivotal moment in the history of the Canadian Association for Adult Education (CAAE), enabling us to understand more clearly the intellectual formation of Canadian adult education. Second, retrieving The Pas experiment from "the dustbins of history" allows adult educators to test their present concepts and values in a free and open dialogue with tradition.<sup>4</sup> Finally, the historian in guise of deep-sea diver plunges into the murk of the past hoping to surface with a pearl in hand.<sup>5</sup>

### **"Rooted in the Life of the People": Social and Intellectual Origins**

The Pas experiment, though never completely fulfilling the hopes of its friends and supporters, was essentially the culmination of a desperate search and fervent conversation between friends located in different institutional settings about the need to provide Manitoba's stricken rural communities with a coherent adult education program: Esther Thompson, Director of women's work with the Extension Branch of the Department of Agriculture, Dr. Sidney Smith, President of The University of Manitoba, E.A. Corbett, Director of the CAAE, and Harry Avison, a United Church minister.

The need for a formal adult education program had been acknowledged as early as 1933 when three Manitobans, H. Trevor Lloyd, J.E. Robbins and Andrew Moore, returned from their American Association of Adult Education sponsored tour of the Scandinavian countries. Andrew Moore, an inspector of schools, had been instrumental in organizing a preliminary conference in September 1934 for those who believed that education, particularly adult education, provided one of the surest means

of solving social problems. The 1934 conference set up a committee charged with the responsibility of cataloguing adult education activities in Manitoba (for the Sandiford Report on Adult Education in Canada), and of preparing the way for the formation of the Manitoba Association of Adult Education (MAAE), which was formally established in May 1935. The MAAE leaders believed that the average Manitoban citizen was not adequately informed about local, national and global affairs. By providing some leadership in the inchoate field of adult education, the MAAE leaders hoped to develop a politically literate citizenry. It appears, however, that the MAAE had little contact with rural community organizations. After this initial organizing activity (which included a visit in November 1934 from Oscar Olsson, the founder of the Swedish Study Circle movement), the MAAE was unable to develop much momentum.<sup>6</sup>

This latter fact was very disturbing to Harry Avison, who was frustrated with the limitations of his pastorate in Deloraine and anxious that the MAAE do some real work in alleviating community problems. By the end of October 1936 Avison had talked with Dr. John MacKay, Director of Vocational Training, and with Esther Thompson and Dr. Sidney Smith about the "prospects for adult education in Manitoba." On November 1, 1936 Avison wrote to Thompson, telling her that he had been discussing his situation with MacKay, who felt that the MAAE's meetings were barren and urged that a "man" be placed in the field. Characteristically, Avison insisted that the Association think out its policy carefully and thoroughly. He also wanted the University and the government to legitimize adult education in order to free the name of Adult Education from the vague associations it has in the public mind. Avison informed Thompson that he was willing to volunteer his services. But, he queried, who would support a definite program of rural adult education? The University? The Department of Labour? The Department of Education? Avison firmly believed that Ms. Thompson was strategically situated to influence the right persons.<sup>7</sup>

On the following day Avison wrote to Ned Corbett. The tone was importunate. "Unless something different and definite is done fairly soon," he told Corbett, "the cause will suffer a serious loss of interest." No financial support for rural adult education had been forthcoming. Sidney Smith's proposed "Rural Institute" to discover and train leaders in rural communities had fallen through and the MAAE seemed paralyzed. Did he, the director of an organization trying to establish its own *raison d'être*, have any "plan for the stimulating of work in the provinces . . ."? Now was the time to act. "There is a desperate need that people be helped to a renewed interest in life for its own sake in rural Manitoba and I do not like to leave if there is to be a decent chance

offered of doing just that . . ."<sup>8</sup> This was, indeed, a message that increasingly would be voiced by adult education radicals in the late 1930s.

Corbett certainly shared Avison's concern with the plight of rural communities. He had long been convinced of the potential role of adult education in community betterment and citizenship responsibility.<sup>9</sup> He was also aware of the greatly increased interest in adult education within the Dominion.<sup>10</sup> As Corbett noted in his "Report to Carnegie Corporation" in the summer of 1941, "It was decided early in the history of the Association that our major emphasis should be on rural adult education . . ."<sup>11</sup> But the reform potential of adult education--with the exception of the evocative developments in eastern Nova Scotia--had scarcely been demonstrated in late 1936. Not enough was known about adult education to be complacent about its methods. Continual experimentation was needed to discover the best techniques.<sup>12</sup> Thus, it was imperative from Corbett's point of view to encourage "specific experiments . . . in the hope that, if successful, they would serve as working models for similar efforts in other provinces and districts."<sup>13</sup> One takes note, in the light of current debates on the power of theory to influence practice, that the educational radicals of the 1930s sought to ground their practice pragmatically in lived experiments.

Corbett was anxious that Manitoba develop a policy and commit itself to action. At the CAAE annual meeting held on November 23-24, Corbett told Thompson that he wanted The University of Manitoba to develop a plan acceptable to the Carnegie Corporation, one that might well include an experiment the Avisons could conduct. "Both he and I feel," Thompson informed Avison, "that you and Mary are the two people who could create a cultural centre in the community where young men and women come for a time and experience the life that you want people to realize for themselves." The bond between Thompson and Avison was evidently quite strong, because Thompson adamantly rejected Robert England's choice of Andrew Moore for the leadership of Manitoba adult education. Her candid comments to her friend reveal something of her humanistic sensibility. "The person who is to undertake this work," she told Avison, "should be a person in whom the whole of life is united by a spiritual quality. This work is to concern people and the development of the whole personality and the individual. Who can do this but one who has achieved it in his own life? I am not so sure that many share Mr. England's opinion about Inspector Moore." She concluded her letter to Avison by summing up the outcome of the 1936 annual meeting: the little study club was gaining acceptance as the chief channel through which adults may inform and cultivate themselves; action requires

leadership; and the "most insistent demand for adult education is coming from rural communities."<sup>14</sup>

The need for a systematic program of adult education for rural Manitobans had been long recognized by The University of Manitoba. With the installation in October 1934 of Sidney Earle Smith as President of The University of Manitoba, the adult education movement gained a formidable, capable and genial ally. The socially conscious Smith moved quickly to increase the services rendered to the community. He multiplied the specialized and technical training offered to the community and initiated serious discussion about the University's role in revitalizing rural communities. But he was having tremendous difficulty finding the money to finance his dream of an indigenous program of adult education for rural Manitoba.

