

Introduction to the Original Edition _____

Literacy and History

What would be the effect if reading was abolished by some stroke of arbitrary authority, while the radio, records, cassettes, were available very cheaply? I am still not clear why you think the act of reading is so important.

ANDREW SCHONFIELD
The Listener, 25 July 1974

In most urban and suburban communities, most children will pick up the printed code anyway, school or no school. . . . It is likely that teaching destroys more genuine literacy than it produces. But it is hard to know if most people think that reading and writing have any value anyway, either in themselves or for their use, except that they are indispensable in how we go about things. Contrast the common respect for mathematics, which are taken to be about something and are powerful, productive, magical; yet there is no panic if people are mathematically illiterate.

PAUL GOODMAN
Speaking and Language: in Defense of Poetry (1971)

And when we consider the first use to which writing was put, it would seem quite clear that it was first and foremost connected with power; it was used for inventories, catalogues, censuses and instructions; in all instances, whether the aim was to keep a check on material possessions or human beings, it was the evidence of the power exercised by some men over other men and over worldly possessions.

CLAUDE LEVI-STRAUSS
in Georges Carboneier,
Conversations with Claude Levi-Strauss (1969)

I

A literacy myth surrounds us. Literacy is considered a basic human right and a tool for productive citizenship and fulfilling lives, yet world illiteracy continues at a high rate. Although literacy is closely associated with basic western values and key elements of our social thought, tests reveal that many high-school graduates and college students are illiterate and that children are not learning to read. Other observers portend the end of traditional print literacy; some disclaim even the frequent cries of literacy decline. Our uncertainty and anxieties are striking.

Nonetheless, a new book is published every minute, and the world's reading population has more than doubled in 20 years. Eight billion volumes are printed each year—the distribution and circulation are, however, unequal and unbalanced. The developed countries suffer from a glut of print and other parts of the world suffer from a scarcity amounting to what has been termed "book hunger." Ironically, in the developed or industrialized nations many who can read very often do not. In Italy and Hungary, for example, 40% of the population do not read to any appreciable extent; in France, 53% do not; and in the United States, with low levels of absolute illiteracy, "functional" illiteracy is quite high: estimates range up to a full 50% of adults!¹

That a literacy problem exists seems certain. Its dimensions, causes, and comprehension are, however, less than clear. Many reasons and explanations for its existence have been offered. Specialists such as Baker and Escarpit point to the competition and distraction of audiovisual media and to school and preschool experiences—two common areas of censure. They argue that "the child who meets books for the first time when he goes to school tends to associate reading with the school experience especially if no reading is done at home. . . . More often than not the child comes to dislike reading and drops it altogether when he leaves school."² Others point to instructional methods and materials, classroom settings, problems of motivation and relevance, external influences, social changes, and home environments. Despite the quantity of print devoted to this topic, one of the few justifiable conclusions is

¹ *Toronto Star*, January 2, 1974; George Steiner, "After the Book," in *The Future of Literacy*, ed. Robert Disch (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973); Escarpit, *The Book Revolution* (New York: UNESCO, 1966); David Harmon, "Illiteracy: An Overview," *Harvard Educational Review*, 40 (1970), 230; "Functional Illiteracy Found High in U.S.," *New York Times*, May 20, 1970.

² *Toronto Star*, January 2, 1974; see also, M. M. Lewis, *The Importance of Illiteracy* (London: Harrap, 1953).

that common understanding of literacy is inadequate and incomplete. This is as true for past as for present considerations of the subject.

Discussions of literacy are confused and ambiguous—an ironic, and even startling, phenomenon, which contrasts sharply with the high value we assign to the skills of reading and writing. Vagueness pervades virtually all efforts to discern the meaning of literacy; moreover, there is surprisingly little agreement on or specific evidence for the benefits of literacy, whether socially or individually, economically or culturally. Rather, assumptions preempt criticism and investigation, and agencies and specialists whose business it is to promote literacy shrink from asking fundamental questions in their campaigns to disseminate skills.

Definitions and conceptualizations are obviously basic to these considerations; recognition of persistent problems with them can illuminate the most significant issues. As David Harmon recounts, until the 1950s most governments equated the abilities of reading, writing, and ciphering with individual literacy, and UNESCO summarized: “A person is literate who can, with understanding, both read and write a short simple statement on his everyday life.” During the 1950s, however, efforts were made to distinguish between a literate and a functionally literate person, thereby complicating measurement and evaluation. New definitions issued. Functional literacy meant “the essential knowledge and skills which enable [one] to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in [one’s] group and community, and whose attainments make it possible for [one] to continue to use these skills towards [one’s] own and the community’s development.” But nowhere are “effective functioning,” “knowledge and skills,” or “development” defined or discussed. The relativism of these conceptualizations is important, for literacy’s role changes with time, place, and circumstances; nonetheless, these definitions are less than useful.

