

## Essay Review / Revue d'essai

### History, Memory, Community

**Milton Gaither.** *American Educational History Revisited: A Critique of Progress.* New York: Teacher's College Press, 2003. Pp. 216.

*“At its best, heritage fabrication is both creative art and act of faith. By means of it we tell ourselves who we are, where we came from, and to what we belong.”*

David Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), xvii.

#### I

The history of the historiography of American education should be one of American educational history's own normal topics. Instead, historians of education have systematically avoided that history, or they have uncritically passed on received knowledge about the past. Lost in such acts of historical negligence or historical forgetting is a considerable bloc of the discipline's cultural capital. One consequence of the impaired memory of historians of American education is a needlessly truncated sense of the discipline. A less-than-firm sense of what might be possible in terms of the self-image of the discipline, and one's place within it, is another consequence of our historical amnesia. The greatest merit of Milton Gaither's *American Educational History Revisited: A Critique of Progress* is in redressing some of these oversights and fallacies of American educational history.

#### II

One of the most striking developments in the history of American educational history was the appearance in the 1960s of a “new” history of education. Crucial to its emergence was the

construction or invention of an “old” history of education against which the “new” history of education deliberately positioned itself in contra-distinction. The designation of “old” and “new” histories of American education has come to dominate the way in which American historians of education think about the past of the discipline, one that has profoundly shaped their historical memory up to the present.

The iconic story passed on to and by historians of American education begins in 1960, the *annus mirabilis* of American educational historiography, with the publication of Harvard University historian Bernard Bailyn's *Education in the Forming of American Society: Needs and Opportunities for Study*, a withering indictment of the “old” American educational historiography as typified by Ellwood P. Cubberley's *Public Education in the United States: A Study and Interpretation of American Educational History* (1919). Here Cubberley is denounced for committing the historiographical sins of parochialism, anachronism, evangelism, and isolation from the mainstream of modern American historiography. The condemnation of Cubberley was subsequently reiterated and enormously augmented by Teachers College historian of education Lawrence A. Cremin's *The Wonderful World of Ellwood Patterson Cubberley: An Essay on the Historiography of American Education* (1965).

Now two things occurred: one, the jaundiced reputation of Cubberley and the notion of an “old” educational historiography became rigidly fixed. And two, a “new” history of American education, a watershed in American historical writing on education, so the story goes, was ushered in; it allegedly inserted social history, cultural history, history from “the bottom up,” history of race, ethnicity, gender, of class conflict and group interests, of the oppressed and marginalized, and comparative history into educational historiography. Moreover, the “new” historian of American education would allegedly employ novel quantitative methodologies and theoretical models borrowed from the social sciences. It was as if the “new” history of American education had no precedents in the entire history of American educational historiography.

By the 1970s, the existence of an “old” and a “new” history of American education had become a virtual axiom among general historians interested in education as a field of study *and* among historians of education. It was by then already commonplace by writers on the subject first to denigrate the

“old” history of education and the “old” historian of education, before introducing the “new” history of education and the “new” historian of education. Historian John Talbott, during the course of a general review of American educational historiography in 1971, nicely illustrates this point:

The older historiography was found inadequate because it was too narrow and inward-looking....Long untouched by the great changes that have overtaken historical research in this century, the history of education became one of the last refuges of the Whig interpretation. [Education historians] could believe that education...followed an upward linear progression. We now find this view hard to accept....It is clear that any satisfactory [historical] explanation will have to take into account changes in demographic patterns and in the family, in the economy, the social structure and the political system....Such a task is clearly beyond the old-style historian of education and the old-style historiography (“The History of Education,” *Daedalus* 100 [1971]: 146-47).

Even so knowledgeable and sensible an historian of American education as New York University’s Allen Horlick proclaimed in 1974:

Within the last fifteen years the writing of American educational history...has moved from a historical backwater to a position where it can attract the energies of our most talented social historians....The writing of modern educational history begins with Bailyn and Cremin (“The Rewriting of American Educational History,” *New York University Education Quarterly* 5: p. 25).

The indictment of the “old” history of education – dogmatically asserted and never documented – would come to reign among American historians of education, or in Gaither’s words, “[would become] the default understanding among practicing educational historians of their discipline’s history” to the present (p. 3); a discursive mode that over the decades hardened into a regime of truth. Gaither effectively repudiates the view of American educational historiography – still held almost universally by historians of all stripes in the U. S. – that before 1960 there was little history of education worth reading, and that Bernard Bailyn and Lawrence A. Cremin in the early

1960s transformed the history of American education from a dull, underdeveloped, and backward professional specialization into a reputable and attractive historical specialization by introducing fields of inquiry and methodologies never before explored or employed by historians of American education. Gaither declares that it is “simply false” that pre-1960 educational historiography revealed no significant pattern or that it focused exclusively on schools. It did not isolate schooling from the broader context in which it operated, nor was it out of touch with the main currents of historical writing. This, argues Gaither, is the “myth of the new history of education,” not only unfair to Cubberley, but to many generations of historians of education long before *and* long after Cubberley’s era, who wrote according to or argued on behalf of the traditions of what was to become the “new” history of American education.