Smith had met with his fellow Nova Scotian-born Ned Corbett in early January 1937 to discuss the practicability of conducting an experiment that would launch his program. Smith, who no doubt had been consulting with Corbett prior to their January meeting, agreed with the CAAE director that the university should be the springboard for a systematic program of adult education. The publication of a seminal report--"University Extension Programmes and Budgets"--in late January quickly followed Smith's discussions with Corbett, and with Thompson and Avison. A memorandum written in early January preceding the more elaborate document had been circulated to Avison and Thompson, whose detailed responses influenced the final report. This document provides important insights into the nature of adult education discourse at the formative moment in the CAAE's history.

The opening words of the Report trumpeted the theme so preoccupying the educational radicals. "There is an urgent demand in the rural communities of Manitoba for a programme of adult education. There is an equally urgent need to discover and to learn the type of programme that would be best suited to rural people in western Canada."<sup>15</sup> Scanning other adult education experiments (Scandinavia, St. Francis Xavier), Smith was not certain that programs developed elsewhere would regenerate the western farmer and his family. Nor was he convinced that a state university could embark on a program deliberately designed to curtail the activities of certain economic groups within its constituency. The solution, he believed, lay not with programs formulated in university offices. Rather, the people themselves should determine the type of adult education they really needed. "To do this, we propose that some rural district or districts in the province should be used as a laboratory for investigation and experimentation."<sup>16</sup>

Smith recognized that some organizations--the United Farmers of Manitoba and Co-operative Conference--had organized a network of study clubs.<sup>17</sup> But these programs appealed, he thought, to sectional interests, exacerbating rifts based on economic or social factors. He was no less scathing in his critique of old-line university extension unilateral pedagogy. Learners should be stimulated to think for themselves. One could not "catch an education as one would a cold. No educational process can be a substitute for learning; it may be a stimulus for learning."<sup>18</sup>

To be sure, the university ought to provide leadership. But, this leadership must be "founded in an understanding of, and a sympathy for, the people in the rural communities. . . . All the activities of an extension programme should arise out of, or at least be related to the life of the people." This pedagogical populism represented a decisive break from the classic extension model of tutorial study of subjects. With the emphasis no longer on disciplinary study for the few, Smith suggested that studies in English could issue in "story writing or the production of plays, and groups studying history could investigate the history of their own communities, the province and western Canada." Moreover, rural extension work in Manitoba should provide the tools to help people develop their individual and community resources. This educational process, Smith hoped, would help people realize that they can develop a "way of life of their own, embodying the spirit of the community and the many favourable conditions that are denied to city dwellers."<sup>19</sup>

Study groups were to be the spearhead of the extension program. But folk dances, song festivals, music festivals, drama, spoken verse and choral readings, handicraft and art exhibitions and conferences on rural problems should also be sponsored--to foster an enriched life for the rural communities and to discover through experimentation the interests of the people to ensure that the whole program would be articulated to their conditions. Smith envisaged that the program would require a director, who would travel throughout the rural areas to correlate existing activity, encourage local initiative in all forms of adult education, make available community resources and instruct local leaders. A survey of community needs would have to be conducted by the summer of 1937, and an advisory committee would have to be struck by the Board of Governors of the University. If funds were available, a supervisor could also be hired to assist the director. The project supervisor would try to create an educational mobilizing centre in the community, "leading its members to realize the meaning of their environment, the individual resources of various racial groups within the district, to know their possibilities for living together, studying together and playing and working together."<sup>20</sup> The spirit of Grundtvig, the

quirky inspirator of the Danish folk school movement, hovered in the shadows of this report.

Although the Report was largely the crystallization of an extended conversation among friends, Avison and Thompson had several misgivings about Smith's "University Extension Programmes and Budget." Avison insisted that great care be taken that the "activities should arise out of, or at least be related to the life of the people." He was also concerned about the dangers associated with the much heralded group method. Successful group work required trained leaders. As well, he insisted that the initiators of a community education program should enter into careful consultation with the local community before the supervisor went in, with the supervisor being paid well enough to do whole-hearted work.<sup>21</sup>

For her part, while affirming the program, Thompson was concerned that the experiment be undertaken as a "primary and major activity." Nor did she think that five years was long enough time to obtain results "*rooted in the life of the people*" (italics Thompson's). She concluded her letter to Sidney Smith: "In this kind of experiment I have unbounded faith. Anything less than this I cannot accept or support with some confidence."<sup>22</sup>

### Stops and Starts and Reverses

By the end of February 1937 it looked as if The University of Manitoba would sponsor the program and the Avisons would be the supervisors of the experiment. This strategy was favoured by the key players on the scene. The outcome hinged on the Carnegie Foundation's willingness to provide The University of Manitoba with funding. On March 12 Corbett wrote Avison telling him that he was not able to be "quite definite with regard to our Manitoba job." He would not know until a May meeting with Dr. Keppel whether Carnegie would accept the plan. "I know this makes it tough for you and your wife but the destiny that shapes our ends sometimes moves with incredible stops and starts and reverses."<sup>23</sup> Carnegie funds would not materialize until 1939, and The University of Manitoba's program would not be launched until January 1941 when Watson Thomson arrived from Alberta to assume the leadership.

