

## Preface

In the fall of 1975, newspaper and news broadcasts announced that “one in five U.S. adults lacks skills to cope in life.” A substantial number of schooled adult citizens and workers, an Office of Education study reported, were deficient in the basic educational skills required to function competently in job, marketplace, community, and personal affairs. In addition to these underprepared 35 million, an additional 39 million were considered “functional, but not proficient.”<sup>1</sup>

In the fall of 1977, the U.S. Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, Joseph Califano, announced that the federal government, in recognition of continuing evidence of surprisingly high levels of functional illiteracy and recent declines in basic skill levels of students, was beginning a broad investigation. In addition to asking why those examined failed to perform well on tests of basic literacy skills, he dedicated the federal government to breaking with traditions of local educational initiative, and to helping to develop plans for improving basic skills.<sup>2</sup> Six months later, an educational supplement to the *New York Times* added to this repeated identification of the literacy problem, pointing to frustrations of life for the illiterate as well as to the common theme of continuing failures in the national educational system’s efforts toward a universal, useful literacy.<sup>3</sup> Simultaneously, and significantly, the U.S. Postal Service issued a new stamp. Bordered around the display of quill pen and ink well, the message proclaimed: “The ability to write. The root of democracy.”

These are only samples of recent commentary that has become com-

<sup>1</sup> *Dallas Times Herald*, 12 October 1975.

<sup>2</sup> *Dallas Times Herald*, 25 October 1977.

<sup>3</sup> Spring Survey of Education, 30 April 1978.

monplace. The recent bombardment of woeful tales of literacy decline, drops in Scholastic Aptitude Test scores, low levels of preparation for fulfilling and productive lives, and illiterate high school graduates can too easily obscure the significance that lies behind these familiar words. A deeper meaning, the importance of which transcends the present moment and its discontents, must not be lost. I point to the value that our society, and our western tradition, places on primary schooling and literacy, and the high expectations we attach to them. It is precisely this value that lurks behind the fears so often expressed today, the roots of which lie in a legacy firmly and unquestioningly carried forth from previous times. Contemporary discussions about literacy, basic skills, and mass schooling are hardly unique; to anyone knowledgeable in the history of western social thought, education, or literacy, they ring out with familiarity. They are at once reflective and derivative of ideas and assumptions rooted especially in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, but also in the Reformation and Counter-Reformation of the sixteenth century. These are ideals that permeate the trans-Atlantic western cultural heritage and influence social thought broadly and deeply: in our assumptions and theories of society, economy, culture, religion, as well as education. Indeed, their commonplaceness and ordinariness, I fear, have reduced their significance to many.

There can be no doubt about the place of literacy in this key complex of notions that influences our thought, understanding, and behavior. For at least several centuries, the acceptance of the primacy of print and the abilities to read and reproduce it has advanced to universality, with an instructive degree of consensus. While the uses of literacy are still debated, its basic value is not.<sup>4</sup> Although interpretations of the story can violently differ, its outlines are standard: The rise of literacy and its promulgation through different agencies of schooling is associated firstly with a positive evaluation of mass access to the tools of reading and writing. It is seen as one of many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century social reforms that sought the improvement of society and the human condition within it. Overwhelmingly, to be literate and to spread literacy were considered more and more important; all opposition was branded reactionary and overcome (in theory if not in fact). Literacy, it was held, carried benefits to individuals as well as to societies, nations, and states. Ambiguities and contradictions are minor, especially when

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Léon Bataille, ed., *A Turning Point for Literacy: Adult Education for Development* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1976); Robert Disch, ed., *The Future of Literacy* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1973). For full bibliographic information on much of what follows, see my *Literacy in History: An Interdisciplinary Research Bibliography* (Chicago: The Newberry Library, 1976, 2nd ed., 1979).

viewed in terms of the association of mass schooling with progress and enlightenment in all spheres of life and development. Value to the community, self- and socioeconomic worth, mobility, access to information and knowledge, rationality, morality, and orderliness are among the many qualities linked to literacy for individuals.<sup>5</sup> Literacy, in other words, was one critical component of the individual's road to progress. Analogously, these attributes were deeply significant to the larger society in which the educated man or woman resided and to which he or she contributed. From productivity to participation, schooled workers and citizens were required if the best path to the future and its fulfillment were to be followed.

Literacy, thus granted its valuable role in the process of individual and societal progress, itself became identified with that process and its success, acquiring a cultural endorsement that it easily maintains. This of course is highly simplified and too schematic, as the pages that follow will illustrate; nonetheless, at least an awareness of the broadest context in which an understanding of literacy must be placed and an awareness of the implications of the history of literacy for the present are required for this work to be fully assimilated. The story is not a simple one, as we shall shortly observe.<sup>6</sup>

Most accounts that relate to literacy's history fall well within the usual context. The rise of literacy and its dissemination to the popular classes is associated with the triumph of light over darkness, of liberalism, democracy, and of universal unbridled progress. In social thought, therefore, these elements relate to ideas of linear evolution and progression; literacy here takes its place among the other successes of modernity and rationality.<sup>7</sup> In theory and in empirical investigation, literacy is conceptualized—often in stark and simple fashion—as an important part of the larger parcel of factors that account for the evolution of modern societies and states. The centrality of literacy is found in its expected

<sup>5</sup> See, Introduction, below, as well as the examples provided by Alex Inkeles and David H. Smith, *Becoming Modern* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974).