In response to such complications, most governments employ little more than a loose definition, often similar to the one just quoted, in conjunction with a grade-completion equivalency (commonly, the fourth or fifth grade is taken as a standard). Agencies ranging from the U.S. Census Bureau, the Army, and the Navy to the census authorities of Statistics Canada and the United Nations follow this common practice, but usually admit that the completion of a particular grade of school does not warrant a presumption of the attainment of literacy—a disheartening and debilitating comment on efforts at measurement. Thus, comparisons of literacy rates are contradicted, too, over units large or small, and even the implications of reading and writing a message are, apparently, seldom considered. Without the specification of a context

in which literacy is to serve either the individual or society, attempts to establish a valid concept of functional literacy cannot succeed. Moreover, even in the present decade, those fostering renewed literacy campaigns, such as the "right-to-read" movement, still do not define "functional competencies" (i.e., of reading, writing, and computing) or "requirements for adult living" although they rely on such terms to justify their efforts.³

Investigators focusing on units of analysis smaller than nations or international units pursue other alternatives in defining and measuring literacy. Some, for example, administer tests. In the Schuman, Inkeles, and Smith East Pakistan (Bangladesh) study, each subject was first asked if he could read (i.e., Bengali). If the response was yes, a short newspaper-level passage was given to him to read. His comprehension was rated as follows: *cannot read, reads only a few words, reads slowly but understands, or reads well.*⁴ DeYoung and Hunt, in a Philippine study, defined functional literacy as ability to read and comprehend sufficiently to communicate their understanding to another. To test functional literacy, they graded individuals on responses to questions about a text, scoring them "nonfunctional" (no comprehension), "poor," or "good in comprehension."⁵ In a third study, Rogers and Herzog assessed the ability of Columbian peasants to read or write well enough for them to carry out the functions of their roles in the social system. The peasant's functional literacy was assessed according to the number of words he or she read and comprehended from a sentence consisting of six words of varying difficulty. This represented, to the researchers, a measure of literacy viewed as a continuous variable (with many levels of ability); if literacy was seen as a dichotomous attribute (literate or illiterate only), they add, only those who read all six would be functionally literate.⁶

These examples represent a clear improvement over the census-style measures. Nevertheless, the definitions employed do not fit closely with styles of testing. For instance, a reference to writing forms a portion of

³ Harmon, "Illiteracy: An Overview," 226-229; UNESCO, *Literacy as a Factor in Development* (Paris, 1956), 7.

⁴ Howard Schuman, Alex Inkeles, and David H. Smith, "Some Social Psychological Effects and Non-effects in a New Nation," *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 16 (1967), 2.

⁵ John E. DeYoung and Chester L. Hunt, "Communication Channels and Functional Literacy in the Philippine Barrio," *Journal of Asian Studies*, 22 (1962), 69-70.

⁶ Everitt M. Rogers and William Herzog, "Functional Literacy among Columbian Peasants," *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 14 (1966), 192-194. All three studies report that their tests showed "close congruity" with self-reporting, thus census-type surveys of literacy may be considered reasonably accurate when compared with tests.

each definition, but writing ability is never evaluated. More importantly, work and social functions are neither specified nor related to test questions, for no attempt is made to relate literacy to a hierarchy of job or social skills or to the specific needs of the circumstances of life. Insights, like that of Rogers and Herzog that literacy is a process, different for different roles, and with requirements shifting as individuals and society change, are not incorporated into measurement or analysis. The meanings and uses of literacy are more complex and diverse than these typical questions or tests allow. Popular confusion and scientific ambiguity are not resolved by the strategies thus far adopted; the crux of conceptualization and definition is not satisfied, nor is the myth dispelled.

Vagueness and ambiguity of definition and measurement not surprisingly influence forms of analysis and research questions. Functional necessities, interestingly and importantly, are often translated into matters of attitudes and values rather than of behavior or skill. Rogers and Herzog, for example, inquire about such abstractions as empathy, achievement motivation, and "cosmopolitanism," instead of isolating the roles played by literacy in work or life chances. Few of their questions, in fact, relate to functional skill in ways that might correspond to the definitions usually offered.

David Harmon, for one, has attempted to surmount the limitations of these definitions, so it should not be construed that no efforts have been made to do so or that this critique is wholly novel. He has offered a three-stage conceptualization of literacy: as a tool, as a skill attainment, and as an ability having applications. "Each stage," he concludes, "is contingent upon the former; each stage is a necessary component of literacy." A useful beginning, undoubtedly, Harmon's model nevertheless continues to make key assumptions without support or rationale; while maintaining the required flexibility, he does not succeed in dispelling the vagueness and confusion which beset discussions of literacy. Literacy is rightly assumed to be a tool and a skill, but we must ask, What kind of tool and for what uses? Today, as previously, the understanding of literacy remains at the level which it has held for a century. As Harmon remarks, "Few would dispute the significance of literacy for either individual or national development."⁷ This, need I add, is hardly an advancement in comprehension; the literacy myth is pervasive. Its influence weighs upon analysis both past and present.

This obstacle to understanding is not recent in origin. It dates from at least the previous century, and as Robert Disch usefully summarizes, "The assumption that literacy and progress were identical had become a

⁷ Harmon, "Illiteracy: An Overview," 228.

dogma of progressive thought. Many thinkers believed that universal literacy was no less than the final milestone on the road to Utopia." He continues, reflecting my position,

Subsequently the twentieth century inherited a mystique of literacy born out of two tendencies. One, essentially utilitarian, was committed to the functional uses of literacy as a medium for the spread of practical information that could lead to individual and social progress; the other, essentially aesthetic and spiritual, was committed to the uses of literacy for salvaging the drooping spirit of Western man from the death of religion and the ravages of progress.⁸

Nor, as we shall see, is this all. The main point, of course, is that some disputation of the significance and mystique of literacy is possible; we will shortly consider the nineteenth century anew. Moreover, it might also be useful for other, more contemporary analysts to reexamine the current implications of this major legacy.