Instead, the experiment took an ironic turn. During the course of a conversation with David Winton, President and General Manager of The Pas Lumber Company, Esther Thompson discussed the idea of "trying out an adult education experiment somewhere in Manitoba."<sup>24</sup> Winton, who wanted to do a project for the community, was looking for a suitable

community worker. Against the wishes of Sidney Smith, prominent University of Manitoba Board member Mary Speechley, the Minister of Education, and perhaps her own deepest desires, Thompson sold David Winton on the Avisons. In November 1937 Winton invited the Avisons and Corbett to spend a weekend in Minneapolis to talk over the plan. The Winton family agreed to put up \$10,000 to cover the costs of a three-year experiment, sponsored by the CAAE with Harry Avison in charge. But Winton did not want his "family name to be connected with the undertaking." Apparently he feared that the "more radical elements" among the workers might regard the experiment as a "sedative to keep them quiet."<sup>25</sup> As it would turn out, this latter perception would in fact be held by some The Pas residents, one of many undercurrents of suspicion about the real motives of the Avisons.

In the late 1930s The Pas seemed to be ideally suited for the CAAE experiment.<sup>26</sup> Situated on the south bank of the Saskatchewan River and inaccessible by road, The Pas had developed from the early 1900s into an important minor economic and administrative centre. Lumbering was the largest single industry with approximately 500 employed in the mill in the summer and an equal number in logging camps during the winter. The area also attracted prospectors, commercial fishermen and railway workers. During the depression years, numerous men lived on the outskirts in makeshift cabins, surviving on odd jobs and paltry municipal relief handouts.<sup>27</sup> There were few opportunities for education, culture, recreation or entertainment for the largely male work force. There was nothing much, as Corbett so colourfully put it, to "brighten the drab routine of ordinary life"<sup>28</sup>

For adult educators who view community development and community education as "processes which could involve the whole community in a concerted effort to resolve local problems,"<sup>29</sup> The Pas presented monumental challenges. The town of roughly 3,000 was comprised of a dominant British group of 1200, 700 French, 500 Ukrainians, 200 Polish, 200 Scandinavians, 150 Germans and a large Cree Indian reserve<sup>30</sup> across the river from the town. The three major ethnic groups were suspicious of each other, and The Pas' isolation, frontier individualistic political economy and myopic voluntary associations perpetuated mutual fear. Class tensions were evident, too, as the British petit bourgeoisie ran the town. To make matters even more complex, ideological divisions within ethnic groups like the Ukrainians further divided an already splintered geographical community. This "disjointed and amorphous" community lacked a tradition of pulling together.<sup>31</sup> It was, in Mary Avison's words, a "town of enclaves."<sup>32</sup>



Leaving his family in Winnipeg until after Christmas, Harry Avison arrived in The Pas on December 11, 1937, so *The Northern Mail* announced, "to conduct a survey of population types in The Pas and occupations of the residents, preparatory to inaugurating the first three-year adult education programme in Canada."<sup>33</sup> Avison had finally achieved his goal, but not under completely satisfying circumstances. The experiment had not emerged out of consultation with the townspeople; the "people," or even a segment, had not invited him to come. The CAAE, sponsor in name only, was not widely known in Canada, let alone in the remote town of The Pas; the financial sponsorship of the project was hidden from the residents. This arrangement, at best, was a compromise solution to a problem defined by sensitive educators who felt they knew what the people needed.

The Avisons had the right credentials for the utopian task confronting them. Now in their late thirties, they had come of age in the inquiring intellectual atmosphere at McGill University following World War I. Both had been active in the Student Christian Movement (SCM)--a controversial student-initiated movement probing many social questions--while studying liberal arts. There, influenced by Dr. H.B. Sharman's teachings on the life of Jesus, they acquired deep personalist and communitarian convictions coming to believe profoundly in the creative potential of group process. They also moved beyond the "business Methodism" so favoured by the Montreal YMCA into critical engagement with the great issues of the 1920s; constructing a just and peaceful world. In 1925, after completing a M.A. thesis on John Ruskin and his theological training, Harry Avison married Mary Fry, who had been teaching for two years in a private school, in Montreal. After a brief stint running the church school of a wealthy Montreal Presbyterian church, Avison worked for the SCM for five years. By the early 1930, with a growing family to support and without an income from the SCM, Avison went to work for the United Church, ministering to embittered and hopeless men in relief camps across Canada. In 1933 the Avisons accepted a United church pastorate in Deloraine, a respectable one church town swept by dust and devoured by grasshoppers. Frustrated to some extent with an aging congregation and the humdrum duties associated with the rural parish, Avison centred his work on the needs of youth. When the Avisons finally arrived in The Pas after many stops and starts, they brought with them the rich experience of over a decade of community service.

The Avisons settled in to their new community, and the arduous work of developing a "broad program of self-help and mutual understanding"<sup>34</sup> began in earnest. During his first year, Avison was a whirlwind of activity, initiating programs designed to meet practical needs, opening

up associative space for critical thinking and bridging the enclaves through working with and through community-based organizations. Avison began his work--quite innovative for its time--with a survey of the community. The survey showed that "a large proportion of the people have a very low annual income. Seasonal labour coupled with bad household management and the lack of skill in homecrafts bring many families near or actually on to the relief rolls in the early months of the year."<sup>35</sup>

Responding to this need, Avison launched a Youth Training Program homemaking school in January. During its first year thirty young women received training and five or six found jobs as a direct result of the course. The curriculum of the Youth Training Program, though framed within an "ideology of domesticity," broke through these constraints to some extent as the Avisons wove a folk school component into the general activities and helped the young adults acquire a "set of competencies" to deal actively with an environment of restricted possibility.<sup>36</sup> Enthusiasm among the youth evidently ran high, and Avison thought it had met a very real need.<sup>37</sup> The Avisons also worked with several other groups of young people--producing plays, spending evenings singing and folk-dancing, and through the recently formed Youth Council and Board of Trade, equipped playgrounds and organized a softball league.

