

## IF I HAD A HAMMER: RETRAINING THAT REALLY WORKS

Margaret Hillyard Little  
Vancouver: University of British  
Columbia Press, 2005

### REVIEWED BY JAN KAINER

This fascinating book about equity training is a valuable contribution to Women's Studies not only because it offers one of the very few, if not the only, in-depth case study analysis of a women-only skills training program in Canada, but also because Little's discussion raises significant policy questions, and provides important lessons concerning the need to structure training programs that are specifically designed for minority groups. Little was motivated to investigate training policy in response to the neo-liberal attack on welfare recipients, the majority of whom are single mothers. Angered by the advice given to welfare mothers by politicians who promise a "hand up" (i.e. training) as the answer to poverty, Little went on to inquire about the potential benefits of training programs for low-income women. She searched the country for programs geared to low-income women and found the Women's Work Training Program (WWTP) in Regina, Saskatchewan. The WWTP, offering non-traditional skills (carpenter) training, stood out because of six unique features rarely seen among training schemes. "It was long term, and had a [construction] co-op, built-in flexibility, and female mentors. And it attempted to meet the needs of a racially diverse, low-income, marginalized group of women." One of the greatest strengths of the program was its emphasis on meeting the personal needs of minority women, an overwhelmingly significant feature when one considers the background of the trainees.

Little explores the life histories of 30 participants in absorbing

detail uncovering their incredible childhood experiences, often characterized by violence, extreme poverty and parental neglect, all of which conditioned addictions and enormous psychological barriers to achieving success later in life. Their sad tales of alcohol and drug abuse, extreme violence, personal tragedy (family members lost to suicide and addiction), and repeated experiences of discrimination at school and at the workplace establishes why a woman-specific approach to learning is absolutely necessary for a training program for racial minority low-income women.

Although the program inspired self-assurance and trust in oneself, and others, creating lasting friendships and social bonds of solidarity, there were also insurmountable challenges faced by the participants, many stemming from racism. For example, white women expressed impatience concerning the inability of Native women to make decisions (even as seemingly unimportant as ordering a logo and colour design for a tee-shirt), to take on leadership and mentoring roles, to delegate responsibilities to others, to market and promote the training program, and to take full responsibility for the business needs of the co-op. Native women also had a tendency to work slowly, afraid to make a mistake that would undermine their confidence level, yet working fast was a necessary requirement in a business where "time is money." Many of the demands of the training program were fundamentally at odds with the lived experience and cultural values of Aboriginal women, a common outcome of equity programs. Equity initiatives are inherently double-edged in that they open the door for disadvantaged groups to enter new and unfamiliar realms in the field of education or in the workplace, but at the same time, participants are expected to conform to a white normative value system which inevitably exposes them to painful experiences of racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimina-

tion prevalent in the mainstream world. As Little argues, the WWTP was dominated by "white cultural values" which rewarded personal autonomy, punctuality, financial self-sufficiency, self-assertiveness, and outspokenness, but did not take into account the "distinctiveness" of Native culture with its "ties of interdependency and deference to those in authority" (i.e., elders). I agree with Little that "normative whiteness" was pervasive, seeping into almost every aspect of the program. But I would like to have seen more discussion about the contradictions this raised for the coordinators and the participants, especially for those who developed deep personal bonds of friendship that crossed racial lines. How did the participants reconcile their cultural differences? Was it possible to fully honour Aboriginal values for a training program funded by intermittent government grants that demand maximum results and require participants to compete in the highly competitive construction industry? As the WWTP coordinators acknowledged, the most striking contradiction faced by the participants were the shockingly low-wages (a top wage was \$9.75 per hour) paid to them by the co-operative. In a program intended to lift women out of poverty, some members earned more from social assistance than through their skilled work in the construction industry. This, more than any other factor, undermined the credibility and equity goals of the program.

Despite certain limitations, what emerges from the training experience is that it "was not merely a program to train women in specific carpentry skills but also a program whose purpose is to change lives." Little's analysis makes clear how gender and race-sensitive training has the potential to transform the lives of low-income minority women. Nevertheless, the WWTP program closed its doors in 2000 after four and a half year of operation, an outcome of sporadic and inadequate funding. Little's case study goes a long way in

explaining the extreme difficulties of sustaining a retraining program for women in a time of state cut-backs, while also showing why gender-specific training for low-income women is well worth pursuing.