II

A review of the major conclusions of contemporary literacy studies offers a heuristic perspective and orientation. As has been indicated, these findings often relate to attitudes and values, suggesting that therein may lie literacy's most important influences. For example, functionally literate adults (as they have been defined here) are, research reports, more empathetic, more innovative in agriculture and at home, more achievement motivated, and more cosmopolitan than illiterates; they also have larger farms, greater exposure to media and political information, and more often serve as opinion leaders. Literates, in addition, identify more often with a nation than a community or ethnic group, aspire to post-secondary education for sons, and are more aware of new opportunities. Urban places of residence may intersect with literacy, moreover, in promoting such attitudes as acceptance of birth control and technological awareness. Whether these attitudes result from literacy, or literacy from these or other influences, remains unclear.⁹

⁸ Disch, *Future of Literacy*, 4-5.

⁹ Rogers and Herzog, "Functional Literacy," 198-202; see also Daniel Lerner, "Literacy and Initiative in Village Development," in *Rural Development Research Project*, ed. F. W. Frey (Cambridge, Mass.: M. I. T., Center for International Studies, 1964), "Toward a Communication Theory of Modernization," in *Communication and Political Development*, ed. Lucian Pye (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963); Schuman *et al.*, "Some Social Psychological Effects," 4-5; 8-10.

Negative findings, often unexpected ones, are equally important. Literacy is found to bear no relationship, for instance, to growing material self-interest in East Pakistan, whereas urbanization may; neither does it relate to the recognition of differing opinions among one's fellow men. In fact, literacy is correlated negatively with contentment with material possessions. Researchers have also found that literacy does not correlate highly with media exposure (including print media), a finding that suggests that literates do not read to a significant extent and that illiterates have access to information sources. Illiterates often buy newspapers (48% of illiterates in one report) and have them read to them. Moreover, among Columbian peasants, most households contain at least one literate resident. Sources of information and new ideas are available to those without reading skills; and, individuals, in fact, not the media, are considered the best sources of information. Opinion leaders, finally, are far from 100% literate.¹⁰

These findings are important. The contradictions and paradoxes are no less significant than the expected results. Not only do they reflect the problems considered here, they also reinforce the need for reconsideration. Nevertheless, this lack of consistency in research findings does not reduce the influence of the literacy myth, nor does it occasion a questioning of the centrality of literacy to development, whether of individuals or of societies. Consider the ingenuous response of Schuman, Inkeles, and Smith to several aspects of this predicament. Evading issues of functions and skills, they argue, "Rather than finding literacy to be a factor which completely pervades and shapes a man's entire view of the world, we find it limited to those spheres where vicarious and abstract experience is essentially meaningful. The more practical part of a man's outlook, however, is determined by his daily experiences in significant roles." There is no mention of the functional or concretized contributions of literacy; its impact is construed as symbolic, abstract, and not practical. Moreover, both the correlates and noncorrelates of literacy seem to be explained at least in part by such factors as urban residence and industrial work. For instance, some attitudinal changes occur "most completely" in the presence of both literacy and urban-industrial experience, requiring the new experience of the latter and what they call the "ideational sophistication" of the former. Literacy, therefore, does not enter into all psychological changes, and when it does, its impact is influenced by other, contextual and structural factors. Thus, Schuman *et al.* argue vaguely, literacy specifically, and education more generally,

¹⁰ Schuman *et al.*, "Some Social Psychological Effects," 6-10; Rogers and Herzog, "Functional Literacy," 196-197, 201; DeYoung and Hunt, "Communication Channels," 74.

open minds to new ideas and change attitudes little dependent on concrete situations.¹¹ Literacy's role has shifted perceptibly and significantly.

This is not all; for enter here Alex Inkeles' "modern man": the culmination of a "set of personal qualities which reliably cohere as a syndrome and which identify a type of man who may validly be described as fitting a reasonable theoretical conception of modern man." The central elements of this "syndrome" remarkably parallel literacy's imputed influences: an openness to new experiences, an assertion of independence, a belief in the efficacy of science, an ambition for one's self and one's children's success in education and work, a dependence on planning, an interest and involvement in politics, and an effort to be aware of issues larger than local ones. The connection lies in the setting in which these attitudes are learned: the school, first, and then the factory. As Inkeles explains,

If attending school brings about such substantial changes in these fundamental personal orientations, the school must be teaching a good deal more than is apparent in its syllabus on reading, writing, and even geography. The school is evidently also an important training ground for inculcating values. It teaches ways of orienting oneself towards others, and of conducting oneself, which could have bearing on the performance of adult roles in the structure of modern society.