To bridge the enclaves, Avison initiated actions with a multiplicity of community groups. "Education Leader is Speaker at Men's Club" was a common newspaper headline as Avison addressed the "middle class" through the Rotary Club, Winton Community Club, Board of Trade, Ministerial Association, Women's Institute and other voluntary associations. Newspaper accounts of the time state: "The program of the Adult Education Association is to endeavour to wake the adult mind to the fact that it is still capable of learning . . ."<sup>38</sup> and, "In an age of rapidly growing knowledge and swiftly changing standards, adult education is necessary . . ."<sup>39</sup> He contacted the "quite enterprising" Ukrainian Labour-Farm Temple Association (ULFTA) and thought they were a "thoroughly live concern": organizing a language school for their children, a night school for men, reading and handicraft circles for women, a Sunday evening public function (concert and propagandist speech). The ULFTA was a microcosm of what he had in mind for the whole community, a "most worthy effort" that, though provoking some hostility, deserved to "rank among the better Adult Education schemes."<sup>40</sup>

Travelling eighty miles by snowmobile to visit the three logging camps of The Pas Lumber Company, Avison also talked to the workers about the possibilities in Adult Education and showed films to the isolated

campmen, most of whom were Ukrainians. He hoped to integrate this venture into his regular program. This initiative would, however, derail over conflicting perceptions of what the campmen needed--entertainment or adult education. To solidify these contacts, Avison organized a local branch of the MAAE, insisting on the importance of creating a truly representative body.<sup>41</sup> The Association produced a document, "Adult Education Represents a Middle Way," contending that adult education "provides a basis for people of different racial, political and religious affiliation to work together for the enrichment of their common life." Concerned with all parts of life, Adult Education included "helping people to meet adverse economic conditions," "breaking down social barriers" and encouraging the "appreciation of music and arts and crafts."<sup>42</sup>

The Avisons, not surprisingly given their profound belief in achieving a "common life based on undistorted communication, dialogue, communal judgement and rational persuasion,"<sup>43</sup> began the delicate process of opening up space within society for critical reflection. Beginning in the first year with four clubs (public affairs, co-operation, child study and public speaking), the Avisons engaged the community in dialogue about the meaning of citizenship in a world now "infinitely complex." Any attempt to grasp the main issues, be they raising children or political problems, could only occur through systematic study. The formal school could not educate men and women who loved freedom, desired to serve the community and were equipped with the necessary knowledge and power of clear thinking to become effective citizens. Avison fingered cynicism and indifference as more serious dangers than fascism and communism, an idea anathema to the Knights of Columbus and French-Canadian clergy. Becoming an active citizen was an intentional educational practice. This "form of learning," he told a radio audience no doubt aware of portentous developments in Europe,<sup>44</sup> "is being more and more appreciated. In the small group people develop the ability to talk and think together . . . (P)eople progress towards tested conclusions, increase their knowledge and achieve a basis for unity and understanding of the welfare of all."<sup>45</sup> The Avisons also created a small library and opened up their home to informal learning and social gatherings.<sup>46</sup>

But Avison's strategy--"working in a variety of community projects providing information, resources, advice and, learning and training in specific skills and techniques relevant to such action"<sup>47</sup>--was not working any magic. Writing to Corbett after his first two months of work, Avison said that he was "meeting some little difficulty . . . in getting support for the kind of educational activities I would like to carry on. It is chiefly the difficulty of breaking the ice." He thought the people had "settled down to their own routine of interests and I haven't yet broken

through with any great success."<sup>48</sup> He had, however, just began. His first month in The Pas also revealed the depth of the ideological tensions in the community. The Pas ULFTA was tugged pell-mell into the centre of national political controversy when Duplessis enacted his infamous Padlock Act against Quebec "communists" in 1938. In early January, the Quebec police raided the headquarters of the Canadian Labour Circle, and in late January, they padlocked the Montreal ULFTA after closing an alleged communist school on St. Lawrence Boulevard attended by fifty pupils.<sup>49</sup>

Annie Buller, one of Canada's pioneering communists and seasoned political educators, spoke in a jittery The Pas in early January on "The War Danger" and to the ULFTA on "The Road Ahead for the People of Manitoba." The ULFTA protested Duplessis' Padlock Act and resolved that "Canada cease shipping nickel to Japan."<sup>50</sup> In the midst of this controversy, radio and Associated Press reports hinted darkly that the "real purpose" of Harry Avison was to foment social revolution. Both Esther Thompson and Avison were incensed. Writing angrily to the *Northern Mail* on January 27, 1938, Avison averred:

May I have the use of your columns to point out that the recent radio and Associated Press publicity of the Adult Education work here was as distasteful and annoying to me as it was to them. Further, that I had no knowledge of or responsibility for this publicity and can attribute it only to over-eager news hounds with no judgment and less knowledge of the Adult Education movement.

The suspicion that he was a "communist" can be linked in part to his association with the ULFTA as well as his efforts to build a more co-operative community. But it was Avison's work with youth that would touch a particularly sensitive nerve among some The Pas residents. A *Northern Mail* editorial (May 3, 1938) observed that Avison was receiving adverse commentary, even though he had stimulated youth interest in recreational movements and citizenship gatherings after years of neglect.