### III

For a slender volume, just over 200 pages including Notes and Index, Gaither has a lot on his mind. The sweep of *American Educational History Revisited* is vast, covering approximately three centuries, 1660-1960. A brief concluding chapter brings Gaither into the 1970s. The book has about six major themes. The first theme is a critique of Bailyn’s condemnation of Cubberley. The second theme concerns the reconstruction of a tradition of American educational historiography that, Gaither claims, goes back to the colonial period and Edward Johnson’s *Wonder Working Providence of Sions Savior in New England* (1653), the first “history of education proper, the first of its kind in the Western Hemisphere” (p. 10); Cotton Mather’s *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1698); Robert Beverley’s *The History and Present State of Virginia* (1705); and other worthy colonial and early Republican scholars. This information is in Chapter 1, “Ideology and Historical Practice in Early America,” and will be familiar to specialists, but since Gaither looks at it in a different and original way, we are compelled to stop and reflect: think of it, all of us members of the same profession.

A third theme, covered in Chapters 2, “The Whig Tradition,” and 3, “Educational History as Professional Science,” bears on the enduring and dominant ideological tradition – the meta-narrative of American educational historiography – from the beginnings to about 1960. According to Gaither, this

tradition was indeed essentially Whig, as Talbott indicates above, and until the latter part of the nineteenth century was articulated in Protestant religious terms, and subsequently in secular terms: its key words included “education,” “[Western] civilization,” “evolution,” “science,” and, invariably, “progress.” Progress was not just a key word in the controlling philosophy of American educational historiography in the late nineteenth and for most of the twentieth centuries; belief in “the reality of human progress and of the New World’s role therein” was American educational historiography’s animating principle (pp. 6, 74). A fourth theme, reverberating throughout *American Educational History Revisited*, is to reclaim for the historiography of American education many voices remembered only in dimness, if at all: for example, Richard G. Boone, Thomas Davidson, George H. Martin, Thomas Woody, Warren Burton, and Edward Eggleston. Gaither is also insightful in his re-evaluation of better-known, if today little-studied, historians of American education like Henry Barnard, James Carter, Paul Monroe, and Merle Curti.

A fifth theme, taken up in Chapter 4, “Influence and Contextualization in the Twentieth Century,” concerns Gaither’s rightful insistence on the necessary contextualization of American educational historians and their histories, relating them, as Gaither says, “to the intellectual and cultural history of their own time” (p. 5). There were always historians of American education who relied on and who practised mainstream historiography of their time. In the early years of the century, Paul Monroe; and in the World War I era and in the interwar years, among other similarly enlightened historians of American education, Gaither brings forward Stuart G. Noble, Edgar W. Knight, Howard K. Beale, Merle Curti, and of course, Cubberley. Thus, Cubberley’s work did not emerge in “almost total isolation” from the main currents of twentieth-century historiography, as Bailyn claims, “but inhabited precisely the same intellectual space as did that of his contemporaries in political and intellectual history” (p. 102). In fact, American educational historiography was not any worse and sometimes better than the general historiography of the times. This is an argument made by Cremin in *The Wonderful World of Ellwood Patterson Cubberley*, but overshadowed by the stir provoked by his endorsement of Bailyn’s damnation of Cubberley.

A sixth theme – covered in parts of Chapter 4 and in Chapter 5, “Diversity and Controversy in the Twentieth Century” –

establishes that social history, cultural history, comparative history, history from “the bottom up,” ethnic, race, and gender history, history of the oppressed and marginalized, and history *by* the oppressed and marginalized were all present in educational historiography during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: e.g., the “pioneers of black history” – Carter G. Woodson, W.E.B. Dubois, and Horace Mann Bond; and in women’s educational historiography, Willystone Goodsell, Alice Morse Earle, Luella Cole, Vera Butler, Alice Felt Tyler, and Elsie W. Clews produced landmark studies in the history of American education (pp. 78-83, 108-126). In the sixth and concluding chapter, puckishly titled “Why Bailyn Was Right Despite Being Wrong,” the least satisfactory chapter in *American Educational History Revisited*, a final, understated, theme is introduced, as Gaither, after criticizing Bailyn throughout, attempts now to establish Bailyn’s positive role in bringing down the “principle of progress” and the Whig interpretation of educational history.

#### IV

Why did our scholarly community allow unsubstantiated knowledge claims to be repeated as truth for decades, even generations, repeated so frequently that they ended up as received wisdom in textbooks? Why do we tend to endow the mere citation of authority with the status of certain evidentiary truth? Why were large chunks of the past erased from the collective memory of the profession? Gaither does not probe very deeply into these matters, but they warrant some extended comment.