The effects of the school, and of the factory too, Inkeles concludes, "reside not mainly in its formal, explicit, self-conscious pedagogic activity, but rather in its informal, implicit, and often unconscious program. . . ." ¹²

Literacy, then, as a measure of modernity, on either the individual or the societal level, becomes a symbol—and just as its benefits are located in the areas of abstraction and symbolism, so are its functions. Important questions need to be considered, however. In the first place, causation, direction, and weight of influence are uncertain. As Tilly argues, structural settings need not relate directly to the type of learning taking place in them or to its outcomes in attitude and behavior; neither in fact must attitude and behavior be in lock-step conformity. The relationships might be very different. In addition, there are good reasons, for past and present both, to contradict Inkeles' insistence on the unconscious nature of the results of schooling on attitudes and

¹¹ Schuman *et al.*, "Some Social Psychological Effects," 7–11.

¹² Inkeles, "Making Men Modern: On the Causes and Consequences of Individual Change in Six Developing Countries," *American Journal of Sociology*, 74 (1969), 210, 213; Inkeles and Smith, *Becoming Modern* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), *passim*.

values; these influences can be far more direct, and yet equally subtle. And finally, the modernity syndrome's coherence and causes, and its very relationship to literacy, suffer from both conceptual and empirical limitations.¹³

The evidence remains nonetheless suggestive. For, in the nineteenth century, literacy's role and the expectations held for it paralleled in significant ways elements of these patterns, yet it also symbolized a somewhat different set of changes. The ambiguity and confusion between skills and values remain important aspects of continuity, and continuing obstructions to understanding. Curiously, literacy—and schooling—are held to represent a complex of attitudinal changes, related in some measure to modernity. In part, this is a result of the acquisition and possession of literacy, but perhaps it is more directly the result of the processes that accompany the dissemination of that ability: the values and organization of the school. This duality is not often recognized, but may comprise the essence of schooling's contribution to development and modernization. It may also explain the frequency with which researchers isolate attitudes while neglecting functional skills.

Recognition of this conceptual confusion about the purposes that literacy serves aids in understanding the place accorded it in notions of societal modernization and change. Not surprisingly, literacy is accorded a pervasive role. Economists, sociologists, planners, and governments inform us that literacy rates correlate with scores of factors, ranging from individual attitudes to economic growth and industrialization, per-capita wealth and GNP, political stability and participatory democracy, urbanization and vital rates, communications and consumption—to list only a few of the correlations reported.¹⁴ There is a certain logic behind many of these correlations; however, no convincing or documented explanations or analyses correspond to them. The assumptions, ambiguities, and contradictions implicit in these approaches attract criticism, so we need not repeat that debate. What need to be stressed are the limitations

¹³ Charles Tilly, "Talking Modern," *Peasant Studies Newsletter*, 6 (1977), 66-68; Robert Dreeben, *On What Is Learned in School* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1968); Kenneth Lockridge, *Literacy in Colonial New England* (New York: Norton, 1974). Lockridge in a tentative test of the Inkeles conclusions locates little evidence of literate persons exhibiting more modern attitudes, using charitable giving as his measures, 32-37. See also, *Becoming Modern*, 138, 246, *passim.*, for complications in testing education's contribution to modernity.

¹⁴ For a summary, see Bruce M. Russett *et al.*, *World Handbook of Political and Social Indicators* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964); see also, Lerner, "Towards a Communication Theory"; Carlo Cipolla, *Literacy and Development in the West* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969); H. H. Golden, "Literacy and Social Change in Underdeveloped Countries," *Rural Sociology*, 20 (1955), 1-7.

of the literacy–modernization–development sequence, especially as it relates to historical time. One valuable example is Flora’s refutation of Daniel Lerner’s sequences-of-development theory with literacy at its center; Flora has offered evidence *disconnecting* urbanization and industrialization from literacy.¹⁵ The vagueness that surrounds the meaning of literacy, the failure to specify the contexts of its role, the power of the literacy myth, and, crucially, the ignorance about the functional benefits to the individual and society of literacy skills debilitate these macrosociological correlations, along with many of the individual-based approaches.

Assumptions remain simplistic and deterministic; explanation and critical understanding are rare. The implications of these criticisms are severe for common notions about literacy and its centrality in social theory and western values. The need for reexamination, and a direct confrontation of theory with the facts of historical development and modernization, is compelling. Our current “crisis” makes this examination imperative. These concerns, and their ramifications, must be recognized, finally, by historians, whose own studies of literacy have only recently begun. Regardless of our position regarding the myth or the crisis, we cannot ignore literacy’s own history, one which intersects vitally with the course of social change and development—especially in the centuries since the invention and spread of printing. Nor can we neglect the relevance of that history to modern social thought.