Avison had succeeded in organizing a local committee of the national Youth Council movement, which sent delegates to the Manitoba Youth Congress meetings and the national Canadian Youth Congress conference. The national conference encouraged pluralism and dialogue and was the most important national forum for youth discussion of pressing global, national and local issues. Numerous youth became more "socially conscious" at these gatherings. However, right-wing anti-communist

elements in The Pas really did believe that Harry Avison was trying to steal their youth for an alien ideology.<sup>51</sup> On May 17, under the headline "Communist Tendencies are Denied," the *Northern Mail* reported that Howard James, The Pas delegate to the Manitoba Youth Congress, denied the Council's "tendencies toward communism" before sixty people attending a meeting at Westminster United Church. Avison told the gathered that the youth movement was "inspired with a spirit of unity," pointing out the "danger that youth, who had no direct experience with the great war, might not have learned the futility of such war."<sup>52</sup> Nonetheless, Avison found the communist tag a "little refreshing" and "inevitable." He thought the "propagandist" accusation due to people's inability to "conceive that one could be impartial." "The educational process," he confided to Corbett, "is not furthered among non-student adults by dispassionate reasoning (not much among students, for that matter) but by challenging statements, stimulating discussion and fellowship in work."<sup>53</sup>

### Fanning Sparks of Hope

Throughout 1939 and into the late winter of 1940, Avison continued working along lines he had initiated, confident that time and progressive pedagogy would dampen suspicion. Vocational training for young men and women pressed on, even though municipal interest was waning.<sup>54</sup> Avison saw evidence of the "creation of a new spirit and attitude towards life as a whole" among the young adults.<sup>55</sup> Study groups expanded; women in child study groups were learning to see how problems affecting their children interwove with those arising out of school administration and local government, and the men, studying "Five Political Creeds," were learning that they could "differ from another without being hostile." The Adult Education library, now housed in a newly acquired building on 2nd Street, grew to five hundred volumes. Avison continued to nurture artistic expression, the ESL classes trebled from 1938, and his seemingly endless work through local organizations and the Adult Education council bore some fruit.<sup>56</sup>

But Avison was desperately "fanning sparks of hope"<sup>57</sup> in his work. At the end of 1939 he was still confronting "inevitable difficulties" because of "misunderstanding of our real program and aims" as well as "latent prejudice between racial and religious groups." Although he bravely believed that "time and careful planning" would solve these problems, Avison was having a more difficult time than his official reportage or CAEE publicity revealed.<sup>58</sup> David Winton was not overly pleased with Avison's orientation--preferring a safer sort of non-political programming.<sup>59</sup> More seriously, world events beyond anyone's control reverberated through The Pas widening the ethnic rifts, transforming

ideological cracks into crevices and undermining the Youth Training programs.

In the late winter of 1939 the Rev. Father A.J.B. Cossette and the Knights of Columbus moved more aggressively to advocate support for co-operatives and credit unions to counteract the communist threat<sup>60</sup> and, it appears, to undermine the Avisons' work. As well, a revitalized Canadian Legion adopted a militantly anti-communist line.<sup>61</sup> The ideological tensions erupted publicly at the annual meeting of the Adult Education Association of The Pas at the end of April. From the beginning the Avisons had insisted that they would disassociate themselves from any non-representative meeting.<sup>62</sup> They judged this one to be unrepresentative and walked out. Mary Avison was alarmed that the annual meeting did not adjourn until a "genuinely public and representative meeting" could be called and that no one had objected to Cossette's statement that his study clubs were the "only real adult education done in The Pas last year." Mary Avison wrote the editor of the *Northern Mail*:

Until this organization includes various aspects of Youth Training, Parent's Study Groups in Child Psychology, and other forms of group study and activity in its concept of Adult Education, and until it is prepared to accept the WHOLE community as its field and a truly democratic method, my work must perforce be undertaken independently of the Adult Education Association of The Pas and under the auspices of the CAAE in The Pas.<sup>63</sup>

Cossette and his Knights of Columbus associate, E.S. Barker, counterattacked a few days later. Both accused Harry Avison of undemocratic and manipulative tactics, arguing that they were not trying to limit the work of the Adult Education Association. Father Cossette offered his resignation from the Association, contending that since his study clubs caused alarm and were only appreciated in the "attendance records of annual meetings," the "greatest service" he could render the cause of adult education in The Pas was "to get out of the way."<sup>64</sup> This somewhat bizarre twist of events marks a decisive break in the Avisons' spiritual commitment to The Pas.<sup>65</sup>

This was not the end of the Avisons' troubles in a community thought to be so ideally suited for a CAAE program "designed to serve the interests of the whole community."<sup>66</sup> On February 26, 1940, the Rev. J.W. Clarke, minister of Knox United Church in Winnipeg, wrote to his old friend, "Someone is trying to throw a knife into you and accusing you of

seditions utterances. The attack has taken the form of a complaint to the Mounted Police, who have been making enquiries about you." Clarke assured the RCMP that Avison's comments were the "expression of a thoughtful man" but counselled him to be "very careful about the people to whom you speak." Avison explained what might be behind this latest move in what appeared, increasingly, to be an orchestrated campaign. He had been invited to preside at a ULFTA public concert where he had made a speech on the value of the Ukrainian contribution to Canadian culture. "Unfortunately," he told Clarke, "at the end of this concert, the Ukrainians sang 'O Canada' and not 'God Save the King'. There were only a corporal's guard of the British group present but some of them took it as a deliberate slight and I imagine some of the blame has fallen on me."<sup>67</sup> This incident, really a petty affair, was just further evidence of where the Rev. Harry Avison's sympathies lay.

