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The State, the People, and the Colony: Towards a Critical History of Early Newfoundland Literacy

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Keywords: literacy, history, Newfoundland, gender, class

Abstract: Adult literacy in nineteenth century Newfoundland was greatly influenced by the island's positioning, first as a colony of Britain, and later as a struggling country dependent on experts, pedagogical methods and philanthropy from the home country and its religious institutions. Literacy efforts contributed to the general "civilizing" of the outpost and enabled it to become increasingly self reliant, at least for select periods of time. This study analyses some of these early literacy efforts, asking critical questions of colonialism, organization, gender, and religion.

Contextual Issues

In 1929 the Newfoundland Adult Education Association (NAEA) was established, becoming the first such association in Canada (the AAACE was formed in 1926, in the US). The NAEA was part of a long line of haphazard efforts over a century and a half to increase literacy in the adult population in Newfoundland, especially among men who had left school early to contribute to the household economy. Little is written about Newfoundland's literacy efforts, its supporters and their ambitions save for the histories of McManus (2006) and Overton (1995) which concentrate on the twentieth century and McCann (1988, 1989) who focuses on schooling. This paper therefore focuses on eighteenth and nineteenth century efforts in the education of adults.

Adult education in Canada has largely been shaped by a vision of mostly male progressive reformers and champions such as Moses Coady (Welton, 2001) resulting in a history that honors giants and great men, and which perpetuates notions of monumental change, cataclysmic events and coherent stories of positive educational attainment and development. To address this situation, this paper works with the historical and archival record(s) to broaden our recollections beyond the unified narratives of the NFB, the CBC and the Antigonish Movement to contribute a less coherent story that is in keeping with actual events in Newfoundland. Although this study concentrates on one province at one point in history, it has implications for the field at large, in that it explores critically the social-economic context of literacy teachers and students, and it reflects a more fractured picture than is typically seen in our field's historical narratives.

Though estimates vary, there is general agreement that the literacy situation in Newfoundland in the 1800s was dismal. Rowe (1952), for instance, estimated that the literacy rate in the early nineteenth century was 25% and rose to 50% by 1900. Other estimates are not much better. A.G. McPherson (cited in McCann, 1989, p. 191) found that in St. John's in 1841-1850, literacy, defined as the ability to write one's name, was 67.7% for men and 52% for women in the city but considerably less in the outports. In Hermitage, for instance, it was 5.1% for men and 1.7% for women. Among the most quoted figure on literacy in this time is David Alexander's (1980) assessment, based on varied census data, that "in 1891, at the very least,

about 32% of the population over ten was totally illiterate” (p.10). Alexander makes the argument that such rates of illiteracy contributed to the struggles of Newfoundland for economic and political well-being. The rates remained low, in part because compulsory schooling was not instituted until 1942. Although definitions of literacy vary from the ability to write one’s name, to read the Bible, to understand simple texts, and involves debates about whether it means the ability to read *and* write or the ability to read *or* write, clearly there was great need for education. Yet, who provided it and what their motives were has rarely been examined.

Religious Associations

First as a colony of Britain, claimed by Sir Humphrey Gilbert in 1583, Newfoundland had Representative Government from 1832-1855 and Responsible Government from 1855-1933. It returned to Britain voluntarily in 1934 in bankruptcy, eventually becoming a province of Canada in 1949. For most of its history, Newfoundland had a resource based economy, dependent on fishing, and remained subject to the vagaries of the ocean, the inclement weather and the colonial offices. When one considers that many of the early immigrants to the colony were from working class and poor backgrounds from the west coast of England and southern Ireland, and were mixed with equally disadvantaged French, Beothuck and Micmac inhabitants, it becomes clear that social class was interlinked with low literacy rates. The island’s uncertain status and its great economic needs made it the object of the largesse of a number of religious groups from England such as the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG; 1701-1827) and its successor, the Newfoundland School Society (NSS; 1823-1923), both of which saw the outpost as ripe for proselytizing both the adults and the children through education.