III

The volume and pace of historical studies of literacy has increased dramatically since Roger Schofield lamented, in 1968, “Despite its relevance to many kinds of historical study, literacy does not feature very

¹⁵ Peter Flora, “Historical Processes of Social Mobilization: Urbanization and Literacy, 1850–1965,” in *Building Nations and States*, ed. S. N. Eisenstadt and Stein Rokkan (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1973), 213–258; see also, François Furet and Jacques Ozouf, “Literacy and Industrialization: the case of the Département du Nord en France,” *Journal of European Economic History*, 5 (1976), 5–44; Jack Goody, “Literacy and the Non-Literate in Ghana,” in *The Future of Literacy*, 45; and Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970). For more general critiques, see Dean C. Tipps, “Modernization Theory and the Comparative Study of Societies: A Critical Perspective,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 15 (1973), 199–226; Manfred Stanley, “Social Development as a Normative Concept,” *Journal of Developing Areas*, 1 (1967), 301–316; and Robert Nisbet, *History and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969).

often in historical discussion, and when it does appear, a certain vagueness surrounds its meaning."¹⁶ Only in the past decade have systematic studies of historical literacy been seriously initiated. This development derives in part from a recognition of the role of primary education and literacy in society; that is, the factors that influence their growth, stagnation, or decay and the ways in which changing levels of literacy and education affect social change. Lawrence Stone has sketched most forcefully the relations between schooling and the influences on it. In a seminal essay, Stone identified several factors that determine the social structure of education and educational opportunities: patterns of social stratification, job opportunities, religion, theories of social control, demographic and family patterns, economic organization and resources, and political theory and institutions. General as his discussion was, it stimulated interest in and research on a largely neglected problem.¹⁷ Contemporary social research provided another impetus as historians now attempt to apply or test social theories with the evidence of historical development. A third source is the fortuitous byproduct of the recent tendencies of social historians to examine large bodies of routinely generated records, which in some cases include measures of literacy.

Literacy, despite its place in legacy and thought, was almost totally ignored in traditional historical writing. A search through histories of education or social histories is seldom rewarded by a passing reference to it.¹⁸ The topic appeared, nonetheless, in a few works. These may be grouped into three categories, interesting in themselves: studies of elites or special groups, studies in which literacy levels are deduced indirectly rather than measured, and, ironically of more value than either of the preceding, studies in which literacy remains peripheral to the main themes.

Our first category includes much of the oldest work on the subject and has included studies of medieval English kings, early Methodist preachers, upper-middle-class and aristocratic library subscribers, the laity in the Middle Ages, and individual markers, whose stylized marks do

¹⁶ "The Measurement of Literacy in Pre-Industrial England," in *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, ed. Jack Goody (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 312. For a detailed discussion, see my *Literacy in History: An Interdisciplinary Research Bibliography* (Chicago: Newberry Library, 1976; second edition, 1979).

¹⁷ "Literacy and Education in England, 1640-1900," *Past and Present*, 42 (1969), 69-139.

¹⁸ There are welcome exceptions which are signs of change, for example Lawrence Cremin's *American Education: The Colonial Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970) and some very recent surveys; they are few and far between however. Cremin, for example, typically perpetuates the myth.

not signify an inability to write or read.¹⁹ These studies' limits need not be elaborated, for tests of literacy for such samples need not be direct and generalization is almost totally prohibited. Before the 1950s, they represented the historical study of literacy.²⁰ Private surveys of the nineteenth century and government statistics were seldom noted, although contemporary writers made use of them.

The next generation of researchers matured in the 1950s. Their conceptualization of literacy was still vague; evidence was primarily literary or anecdotal but research was conducted on a wide, if ill-defined, front. Contemporary comments were taken, regardless of context, as indicators of the extent of literacy, without reference to age, sex, status, or residence.²¹ More importantly, these students cited the volume and types of current publications, and deduced from any increase in their numbers a sign of growth in rates of literacy. In some cases such a judgment may be warranted—although not, as is commonly argued, for mid-eighteenth- to early nineteenth-century England. There are in fact grave difficulties in the method and the assumptions behind it. There is no necessary relationship between the volume of production and size of audience. The number of readers per copy can not be assumed to stay constant. And changes in quantity are also influenced by factors other than rates of literacy: technological changes in printing, printers' legal status, distribution systems, and size of editions, as well as modifications in governmental fiscal policy, such as the imposition of stamp duties on periodicals.

This generation also associated the institutional history of schooling with literacy levels. Growth in facilities, regardless of kind or quality was equated, invalidly, with dramatic increases in readers. A knowledge

¹⁹ For each group, I will provide several examples only; my *Literacy in History* includes more complete listings. V. H. Galbraith, "The Literacy of the Medieval English Kings," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 21 (1935), 201-238; Paul Kaufman, *Libraries and Their Users* (London: Library Association, 1969); J. W. Thompson, *The Literacy of the Laity in the Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1939).

²⁰ The work of J. W. Adamson in English history is an exception to these generalizations, for he has drawn on widely scattered sources to discuss *The Illiterate Anglo-Saxon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1946).

²¹ See, as prime examples, R. D. Altick, *The English Common Reader* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957); Victor E. Neuberg, *Popular Education in Eighteenth Century England* (London: Woburn Press, 1971); John McLeish, *Evangelical Religion and Popular Education* (London: Methuen, 1969); Ålvar Ellegård, "The Readership of the Periodical Press in Mid-Victorian Britain," *Göteborgs Universitets Årsskrift*, 63 (Göteborg, 1957).

of such matters is certainly valuable for an understanding of the nature of the transmission of reading, writing, and other learning, but it fails to supply reliable estimates of the level of development of the skills attained. Rates and regularity of attendance were rarely examined or questioned, nor was the quality or effectiveness (of "dame" schools, for example) or the purposes of instruction (in, for example, Sunday Schools). Informal instruction was ignored, whether in the home, the church, the village, or on the streets, even though we do not know the significance of these modes of instruction.