Gaither argues that even though his history of education may have been “wrong,” Bailyn was “right” for the times, the times being the general post-World-War-II mood of disillusionment. I agree that Bailyn was “right” despite being “wrong.” But I’d like to present a different version of why Bailyn was “right,” despite being “wrong.” Like some others at the time, I was not caught up in the ideological battles between Old and New Left that Wayne Urban depicted in the pages of this journal recently as characterizing his graduate education in the 1960s. I was, however, caught up in the battles between the “old” and “new” history of education. The disputes swirling about history of American education at that time were many and

complex, and I have written about them in *HSE/RHE*. However, readers may need to be reminded that the then-reigning approach to history of American education was presentist, instrumentalist, problems-oriented. They may also need to be reminded that some of us thought this approach to history ahistorical, unreasonable, and intellectually stultifying. It may be discomfoting to admit, but some of us graduate students or junior professors in the States, as well as some of our Canadian peers, had been waiting for someone to speak out against the historiographical sins of anachronism, presentism, and instrumentalism committed by the “old” education historians. It wasn’t so much the new subjects or the social science innovations in Bailyn and Cremin’s vision of the “new” history of education that was so seductive; all this was familiar stuff to their students. We applauded Bailyn and Cremin, exaggerations and mis-statements included, because they gave voice to what we thought and felt but couldn’t articulate given our junior status in the profession.

Of course we ourselves were ahistorical and heedlessly dismissive of tradition. Beyond the immediate past of the historiography of American education, we didn’t linger much on tradition: we accepted that there was Cubberley; then there was Bailyn and Cremin. The past was a burden. We wanted to forget our forebears, those educational historians whose interest in history, so we thought, was strictly instrumental, and whose instrumentalism dominated our professional lives. Bailyn’s message was indeed one “that many historians were eager to receive” (p. 3), but for rather different reasons than those given by Gaither. It was for some of us our Declaration of Independence, which had very little to do with the progress principle, which had long seemed increasingly quaint to us, but more to do with issues of professional identity or self-image.

Bailyn and Cremin’s iconoclasm created a new reality – they gave us a choice between the various forms our professional lives might take. We could start afresh as one of Johns Hopkins historian Wilson Smith’s “new” historians of education: more “humanistic” than “professional” in our commitments (“The New Historian of American Education,” *Harvard Educational Review* 31: 1961). I can testify to those halcyon days when we thought that history of education and general history would develop together and we would be able to break out of our professional ghetto and sample everything that seemed vital in contemporary mainstream history without being anxious about

our professional “function.” Such innocence. We never contemplated the institutional pressures that impinged on us to produce “functional” history or the potential consequences of repeatedly asserting the existence of a “new” against an “old” history of education in terms of polarization and fragmentation among our small community of professional historians of education.

Then, oddly for an historian whose book teaches us how easy it is to be passed over by history, Cremin’s role in the “new” history of American education is seriously down-played in *American Educational History Revisited* while, remarkably, Bailyn’s is celebrated. Bailyn is criticized throughout the book; nevertheless Gaither concludes that historians of American education are indebted to Bailyn for overthrowing the principle of progress. Here is Gaither’s encomium to Bailyn: “It was Bailyn’s achievement to bring educational historiography up to date, to reimagine it so that intellectuals sensitive to the death of the principle of progress could believe in educational history again” (p. 6). I am not certain I understand this passage, and what I do understand I disagree with. First, I think it was Michael Katz’ *The Irony of Early School Reform* (1968) that signalled the death of the principle of progress and the Whig interpretation of American educational historiography, if indeed the latter is dead, which is extremely doubtful. And it was Lawrence Cremin, through his Bancroft Prize-winning *The Transformation of the School* (1961), who brought American educational historiography up to date. I am too much the post-modern historian to cavil at historiographical spin. But this is egregious. Bernard Bailyn’s involvement in the history of American education was ephemeral, a brief, opportunistic fling, which began with *Education in the Forming of American Society* in 1960 and was over in 1963 (“Education as a Discipline: Some Historical Notes,” in John Walton and James L. Kuethe, eds., *The Discipline of Education*). Given his silence on the subject these past forty years, I surmise that Bailyn would like to forget this episode. One further curmudgeonly observation is in order. The U.S. history of education community is part of a cosmopolitan North American and international profession. Some revisiting of parallel events, at least in Canadian educational historiography in the 1960s, was an opportunity missed by Gaither. *Educational History Revisited* is not without flaws, then. Nonetheless, I wish it were longer.



Gaither is presently a member of the faculty at Messiah College, Grantham, Pennsylvania. *American Educational History Revisited* is based on a Ph.D. dissertation completed under the supervision of B. Edward McClellan at the School of Education, Indiana University, Bloomington, and is published in the Teachers College Press Reflective History Series, edited by Barbara Finkelstein and William J. Reese. This book is a unique and important contribution to the field, engagingly written, rich in data, provocative, and bursting with energy, and deserves to become required reading in the graduate training of historians of American education. To conclude with Gaither's favorite mode of explanation – contextualist – *American Educational History Revisited* might be assigned in conjunction with Ellen Fitzpatrick's *History's Memory: Writing America's Past, 1880-1980* (2002).

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