As early as 1788, Mr. Lampen, an SPG funded school teacher, had begun an evening school in Harbour Grace in which he taught young men and women to read write and cipher during the winter. These adult efforts to catechize and proselytize were continued by the NSS and recorded also in their annual reports. Mr. and Mrs. Martin at Petty Harbour, a husband and wife team, were a standard pair of teachers in the NSS; they reported teaching 18 males and 7 females in their adult school in 1827, along with their regular day school classes. Typical of their reports is this one in which the couple witnessed an inspiring evangelical event:

The children came in the evening to change their library books; one of the Adult scholars, a girl of 18, said, “would you sell me this book, Sir?” Let me see it, I said, and looking at it I found it was a book of Hymns and Prayers. I said, why do you want it?; is it because you like the hymns that are in it? She answered, ‘No Sir, the prayers.’ Do you love to pray? ‘Yes, Sir’ she modestly replied. I let her have the book. She has been in our school about 15 months, during which time she has learned to read the Bible. She usually brings the greatest number of answers to the weekly question, and her general conduct affords us great encouragement.” (Newfoundland School Society, 1827-1828, p. 50).

It was such religious commitment that the Society teachers focused on, and every step they made to improving literacy levels helped the cause of Protestantism. That this young woman typified desirable gendered behavior (i.e., modesty, good conduct and piety) was no doubt the reason her story was profiled; her story would have been quite palatable to funders’ ears (see Whitehead & Peppard, 2008).

The Society’s fervor knew no bounds, and was not constricted to the young adult. There were students of all ages in these schools, all interested in learning to read and write. In fact, they even had octogenarians. Mr. Bridge, a teacher in one of the NSS schools, reported this event:

It pleased God, three or four years since, to make me the instrument of converting an aged Roman Catholic; he was then upwards of seventy; he is now, at nearly eighty years of age, a scholar in the Society's school, and is making astonishing progress. It is delightful to me when I visit his hut to find this aged pilgrim poring over the Word of God, which he is now in some measure able to read. . . . he has seen his way clearly to a renunciation of the errors of Romanism. (Newfoundland School Society, 1841-1842, p. 8).

This religious conversion is an example of how the Society measured success. Although it was trying to increase reading and writing levels in the colony, it clearly saw conversion from Roman Catholicism to Protestantism as the gold standard. This sense of triumph with conversion, and the attempts of Catholics to redress the situation, were to further entrench sectarianism in Newfoundland, and no doubt had longterm effects on educational progress. These early efforts, imbued with a spirit of conversion, forever entangled Newfoundland education with piety.

Government Grants

Official grants for adult education did not come until the first grant of \$10,000 for night schools by the newly established Bureau of Education in 1920, with Arthur Barnes as minister (Rowe, 1952). Yet, through grants of the legislature for general educational purposes, the NSS was able to attain funds which it also used for adults. The first grant of record was the 300 pounds that the NSS received from the first education grant (*Journal of the House of Assembly*, 1836). As McCann (1989) notes, public education started with this grant, and from 1836 to 1843 the "system" was nondenominational. That ceased in 1843, after which education was controlled by competing denominations. The government was to continue to support denominationally based education, in schools and academies, until the end of the twentieth century. As well, the government funded in an ad hoc way apprenticeships at the St. John's Factory, where men and women learned netmaking and a variety of trades (e.g., the Factory received 40 pounds in 1851, *Journal of the House of Assembly*, 1851). Other technical types of training such as the Benevolent Irish Society school for navigation also received government funding in the 1800s, as did a system of schools of industry/charity. Yet, few of these adult efforts were sustained, since most attention focused on children's education.

Private Schools and Tuition

Literacy was also supported through the offering of private schools and lessons throughout the 1800s. With the onset of the island's first newspaper, the *Royal Gazette* in 1807 and others shortly after, advertisements for public lessons began to appear. The *Public Ledger* advertised a "Mercantile and Writing school" by a Mr. E. J. Gleeson (1827) in which he was to teach "a select number of Youth, and those of riper years." A Mr. M'Donald (1829) had a writing/penmanship school for "Ladies" to learn an "easy, elegant and expeditious mode of Writing" and for "Gentlemen" to develop a "bold hand for business." M'Donald was also willing to teach those "who cannot write at all." His seems to be one of the first efforts devoted entirely to adults. Similarly, the *Public Ledger* advertised a "Night School for Adults" by a Mr. James Crosby (1831) in St. John's, in which Crosbie was to offer both "writing and arithmetic" (note, not reading). Again, Mr. E. Gleeson advertised in *The Times* in November 1833 a night school for those "who have not the advantage of Day School," presumably a mixture of adults and adolescents. Another specifically adult school was advertised in *The Times* (n.a., 1834), this time for "reading, writing and arithmetic." Although the overall effects of these private classes are

unknown, it is reasonable to assume they catered to the more affluent and were of limited public benefit.