The greatest advance made by this generation of researchers was the study of surveys produced by government investigations, and educational and statistical societies, in the nineteenth century. Robert Webb has made the best use of this material in his studies of the English and Scottish working class. But such evidence remains of restricted value because of its definitional vagueness, problems of its comparability, and the lack of systematic collection procedures when it was gathered. Nonetheless, direct evidence was examined, largely for the first time, the examination constituting an important contribution.²²

The inclusion of literacy as a topic peripheral to another subject makes for a third category of studies. This research has gone on simultaneously with the others, but more recently it has reflected the renewal of interest in direct studies of literacy. Importantly, much of this work focuses on working class history (much of it English), although demographic history increasingly places literacy among its variables. This tendency dates from the studies of the Hammonds in the early twentieth century, and has included those of E. P. Thompson, E. J. Hobsbawm, Edward Shorter, Stephan Thernstrom, Charles Tilly, Sune Akerman, and Maris Vinovskis, among many others. Literacy has been treated anecdotally, descriptively, and analytically, and important contributions have been made to the study of it. These studies inform direct inquiries of literacy and also aid in posing questions and forming hypotheses. The relationship of literacy to migration, mobility, vital rates, social structure, collective activities, and communications, for example, has been highlighted. A wide variety of sources have been exploited by these studies: aggregate and published data as well as more isolated information.

This summary marks the state of the history of literacy until the

²² Webb, "Working Class Readers in Early Victorian England," *English Historical Review*, 65 (1950), 331-351; "Literacy among the Working Class in Nineteenth Century Scotland," *Scottish Historical Review*, 32 (1954), 100-114; M. Fleury and P. Valmary, "Le progrès de l'instruction élémentaire de Louis XIV à Napoléon III," *Population*, 12 (1957), 71-92.

mid-1960s. Research begun in the past decade, much of it unpublished to date, treats literacy as the central topic for analysis (work in the third category has proliferated, too); these studies are principally in the area of systematic and quantified social history. Drawing its impetus from important trends in current historiography, this development derives from the renaissance of educational history, the use of social science techniques and the computer, the critical appraisal of social theory with retrospective data, and a willingness to confront large bodies of historical materials which contain measures of literacy.²³

Especially striking is the wide variety of sources tapped by students of literacy (see Appendix A). Illustrating a characteristic of a developing field of research, this makes for both a challenge and a central problem, for the comparability of results from records with differing measures of literacy is a matter that has yet to be resolved satisfactorily or systematically. For example, it is unclear how the ability to place a signature, the most common historical indicator of the presence of literacy, compares with reading abilities, how different levels of reading and comprehension compare with signing, or how responses to census-type questions compare with it. Consequently, most studies of literacy are forced to treat reading and writing as a dichotomous attribute: either one had both abilities or one had neither. Usually, this means that the significance of differing literacy abilities is ignored, although an attempt is made in Chapter 7 to deal with this issue. Nonetheless, problems remain, including that of joining different measures for sets of individuals in order to provide a full analysis and a more complete test of these records' reliability. Definitions of literacy are problematic, for the past as the present, although historians show great sensitivity to the issues.²⁴

This is not the place for a full assessment of these first studies. What has been achieved thus far lies, for the most part, on a descriptive plane, as a skeletal view of literacy's course over time and space is being delineated and fleshed out. Regional, sexual, and occupational variations are isolated, as are the effects of events, such as the French Revolution, or processes, such as the Industrial Revolution. Research in this mode has commenced in a small number of areas, principally literacy in

²³ See also my "The 'New Math': Quantification, the 'New' History, and the History of Education," *Urban Education*, 11 (1977), 403-440.

²⁴ See, however, Schofield, "The Measurement of Literacy"; Lockridge, *Literacy in Colonial New England*; my "Notes for Studying Literacy from the Manuscript Census," *Historical Methods Newsletter*, 5 (1971), 11-16, "What the 1861 Census can tell us about Literacy," *Histoire Sociale*, 8 (1975), 337-349, summarized in Appendix B.

England,²⁵ France,²⁶ Sweden,²⁷ the United States,²⁸ and Canada.²⁹ Concentrating on the period from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, this work draws on available sources and seeks to illuminate the modern rise of literacy—"the literacy transition," as it has been called. The beginning of the course of literacy's dissemination among various social groups in these places is now outlined. Present and future efforts aim to complete the time series, to expand the coverage, and to attempt explanation for these changes and their significance.

Important findings have resulted from this as yet early research. In addition to the establishment of time series and group differentials,

²⁵ Stone, "Literacy and Education"; Schofield, "Dimensions of Illiteracy, 1750-1850," *Explorations in Economic History*, 10 (1973), 437-454; Michael Sanderson, "Literacy and Social Mobility in the Industrial Revolution in England," *Past and Present*, 56 (1972), 75-104; V. A. Hatley, "Literacy at Northampton, 1761-1900," *Northampton Past and Present*, 4 (1966), 379-381; W. P. Baker, *Parish Registers and Illiteracy in East Yorkshire* (York, 1961); D. A. Cressy, "Education and Literacy in London and East Anglia, 1580-1700," unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1972, "Literacy in pre-industrial England," *Societas*, 4 (1974), 229-240, "Levels of Literacy in England, 1530-1730," *Historical Journal*, 20 (1977), 1-23, "Literacy in Seventeenth-Century England," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 8 (1977), 141-150; Richard T. Vann, "Literacy in Seventeenth Century England: Some Hearth-Tax Evidence," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 5 (1974), 287-293; various notes in *Local Population Studies*; T. W. Laqueur, "The Cultural Origins of Popular Literacy in England, 1500-1800," *Oxford Review of Education*, 2 (1976), 255-275.