During the early months of 1940 and into the late spring, Harry Avison assessed his dismal situation in a series of letters written to Corbett, Clarke and Winton. For him, the "limits of the community as a field of work" was "becoming increasingly clear" and although his two and half years of work had provided some useful experience, he was deeply conscious of his inability to bridge the gaps between the ethnic groups.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, the tensions and suspicions between ethnic groups were as strong as ever. The war had undermined the Youth Training Program as there were not enough young men in The Pas to justify the overhead. Only isolated individuals appeared interested in books or their own development, though some leadership had been developed in the child study groups. The library, he thought, could be preserved. "It is more widely recognized now that the town needs both a library and a meeting-place." Nevertheless, he informed Winton, this "may seem like a small residue of two and half years work."<sup>69</sup>

How did Avison understand what had gone awry? First and foremost, he and his wife could not gain any solid community support in an "amorphous and disjointed" community. The Pas was a transitory community. Young people, who ought to grow up into positions of leadership, left the town as soon as they were able. Many of the adults in business regarded their stay as "temporary, and did not participate in community life with any degree of whole-heartedness."<sup>70</sup> Railway workers and teachers were also temporary sojourners. Thus, it is not at all surprising that the Avisons' community-building strategy failed. Secondly, Avison thought that the ideological divisions, ethnic rivalries and competing voluntary associations made it almost inevitable that their work would provoke antagonisms. In his final reflections on The Pas experiment written in 1955, Harry Avison told Corbett, who was in the midst of writing *We Have With Us Tonight*, that he could scarcely find

anyone to "go to bat for us," including Winton. "Everybody was afraid to stand up for anything--not only of an educational character--but of any character." He had particularly acerbic words for Father Cossette, who he thought was a "narrow little bastard" whose "opposition was more selfish than ideological--even accepting his ideology." Fifteen years after he had left the wrangling and chaos of The Pas for MacDonald College, Quebec, Avison summed up: "I'm quite sure that very few people in The Pas--now know that we were even there, but there are a few around the world who won't forget us--mostly because we had damn good times together, and it was *living* of the most satisfactory kind." (italics Avison's)<sup>71</sup>

### **An Open Dialogue with Tradition**

We rummage in history's dustbins to deepen our self-understanding as adult educators and shed light on future projects. By so doing, we test our present concepts and values in a free and open dialogue with tradition.<sup>72</sup> This bridging of past and present, while never absolutely conclusive, is one of the primary ways our present practice can become self-reflective. Historical retrieval addresses our understanding; it does not provide us with codified laws to guide practice.

The Pas experiment confronts us with some uncomfortable truths. For too long the discipline of adult education has lived in the sunlit world of the ought. Adult education has been the perennially cheerful discipline, always smiling, no matter what dangers lurk in the shadows.<sup>73</sup> It is no mere accident that J. Roby Kidd's pioneering *Adult Education in Canada* (1950) represses the memory of an experiment once so celebrated at the annual meetings of the CAAE. It is, I think, symptomatic of our "historical amnesia" and unwillingness to face the dark side of adult education and human experience. Surely The Pas experiment shatters the easy optimism of mainstream (and progressive for that matter) adult education thought and invites us to think more radically about the *structural constraints* on the achievement of a "communal life based on undistorted communication, dialogue, communal judgment and rational persuasion."<sup>74</sup> The Pas experiment clearly reveals that external *contextual* factors were more powerful determinants of adult learning than progressive methods. Mirrored in the Avisons' hard work we see the limits of educational intervention in transforming the world. This mirrored image unsettles professional certitudes and demands that we live with doubt, ambiguity and complexity. The old world cries out for redemption; the new refuses to come; our educational practices seem like peashooters against the tanks.



The failure of The Pas experiment lends some strength to recent critiques of the communitarian tradition in community work. Bryson and Mowbray accuse communitarians of harbouring romantic illusions about recreating the "prototypical community" or, of reinstating "some of its features, such as co-operation, mutual support and participative decision-making." The effect of fostering integration, neighbourliness, community consciousness or local control, they claim is:

to direct attention away from a specific consideration of the political nature of the society, thus avoiding the risk of recognition that the so-called urban, social or community problems in question are endemic to capitalism and that the redistribution of power and resources which feature in the rhetoric of such programs, could only be achieved through the building of a socialist society.

And:

Our contention is that, on the basis of the record of such programs, it is virtually inevitable that they will fail. It may be that some people are helped, that some services are provided or improved, that certain skills are enhanced, or even that more people interact and perhaps have more fun--but this still does not add up to the achievement of 'community' and (in so far as this is implied) it is misleading to use the term.<sup>75</sup>

There can be little doubt that Canadian adult education discourse in the late 1930s was animated by a vision of community-based adult education. To be sure, utopian elements were present in the discourse and the conflict of interests (class, ethnicity, gender) embedded in a capitalist and patriarchal society, repressed. We do, indeed, need to move beyond facile notions of meeting the needs of the community towards a sophisticated theory of antagonistic interests that imposes itself onto the needs of individuals and local communities.<sup>76</sup> It is equally facile, however, to assume that seasoned activists like Thompson, Corbett and Avison were unaware of vested interests. They may have underestimated the depths of human resistance to consciousness-raising and entertained naive hopes about adult education's potential. Harry Avison's observation that he understood the limitations of the community as a field of work, though never fully explicated, suggests that he was convinced of the need for a more global development strategy. Communities could not be transformed without structural changes in

regional and national political economies. But his vision and practice of community recognizes, where Bryson and Mowbray's does not, that the achievement of "critical consciousness" is not an "epiphenomenon, a result of social change rather than a factor in bringing about such change."<sup>77</sup> His practice speaks to us of the centrality of communicative competence and dialogue to the building of democratic society: creating "dialogical communities in which there can be genuine mutual participation and where reciprocal wooing and persuasion can prevail."<sup>78</sup>

Remembering is not always a "joyful deep-sea dive." "For what is it," asks Adamson, "that we need to remember if not all the failed attempts at fully realized human emancipation, and in each case the nature of the hopes, the way they were distorted . . ." Our pleasure as adult educators lies on "the far side of the pain"<sup>79</sup> and in our struggle to comprehend the preconditions of learning/action "rooted in the life of the people" and practice of dialogical community-building. The Avisons' project is one whose meaning and implications invite thoughtful reexamination now and in the future.