Associations and Reading Rooms

The 19th century was a hive of associations including the Athenaeum (1861-1898), which seemed to have absorbed many other literary societies and libraries including the Mechanics Institute, formed in 1849 (Barker & Hannaford, 2002). At its peak, the Athenaeum had an auditorium to seat 1000, housed some 6000 books, and offered lectures for the public; it burned in the fire of 1892 and was rebuilt, albeit on a smaller scale. There were many smaller literary associations in the city around the same time, such as the St. John's Literary Society and the Bible Class Library, but none so large as the Athenaeum.

Perhaps out of concern that too much education was happening without religious oversight, the churches also sponsored a number of associations and societies. For instance, the Methodist College Literary Institute (Wade, 1991) carried on adult education activities, including lectures and debates on "a variety of historical, literary, scientific, even political and economic questions" (p. 320). The Institute was to continue for more than a hundred years. There was also the St. Joseph's Catholic Institute (1872) formed in May 1872. Its organizers were adamant that it was needed in the city as it was distinct from other associations such as the "Unions of Merchants, Mechanics, Agriculturalists, and Artists" (p. 4). Unlike these, it saw itself as promoting "the Religious, Moral, and Literary Advancement of the young men of St. John's" (p. 7). Equipped with a billiard room and a librarian (and sub-librarian) for the reading room and library, there were no fewer than 128 members, including the future bishop Howley and his brothers John and James, signed up for this Institute. Yet, the degree to which the Institute was active in sponsoring formal educational activities is unknown. It is more likely that it served as a diversionary tactic to keep young men out of trouble in a time when boys working on the wharves were given liquor to drink three times a day (Howley, 1888). Possibly, it also increased camaraderie among young Catholics, further ensuring sectarianism in the city.

In his discursive account of old St. John's, Paul O'Neill (2003) names many of these literary associations and their buildings. Seemingly the various classes of people had many places to go to read, talk about books, and listen to lectures. Despite the presence of a Mechanics Institute (Konrad & Cuff, 1991) and the seemingly duplicate Mechanics Society formed in 1827 (Cuff, 1991; primarily Catholic and nonpolitical), there is a question of how helpful and accessible these were in advancing the education of the working classes and the illiterate. Indeed a newspaper editorial in 1887 suggested that the Mechanics Society and Home Industries Society had not done much to educate the working men (Editorial, 1887). It seems more likely that these associations, like the more religiously oriented ones, sponsored entertainment and created a diversion to keep people, especially young men, busy. In the absence of a strong and funded adult education program, the associations' efforts were both sporadic and limited in terms of addressing literacy.

Discussion

David Alexander's (1980) estimations of literacy indicate that these discursive efforts had little effect. Although there were many well intended forays, they seem not to have any great results, given that they were sporadic and unorganized. Since Newfoundland did not open Memorial College until 1925, it is clear that educational standards remained low, except perhaps for the upper class merchants whose children went back to England for schooling.

The role that women played in literacy was seemingly minimal; apart from team teaching with their husbands for the NSS they do not appear to have been involved in any meaningful way with decision making. Likely their ability to enact desirable gendered characteristics of teaching and caring, not to mention accompanying their husbands and working for a pittance, made them useful to the NSS. Apart from women, there are other groups who are absent in these narratives including the French and the First Nations. Instead, it would seem that all possible was done to help the Anglos and the Christians.

Adult education, indeed all education, was controlled from outside Newfoundland until the beginnings of Responsible Government and even much later through the advent of missionaries whose primary goal was the salvation of souls. Once government support for schooling was initiated in 1836, any hope of concentrating on adults was diminished. Given the absence of compulsory education, illiterate children became illiterate adults, exacerbating the problem.

There is also little indication that the various associations and societies were overtly political. With fishing as the main industry, unions were not prominent and so any available education was likely apolitical. In the absence of agitation for more, it was unlikely there would be more. The ad hoc nature of literacy instruction through the 1800s ran counter to best practice which suggests that supportive and structured programs are necessary (Quigley, 2006). Colonial overseers, classism, sexism and poverty worked hand in hand to ensure dire circumstances and low literacy rates. Newfoundland would have to wait for the Carnegie funded NAEA in the 1920s and 1930s for this situation to change.

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