²⁶ François Furet and Jacques Ozouf, *Lire et Écrire* (Paris: Les éditions de Minuit, 1977), summarizes earlier studies; Michel Demonce, Paul Dumont, and Emmanuel le Roy Ladurie, "Analyse factorielle des recensements militaires de 1819-1830," *Historical Methods Newsletter*, 7 (1974), 147-160; the work of Jean Meyer, Michel Vovelle, Alain Corbin, Michel Fournaux, Jacques Houdaille, etc.

²⁷ Egil Johansson, ed., *Literacy and Society in a Historical Perspective: A Conference Report* (Umeå, Sweden: Umeå University, 1973), *En Studie Med Kvantitativa Metoder av Folkundervisningen I Bygdeå Socken, 1845-1873* (Umeå: Umeå University, 1972), *The History of Literacy in Sweden* (Umeå: Department of Education, 1977).

²⁸ Lockridge, *Literacy in Colonial New England*, "L'alphabetisation en Amérique," *Annales: e,s,c*, 32 (1977), 503-518; Cremin, *American Education*; Alan Tully, "Literacy Levels and Educational Development in Rural Pennsylvania, 1729-1775," *Pennsylvania History*, 39 (1972), 301-312; Lee Soltow and Edward Stevens, "Economic Aspects of School Participation," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 8 (1977), 221-244, and their forthcoming book.

²⁹ Graff, "What the 1861 Census," "Towards a Meaning of Literacy: Literacy and Social Structure in Hamilton, Ontario," *History of Education Quarterly*, 12 (1972), 411-431, "Literacy and Social Structure in Elgin County, Canada West, 1861," *Histoire sociale*, 6 (1973), 25-48, "Approaches in the Historical Study of Literacy," *Urban History Review*, 1 (1972), 6-11; the unpublished work of Lee Soltow.

conclusions stress the dynamic role of religion, especially Protestantism, in the spread of literacy, the significance of population concentration and distance from schools, and the role of social stratification and inequality. The French Revolution is sometimes seen as having been a stimulus to literacy, whereas the Industrial and urban revolutions are not. The assumed links between education, on the one hand, and industrialization, modernization, and urbanization, on the other, are questioned, but it is agreed that literacy does make economic contributions to the individual and society. Rates of fertility and mortality influence levels of literacy, and vice versa. Overall, variability marks the pace of literacy's growth both within and among nations throughout the west.

The importance of these beginnings is clear, their relevance to both historical analysis and social theory undoubted. However, research is far from complete, the implications of findings are not always precise and certain, and controversy rises rather than abates. Many agree that an important reevaluation has begun, yet we are far from new syntheses and reinterpretations: This is the intellectual context to which the present work seeks to contribute.

Concomitant with this research, moreover, has come the realization that the contexts of literacy, the needs for and uses of it, are far more interesting and important than the raw series of data on changes over time. Literacy requirements, we now understand, vary among different social and economic groups, regions, and communities. What is equally significant, we see that levels of literacy do not always relate to demands for them and that literacy can be in some cases nonfunctional. It is these differences in achieved literacy and the need for or use of literacy that historians must now explain. Thus, measures of literacy must be comparative; and a focus on individuals rather than on trends in gross rates best allows these questions to be confronted. The research conducted thus far represents only a beginning.

Peter Laslett states well what needs to be done: "The discovery of how great a proportion of the population could read and write at any one point in time is one of the most urgent of the tasks which face the historian of social structure, who is committed to the use of numerical methods. But the challenge is not simply to find the evidence and to devise ways of making it yield reliable answers. It is a challenge to the historical and literary imagination."³⁰ To meet the challenge, students must move beyond the numerical data, a prodigious task in itself. To consider any of the ways in which literacy intersects with social, political, economic, cultural, or psychological life (as it is held to do) requires

³⁰ *The World We Have Lost* (London: Methuen, 1971), 207.

excursions into other records. Aggregative statistics, for example, are useful,³¹ and traditional historical sources offer opinion on the value attributed to literacy and on the uses to which it may be put. We note also the value of literary sources and the continuing usefulness of literary approaches, despite the complications noted above. Rather than debate the contribution of each approach, as Neuberg unfortunately does,³² we are better served by a marriage of approaches, combining sources and methods toward a more complete analysis of literacy. To list the materials which would inform the questions is pointless, but their importance should be obvious. Quantitative materials yield only a certain return, no matter how cleverly they are exploited. The parameters of literacy's relationships are too broad, and questions of motivation, perception, institutions, and culture are not always amenable to numerical inquiry. The quality of individual literacy, finally, can be directly derived only from rare sources—for example, the Swedish catechetical examinations. In studying other societies this remains perhaps the most difficult problem.³³

IV

In the chapters which follow, I offer the results of my own foray into aspects of literacy's past. The basis of my approach is quantitative, and is supplemented by a number of other sources; I have drawn upon a wide range of numerical materials in order to examine literacy's place in a variety of the spheres of social life. The time is the mid-nineteenth century; the focus is on the city; and the society is most often that of North America, with Ontario (called Upper Canada or Canada West in much of the period) as the empirical center. Comparative perspectives complement this concentration. Not only are these cities—Hamilton, London, and Kingston—typical examples of nineteenth-century urban development, but excellent literacy data for their residents have survived as well.