#### Reference Notes

1. Undated newspaper clipping, Harry Avison Papers, Public Archives of Canada (hereafter HAP), vol. 4, file 24 (hereafter 4-24).
2. E.A. Corbett, *We Have With Us Tonight* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1957), p. 154.
3. Harry Avison to E.A. Corbett, February 13, 1940, HAP, 4-24.
4. Walter Adamson, *Marxism and the Disillusionment of Marxism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 239. The phrase "dustbins of history" is Nietzsche's.
5. In her introduction of Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), Hannah Arendt says; "Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths, and to carry them to the surface, this thinking delves into the depths of the past--but not in order to resuscitate the way it was and to contribute to the renewal of extinct ages" (pp. 50-51). David Armstrong, "Corbett's House: The Origins of the Canadian Association for Adult Education and its *Development* During the Directorship of E.A. Corbett" (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Toronto, 1968) notes that: "The story of The Pas experiment is a fascinating one, which contains some valuable lessons for Canadian adult educators. . . . First, as a case-study. The Pas experiment has some enduring lessons for Canadian adult education. Second, it was the first step, in a selfless career which spanned 30 years, of one of the most influential and dedicated

- Canadian adult educators" (pp. 95-96). In a letter to Corbett written on November 26, 1955, Avison commented: "Sorry to have taken so long to get my nose in the old files from The Pas. When I finally did I spent a most enjoyable evening. It was interesting to have the incidents recalled that surrounded these and absorbing--if sometimes painful--to read again of our problems. "Twould make a good story" (CAAE Records, A-I, Box 1, Ontario Archives).
6. See MAAE documents, HAP, 4-24 and Andrew Moore to J.S. Woodsworth, J.S. Woodsworth Papers, Public Archives of Canada, vol. 7, file 17.
  7. Harry Avison to Esther Thompson, November 1, 1936, HAP, 4-20.
  8. Harry Avison to E.A. Corbett, November 2, 1936, HAP, 4-20. Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), describes the 1930s as a "decade of trial for residents of the prairie west. Like the boomtime at the turn of the century, the Depression was an identifiable period that affected the psychology of individual citizens, the fate of communities and the image of the region" (p. 416).
  9. Corbett, *We Have With Us Tonight*, p. 152.
  10. CAAE Annual Report, 1938.
  11. "Report to Carnegie Corporation," CAAE Records, A-I, Box 1, Ontario Archives.
  12. Director's Report to Meeting of the Advisory Council, Canadian Association for Adult Education, January 25th, 26th, 1940, Sidney Smith Papers, University of Manitoba Archives, vol. 61, file 6.
  13. "Report to Carnegie Corporation" Other important community-based initiatives in the late 1930s included: the Community Life Training Institute, directed by David Smith, and Alex Sim's work in the eastern townships of Quebec.
  14. Esther Thompson to Harry Avison, December 4, 1936, HAP, 4-20.
  15. "University Extension Programmes and Budget," Sidney Smith Papers, University of Manitoba Archives, Box 10, file 1.
  16. Ibid.
  17. HAP, 4-23, has a selection of United Farmers of Manitoba study group materials. Samples: "Adult Education: A Twentieth Century Movement;" "Nova Scotia's Adult Education Enterprise;" "Learning from our Neighbours (Scandinavian Folk High Schools)." In "The Challenge of the United Farmers," the author contends: "It may be that we have been enabled to endure these long and bitter years of depression and discouragement in order that we may rise to the opportunity of this New Time and inspire the rural life of Manitoba afresh . . ."
  18. University Extension Programmes and Budget."
  19. Ibid. Smith incorporated some of Avison's words into his report. See Avison to Smith, January 26, 1937, HAP, 4-20.

20. "University Extension Programmes and Budget."
21. Harry Avison to Sidney Smith, January 26, 1937, HAP, 4-20.
22. Esther Thompson to Sidney Smith, February 15, 1937, HAP, 4-20.
23. E.A. Corbett to Harry Avison, March 12, 1937, HAP, 4-20.
24. Corbett, *We Have With Us Tonight*, p. 153.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 156.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 154.
27. "The Pas," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, Vol. III (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1984), p. 1805, and interview with Ernest Jacobsen, August 30, 1986.
28. "Danish Folk School Brought to Canada in The Pas Project," undated newspaper clipping in HAP, 4-24.
29. Tom Lovett, Chris Clarke and Avila Kilmurray, *Adult Education and Community Action* (London: Croom Helm, 1983), p. 38.
30. *Northern Mail*, March 12, 1940, reported that Indians on The Pas reservation had formed an adult education group under the direction of R.B. Horsefield, an Anglican missionary. We know very little about adult education among native people, although clearly adult educators need to think about the missionary enterprise in learning terms.
31. The phrase "disjointed and amorphous" appears in *We Have With Us Tonight*, but it first appeared in Avison's letter to Corbett, November 26, 1955.
32. Interview with Mary Avison, September 13, 1986. Richard Avison confirmed this view in interview, August 30, 1986.
33. *The Northern Mail*, December 11, 1937.
34. "Report to Carnegie Corporation."
35. Harry Avison to E.A. Corbett, October 10, 1938, HAP, 4-24. The problem of relief plagued The Pas throughout the Avison's stay.
36. For a critical analysis of Youth Training Programs, see Ruth Pierson and Marjorie Cohen, "Educating Women for Work: Government Training Programs for Women before, during and after World War II," in Michael Cross and Gregory Kealey (Eds.), *Modern Canada 1930-1980* (Toronto: McClelland and Steward, 1984).
37. Harry Avison to E.A. Corbett, October 10, 1938, HAP, 4-24. Mary Vatzel, a student at one of the home-making classes, stated: "This course has meant much to me. I have learned many interesting things, previously unknown to me, about cooking, sewing, homemaking, child training . . ." (*Northern Mail*, March 18, 1938).
38. *Northern Mail*, February 9, 1938.
39. *Northern Mail*, February 5, 1938.
40. Harry Avison to E.A. Corbett, February 18, 1938, HAP, 4-24.
41. Harry Avison to E.A. Corbett, October 10, 1938, HAP, 4-24.
42. "Adult Education Represents a Middle Way," HAP, 4-21.

43. Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), p. 228.
44. *Northern Mail*, February 5, 1938: "Nazis Menace World Peace:" March 19, 1938: Hitler Wants Czech Isolation:" March 23, 1938: Pope Pius' urging Franco to use moderation in air bombing of civilian population."
45. "Education for Citizenship," HAP, 4-21.
46. Harry Avison to E.A. Corbett, October 10, 1938, HAP, 4-24. See also correspondence with E.M. Howse, minister of Westminster Church, Winnipeg, regarding selecting books for The Pas library (April 4, 1938; April 7, 1938).
47. Lovett, p. 37.
48. Harry Avison to E.A. Corbett, March 9, 1938, HAP, 4-24.
49. *Northern Mail*, January 27, 1938.
50. Ibid.
51. Interview with Mary Avison, September 13, 1986.
52. *Northern Mail*, May 17, 1938.
53. Harry Avison to E.A. Corbett, October 28, 1938, HAP, 4-24.
54. *Northern Mail*, March 15, 1939.
55. Harry Avison to E.A. Corbett, January 16, 1939, HAP, 4-24. See, also, "Report of 'The Pas Experiment'--1939," HAP, 4-21: "To a considerable degree have we noted among those with whom we have worked, indications of new attitudes developing. Young men and women in mechanics or homemaking courses, incidental to their training, discover new interest in life through absorbing activity, through fellowship with other young people of different races and grow to appreciate the civic and governmental provision for these activities."
56. "Report of The Pas Experiment--1939."
57. The phrase is Walter Benjamin's.
58. In his report to the CAAE Advisory Council, January 25th, 26th, 1940, Corbett simply says that: "The experimental projects in which the Association has had a hand have all made definite progress." Corbett then drew the Council's attention to Avison's "ideas about the real values in Adult Education." One contrasts this with Esther Thompson's letter to Corbett, written on January 18, 1940: "There were times while at The Pas when I was conscious of acute pain. The Avisons are giving themselves. They are meeting with success but also with bitter difficulties. As we talked of the difficulties, I saw in their faces something of the struggle they are engaged in. In spots it is 'heavy going'. I commend them to you, and hope with all my heart that they may have a long and quiet talk with you" (CAAE Records, A-I, Box 1, Ontario Archives).

59. Harry Avison to E.A. Corbett, October 28, 1938, HAP, 4-24. Winton wanted tangible results for *his* employees.
60. *Northern Mail*, March 20, 1939, headline: "Co-operatives seen as Democratic Protection." Cossette's credit unions and marketing co-operatives were seen as "antidote to communism." The article also stated that the Knights of Columbus were launching an anti-communist crusade.
61. Harry Avison to E.A. Corbett, November 17, 1939, HAP, 4-24.
62. Harry Avison to Editor, *Northern Mail*, May 4, 1939.
63. Mary Avison to Editor, *Northern Mail*, May 1, 1939.
64. Father A.J.B. Cossette to Editor, *Northern Mail*, May 2, 1939. Another member of The Pas Adult Education Association Council, Mrs. D.D. Rosenberry, was also quite obstructionist. Esther Thompson told Corbett that Mrs. Rosenberry, who was the wife of the mill manger, had been trying to get rid of Esther Thompson. "What inspired her to do this? I had been unable, because of our small staff, to give her the courses she *demande*d for The Pas. In addition to that, I was not supporting her criticism of the Avisons" (Thompson to Corbett, January 18, 1940, CAAE Records, A-I, Box 1).
65. Bizarre: Cossette claimed to be inspired by Father Jimmy Tompkins.
66. Corbett, *We Have With Us Tonight*, p. 154.
67. Harry Avison to Rev. J.W. Clarke, February 28, 1940, CAAE Records, A-I, Box 1.
68. Harry Avison to E.A. Corbett, February 13, 1940, HAP, 4-24.
69. Harry Avison to David Winton, April 5, 1940, HAP, 4-24.
70. *Ibid.*
71. Harry Avison to E.A. Corbett, November 26, 1955, CAAE Records, A-I, Box 1.
72. Walter Adamson, *Marxism and the Disillusionment of Marxism*, p. 239.
73. See my review of Carol Kasworm, (Ed.) *Educational Outreach to Select Adult Populations*. New Directions for Continuing Education, No. 20 (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1983), *Convergence*, vol. XIX, no. 1, 1986.
74. Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, p. 228.
75. Lois Bryson and Martin Mowbray, "'Community': The Spray-on Solution," *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 16, no. 4, 1981, p. 257, 259.
76. See Agnes Heller, *The Theory of Need in Marx* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1974).
77. Erica Sherover-Marcuse, *Emancipation and Consciousness: Dogmatic and Dialectical Perspectives in the Early Marx* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 7.
78. Bernstein, p. 228.
79. Adamson, p. 237.