<sup>6</sup> I plan to develop these points more completely and at greater length in a forthcoming volume on the theme, "literacy in history," an interpretative essay on the place of literacy in modern western history. For a partial excursion into some of these relationships, see my "Literacy Past and Present: Critical Approaches in the Literacy-Society Relationship," *Interchange* 9 (1978), 1-21.

<sup>7</sup> See, as one example, Robert Nisbet's important *Social Change and History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969).

<sup>8</sup> For two representative and illustrative cases, see Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957); Daniel Lerner, "Towards a Communication Theory of Modernization," in *Communication and Political Development*, ed. Lucian W. Pye (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), among his many works.

place in historical works as well as sociological ones.<sup>8</sup> Whether it is assigned a role as cause or consequence, independent or dependent function, its value is seldom doubted. Primary schooling and literacy are necessary, it is so often repeated, for economic and social development, establishment and maintenance of democratic institutions, individual advancement, and so on. All this, regardless of its veracity, has come to constitute a "literacy myth."

The sanctity of this traditional and normative interpretation of the modern history of the western world is no longer as secure as once thought.<sup>9</sup> Nor, as this study and other recent works reveal, is the analysis of the role of literacy within the larger complex that comprises social development, any more secure. Modern historical scholarship, along with related research in other social sciences, is now in the midst of a challenging period of reevaluation and revision. This volume seeks to contribute to several aspects of this larger intellectual movement. Consequently, this study of literacy and its social correlates in the nineteenth century commences from a critical and revisionist stance. The data that I have gathered, analyzed, and interpreted do not fit easily within traditional thinking about literacy, nor do they correspond with previous ideas about the course of social development or the operation of social processes. The examination of a variety of factors central to those components of society will make this clear. The importance of these findings is relevant to those of us who seek to comprehend our contemporary world in its relationship to its past. It is for these reasons that I wish to make my own orientation clear.

I began this research with some reservations about certain aspects of this "received wisdom," and with a great many questions about literacy: its distribution, transmission, social and economic significance, relative values to different levels of social aggregation and to different layers within the social order, and its meaning and utility. I did not find myself persuaded by the small amount of previous scholarship that pertained directly to my questions. In particular, I was troubled by the dependence of earlier inquiries on informal and anecdotal approaches to the issues represented by literacy and to the very nature of literacy itself. Equally problematic were the regular appearance of the normative and progressive assumptions. Influenced certainly by Lawrence

<sup>8</sup> Among a large and growing critical literature, see Ian Weinberg, "The Problem of the Convergence of Industrial Societies," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 11 (1969), 1-15; Dean C. Tipps, "Modernization and the Comparative Study of Societies," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 15 (1973), 199-226; Ali A. Mazrui, "From Social Darwinism to Current Theories of Modernization," *World Politics*, 21 (1968), 69-83; Nisbet, *Social Change*.

Stone's seminal review of English literacy and by Roger Schofield's major statistical study (which continues today),<sup>10</sup> I was convinced of the need to develop an explicitly empirical and numerical approach to literacy in order even to attempt to resolve the kinds of questions I found most important. This was my purpose in developing the data upon which much of this study rests: manuscript censuses, tax assessment rolls, employment contracts, jail registers. It is essential to note that literacy is both a quantitative and a qualitative attribute, one whose measurement continues to raise countless difficulties; nonetheless, it is equally apparent that a great many of the important issues can only be approached numerically. Moreover, my studies have led me to conclude that qualitative questions, which may be ultimately of greater consequence, may only be tackled from a solid empirical basis. Other recent research has only made my conviction firmer.<sup>11</sup>

To illustrate my intentions, a preview of what follows will serve well; let us turn to the structure of the book. Following a brief introduction, which sets this study in the context of earlier researches into historical and contemporary literacy and which reviews their deficiencies, we shall evaluate the nineteenth-century consensus on the significance and provision of primary schooling. The focus will be, as in much of what follows, on persons and processes in mid-nineteenth-century Ontario, Canada. Here, as wherever possible, comparative material will be used to supplement and support the principal findings and arguments, extending the explicit comparative thrust and establishing a framework for future comparative explorations. In considering the framing of a "moral basis of literacy" and the progress of a "literacy myth," contemporary expectations and institutional mechanisms for literacy provision are laid bare for detailed questioning of the social realities that accompany this rhetoric.