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## **TRANSFORMATIONS: THE LIFE OF MARGARET FULTON**

James Doyle.  
Toronto: ECW Press, 2006

### **REVIEWED BY CLARA THOMAS**

In his introduction James Doyle tells us that he will focus on the public and professional aspects of Margaret Fulton's life. These are, of course, her long and successful career as a teacher and university administrator, beginning in 1942 in a one-room school near Birtle, Manitoba, where she was born in 1922. She retired in 1987 as President of Mount St. Vincent University in Halifax. Her public speaking career continued long after retirement, for she had early identified herself as an activist-feminist and she was known internationally for her advocacy of challenges to the accepted male-dominated system operative at all levels of the political and educational systems in Canada and elsewhere. She was the youngest of seven children in a farming family. Both her parents were notable for their involvement in community projects and in efforts to stabilize and improve the rural school system of the day. Writing of her childhood, Fulton considered her family to have been "shaped by independence, innovation, education, the work ethic, a respect for nature, and an awareness

of God as a spiritual source." From both her parents she also absorbed the socialist ideals that characterized the Canadian Cooperative Federation (CCF, later NDP). It was an upbringing that served her well as did a family closeness that remained throughout her entire career, especially among the trio of Fulton sisters.

Peggy Fulton, as she was called in the early years of her career, also had several outstanding pieces of good fortune helping her on her way; she had a natural "Presence"—when she came into a room you knew she was there; she had a good voice, an infectious laugh, and an endearing and easy smile. Most important, she had qualified herself for university work and a place in the company of movers and shakers in the early 1960s, when the Women's Movement was gathering strength and when there was an unprecedented establishment of new universities throughout Canada but especially in Ontario where she had come to do a PhD. Though she would have preferred to work on the papers of Thomas Carlyle's wife, Jane, she was persuaded to switch her interests to Thomas himself. That too turned out to be lastingly fortunate: she wrote her thesis on Carlyle's Public Lectures, and their rhetorical style and impassioned preachings suited her own platform manner thoroughly. Seldom has any student derived such lasting benefit from a dissertation topic. Her determined educational advance from Normal School in Winnipeg to a PhD in English from the University of Toronto in the '60s was fuelled by ambition, a capacity for hard work, an openness to new challenges and experiences, and a canny sense of timing which alerted her to likely paths toward her perceived goals. Along the way she read voraciously, discovering important models for her own feminism in various works by her precursor and fellow-Westerner Nellie McClung, the social critic Lewis Mumford, the early feminist Virginia Woolf, and the ecological critic Rachel Carson. Most important

for her future career path, she discovered her talent for public speaking: "For the first time I had the power of speech.... I saw what could be done with words, for I had the vision of a new world as I talked."

Her seven years in the English Department of Waterloo Lutheran University turned out to be her only full-time teaching assignment, for she went from there to be Dean of Women at U.B.C. and then on to be President of Mount St. Vincent. To be appointed President of a hitherto Roman Catholic-administered institution for women was a coup for E. Margaret Fulton as she now was professionally known and she made an outstanding success of her appointment. Like many another colleague who knew first hand the difficulties besetting a woman in the '60s and '70s, I consider her appointment and her achievements a splendid marker for women's acceptance in academia. Prime among her innovative ideas was the letter she sent out to a long mailing list of women asking them to contribute one dollar each to Mount St. Vincent's appeal for operating funds. The novelty and simplicity of its appeal worked: it was a fundraising ploy that was outstandingly successful. She went on, of course, from strength to strength, not without controversy, for her speeches were fearlessly outspoken and often could be understood as crossing the thin line between criticizing the world as men were running it and damning men in general. The Women's Movement gained ground, equity in hiring practices was more and more achieved and Women Studies' Programs, unthinkable in the '60s, became solid areas of many universities' structures.

In her final years as President of Mount St. Vincent Fulton devoted her speaking skills to advocating a complete transformation of society from its traditional hierarchical structure to a cooperative collegial one, away from what she considered a sterile "corporation" to a more benign model: "We need to teach