Part One focuses upon these cities and their populations; it presents a systematic exposition of the place of illiterate and literate adults and

³¹ See, for example, Fleury and Valmary, "Le progrès"; Cipolla, *Literacy and Development*.

³² Neuberg, *Popular Education*, 96-98.

³³ The brilliant essay by Daniel Calhoun, *The Intelligence of a People* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), however, shows how a wide variety of materials can be employed to provide some statements about the quality of literacy.

their families. Literacy's social correlates—its significance for social placement and stratification and its relationship to other structural factors—integrate the analysis.

Hamilton, Kingston, and London were relatively small commercial cities, in many ways typical of nineteenth-century patterns of growth and development. The population of each was growing, although Kingston, the oldest, declined in relative importance throughout the century, mainly as a result of its geographic position between the metropolises of Toronto and Montreal and its failure to gain the capital and administrative functions of Upper Canada. Each city was an immigrant reception center; most adult residents were born in the British Isles. London, the farthest west and the youngest, had the most mixed population: the fewest Irish and the most United States-born. Commercially based, each city was to a large extent a market center, dependent on an agricultural hinterland. This was most important to the local economy of London. Hamilton, however, was the most economically advanced in commerce, trade, finance, and protoindustrialization. It was also the largest, as it would remain; and it was the first to industrialize, in the 1870s and 1880s. All three cities, moreover, were important transshipment centers: Hamilton and Kingston were ports, on Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River, respectively, and London became the center of the shipping and commerce in southwestern Ontario. Hamilton and London advanced with the coming of the railway in the 1850s and 1860s, both prospering throughout the sixties, as Kingston continued its decline in economic importance and remained relatively stagnant. Nevertheless the same forces shaped each city—working in differing circumstances and degrees, of course—but the three cities provide a valid basis for comparative studies of literacy.

Part Two expands the focus, taking up selected problems related to the social roles of literacy: crime, work, and the quality of literacy. Important matters to contemporaries, these topics merit critical reexamination. These topics of course do not compose an exhaustive list of matters of importance.

The argument elaborated in these chapters takes a critical stance. I will challenge the usual historical interpretations of literacy and illiteracy and raise questions about normative social theory and social thought regarding literacy, popular education, and the literacy myth. In so doing, I will urge that literacy, in the past and, by implication, in the present, can not be understood until new perspectives are developed and outmoded conceptualizations rejected. The data and their interpretation allow of no other consistent conclusion.

My emphasis in these inquiries centers on neither the rates of liter-

acy, their changes over time, nor on regional variations, although these are all discussed. The focus, instead, is on individual men and women in society and the meanings of literacy to them. The study of literacy, I urge, is important not only in and for itself; it also illuminates the dynamics of society and provides penetrating insights into how its processes functioned—for example, in stratification, in mobility, or in family adjustment. Literacy study therefore constitutes a valuable mode of analysis for students of society. Moreover, it forms one way of confronting directly the literacy myth, the value assigned to literacy, and its place in social theory. It enables us to examine critically the legacy of literacy's centrality in social and economic life and its relationship with institutional responses such as the public school, productivity, criminality, and the like. The findings, we will see, contradict much of our received wisdom and expectations, with respect to social ascription and its relationship to achievement, mobility, economic development, social order, and broader cultural themes.

Literacy did carry certain benefits to those who possessed it, although its possession often signified attributes other than the abilities of reading and writing. The social and cultural hegemonic functions of schooling were closely tied to the carefully designed transmission of literacy and to the transformation of society. Literacy was both act and symbol; it was neither neutral, unambiguous, nor radically advantageous or liberating. Its value, in fact, depended heavily on other factors, from ascribed social characteristics such as ethnicity, sex, or race, to the institutional, social, economic, and cultural contexts in which it was manifest. The role of literacy in the life of individual and society is contradictory and complex.

The society examined here is a literate society, with rates of literacy in excess of 90%, but literacy—a phenomenon suggestive of equality—contributed regularly as an element of the structure of inequality, reinforcing the steep ridges of stratification, and also as a force for order and integration. It also served as a symbolic focus of other forces of inequality: ethnicity, class, sex, and age. Literacy, then, did not universally serve to benefit all who had attained it, but neither did it disadvantage all those who had not. Tensions and discontinuities of social contradictions emanated from the varied demands for and uses of literacy, its unequal social distribution, and the divergent realities which accompanied its roles. Perceptions, and expectations, could differ greatly from those realities, and they differed among the classes and cultures within the society as well. These contradictions need to be confronted, their relative contribution to literacy's myth and reality evaluated.