

Perspectives

PREFACE TO *SELECTED CHRONOLOGY OF ADULT EDUCATION IN CANADA* BY DRAPER AND CARERE

Michael Welton

Mount St. Vincent University

Abstract

This preface raises some of the issues that historians face. Draper and Carere's selected chronology is commended for encouraging discussion about Canada's adult education history and for challenging future historians on several levels.

Résumé

Cette préface présente quelques problématiques rencontrées par les historiens. La chronologie sélectionnée par Draper et Carere est louée pour son apport au débat canadien, à l'histoire de l'éducation des adultes, et aux défis qui s'offrent aux historiens de l'avenir.

Over the last few years Professor James Draper of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education has persisted with his work in preparing chronologies of several Commonwealth countries. When James first told me that he had started this difficult task, I was a bit skeptical. These days historians are preoccupied primarily with interpretive matters. Many contemporary historians are making creative use of theories generated in the humanities and social sciences. Doing chronological work is somewhat out of fashion.

Yet, looked at closely, "chronicling," which Draper and Carere are engaged in, is the first level of historical conceptualization. Chroniclers have to find elements from an immense field—it is a little like rock hounding on a vast beach—and then arranging them into some kind of order. This ordering, in itself, is not quite innocent. The chroniclers have in their mind criteria about what is important. They scan the beach, noticing rocks or pieces of wood or shells that attract their attention. It may be the colour, or texture, or some other unusual quality. They put them in a sack, and at a later date begin to lay them out to see patterns. Yet it is not quite true to say that the chroniclers have actually begun to tell a story. The events can be made into a story. But the events, in themselves, cry out for a plot structure. And a plot

structure calls out for some sense making (is the story a tragedy? a comedy? a romance?). How do we, as readers, best interpret these particular events? What does this piece of wood, perhaps it is from a shipwreck, mean? What kinds of contexts would account for its appearance? Once we have offered an interpretation, what does a particular historical event have to say to us as adult educators living in the present?

Draper and Carere know well that the very act of selecting this event and not that one presupposes ways of thinking about how and where adults live and learn in changing historical contexts. When any of us as adult educators write adult educational history, what are we, in fact, actually writing about? This is a complex question. Adults have always been learning, from our times in the caves to our present wild world. Adult education, as a formal enterprise, has only appeared relatively recently in Canadian history. Chronologies, it seems to me, are biased toward the formal, identifiable, institutionalized kind of learning event or initiative. They can never indicate the whole story.

Draper and Carere's inaugural event for their selected chronology of Canada is 1800, when the first circulating library in Upper Canada was established. One can always ask why begin here? Last summer I was wandering around the reconstructed fortress of Louisbourg in Cape Breton and was amazed to see that one of the rooms in the fortress was a classroom for the training of soldiers in various arts and skills. This was happening in the late 18th century. Adult soldiers were learning in a formal setting. One can stretch one's imagination and think about the role that churches, of various stripe, have played in Canadian history. The sermon and a listening congregation are seminal learning events in the lives of adults. As an aside, I think that the missionary enterprise in our history ought to be understood, in part, as a pedagogical encounter between differing cultures who engaged in both mutual and conflictual learning processes and outcomes.

So one of the functions of Draper and Carere's selected chronology is to precipitate debate and argumentation as well as to stimulate our imaginations. In this they have done us a good service. Indeed, their chronology is rather tantalizing. People, organizations, movements, and initiatives tumble across our historical landscape. From the innovative schools on wheels to the formation of the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education (which Draper had a hand in), Canadian adult educators will be struck, again and for the first time, with our creativity and commitment, sometimes against the odds, to foster adult learning. Draper and

Carere's chronology, in my view, is particularly strong on identifying organizations that have played salient roles in the learning of adults.

Draper's chronology might encourage students to probe into the various contexts that lay behind the cursory identification of an event or an organization's appearance. For example, the entry for 1850 tells us that private night schools for adults began to appear. What was happening in the economic and social life of urban Canada that precipitated these schools? Who attended them? What was their social class background? Did any women attend classes? What did they actually learn? How did this learning integrate into their everyday lives?

I commend Draper and Carere for going out on a limb with this chronology. A full chronology, if such a thing is possible, must be attuned to the regionalism and ethnic composition of our country. For example, we don't learn much from this chronology about the learning of aboriginal peoples and the multitudes of ethnic groups that make up our country. But it is a beginning point for stimulating an extended and lively conversation about the many meanings of our adult educational history.