The chapters of Part One, "Literacy and Social Structure," therefore examine the lives and livelihoods of illiterate and literate men and women in three cities, Hamilton, London, and Kingston, in comparative study. Their experiences in work, wealth, migrations, mobility, and family patterns form the core of this section. The conclusions, which require the qualification of conventional understanding and normative, progres-

<sup>10</sup> Stone, "Literacy and Education in England, 1640-1900," *Past and Present*, 42 (1969), 61-139; Schofield, "Dimensions of Illiteracy, 1750-1850," *Explorations in Economic History*, 10 (1973), 437-454.

<sup>11</sup> Especially, Kenneth A. Lockridge, *Literacy in Colonial New England* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974); François Furet and Jacques Ozouf, *Lire et écrire: l'alphabétisation des français de Calvin à Jules Ferry* (Paris: les éditions de Minuit, 1977); Lee Soltow and Edward Stevens, "Literacy and the Rise of the Common School," unpublished manuscript, 1977.

sive social thought, reveal a reality much more complex than one might expect. In the first place, a number of discontinuities and contradictions are apparent, showing the role of literacy to be much less direct and clear-cut than typically thought. Moreover, systematic patterns of inequality and stratification—by origins, class, sex, race, and age—were deep and pervasive, and relatively unaltered by the influence of literacy. The social hierarchy, we will see, even by mid-century in modernizing urban areas, was ordered more by the dominance of social ascription than by the acquisition of new, achieved characteristics.

The promise of education, and the rhetoric of school promoters, so strong since the end of the eighteenth century, is contradicted by the experiences of these common men and women. In many ways, traditional structural factors remained dominant, as indeed we now find increasing amounts of recent evidence suggesting that these patterns have yet to be universally reversed.<sup>12</sup> The story is even more interesting, for the data also question other traditional historical stereotypes and relate to other elements of social thought. For example, despite common notions that many immigrants to North America were the dregs of their societies of origin and were rooted in cultures of poverty, we shall see that their levels of literacy were well above average for those places and that they were calculating individuals, able to use their resources and traditions for adaptation, survival, and sometimes for advantage in new, alien environments. Finally, there are important indications that by the second third of the nineteenth century, the society had not developed to the stage at which literacy was a requirement for social and economic advancement or for the intergenerational mobility of children. After the evidence is presented and interpreted, the implications of these patterns will be considered in the conclusion.

Part Two of the study, "Literacy and Society," leaves these urban residents to continue several important themes in the relationships among literacy, development, order, discrimination, and the uses of literacy in the same period. Centering on the Ontario experience, supplemented again with other North American and Western European evidence, literacy's role in work and economic development will first be examined. A case is made for questioning traditional assumptions, as the argument suggests that the connections joining industrialization, eco-

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Ivar Berg, *Education and Jobs* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971); Christopher Jencks *et al*, *Inequality* (New York: Basic Books, 1972); Raymond Boudon, *Education, Opportunity, and Social Inequality* (New York: John Wiley, 1974); Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1977). This is of course a highly controversial area.

conomic progress, and literacy are hardly as direct as most discussions imply. Theories and investigations supportive of these views, we shall discover, hold little systematic evidence when examined carefully. Once more, the need for reconsideration and revision should be apparent.

A further chapter inquires into the relations tying illiteracy to criminality, another firm element in our "received wisdom" and literacy myth. Close textual analysis and a re-analysis of a nineteenth-century gaol register indicate that these typical causal patterns may be less than conclusive. Reiterating themes from Part One, we shall see the influence of social hierarchy and the pervasiveness of structural inequality both counteracting and simultaneously reinforcing the roles of literacy and illiteracy. The possibility and the potential utility of alternative formulations will be indicated, as these chapters amplify the themes and conclusions of the earlier analysis.

A final chapter attempts to confront systematically, for the first time, questions of the qualitative nature of literacy at that time. A topic obviously much less amenable to numerical treatment for the past than the other themes, this part of the inquiry adopts a different strategy. When taken together, a variety of indirect indicators, from observers' and proselytizers' remarks to methods of reading instruction, point to significant patterns in abilities and in the uses to which those abilities were put. For example, we find indications that accompanying the high levels of literacy prevalent in this society were lesser degrees of qualitative skills and probably relatively low levels of use. Literacy abilities, I suggest, while broadly disseminated and quite probably sufficient<sup>2</sup> for many everyday needs, were less than that required for other needs.

Through the series of interrelated examinations that comprise the substance of this book and the elaboration of these arguments, I attempt to illustrate both the significance of the study of literacy and the necessity for rethinking and reinterpretation. While I shall neither belabor the relevance of this research for better comprehension of contemporary events, nor reduce the integrity of the past to suit the present, I do not wish to ignore these implications either. I shall return to this in my conclusions. To summarize, then, the study that follows offers a contribution to comparative urban and social history, the history of education and schooling, and to social theory. By revealing problems in traditional formulations along with the discontinuities, contradictions, and complexity of the subject matter itself, I hope to place literacy and the literacy myth in a new perspective. Literacy, in its social context, is neither simple, direct, nor unambiguous; the ways in which it relates to social processes and social structures reveals its significance alone. That, as we shall see, is only one part of the story.