

Approaches in the Historical Study of Literacy

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Approaches in the Historical Study of Literacy*

The nineteenth-century city, and most especially the Canadian city, provides a rich arena for quantitative studies of literacy. The key is the availability of sources for such a project - for the manuscript census remains the best starting-point for the systematic study of literacy. Researchers who have used these schedules have ignored the literacy data, often dismissing it without consideration. This has resulted in a lost dimension in their work for these schedules provide the easiest, most direct, and perhaps the best information on the problem. The manuscript census furnishes the researcher with a relatively complete and unbiased roster of the people of a given geographical region, differentiating between those who could and could not read or write. Secondly, it provides a tremendous amount of direct information - demographic and economic - on each head of household as well as the rest of the members. It also serves as a standard measurement, as the same question was asked of each respondent. These schedules are useful for the United States from 1840 and for Canada from 1861, while the Canadian urban census of 1851 permits analysis on the basis of signatures for heads of households.

Special note should be made of the particular utility of the Canadian urban censuses of 1851 and 1861. Both manuscripts were gathered through direct distribution of the schedules to each household. This means that each head of household or his agent (especially in the case of the illiterate) was required to complete the schedule, rather than the more common enumerative process used in the United States, Great Britain, later Canadian censuses, and in rural Canada at this time. Unfortunately, literacy data was collected only on the 1861 census, while one may analyze the literacy of the heads of household in 1851 by assuming that those who could sign their name could read as well, as reading was commonly taught or learned before instruction in writing skills. The Canadian urban census of 1861 becomes in many ways the most propitious document for the systematic study of literacy as it records the answer of an individual to the question of whether or not he or she could read or write. In fact, a check on a random

sample of those whose illiteracy had been recorded showed that the great majority (48 of 50) had marked their schedules with an "X" and that the form had been counter-signed by another, presumably the person who had physically completed the schedule, thus reducing the margin for evasion. The other two were unsigned. As well, there is evidence that social stigma was not a vital factor against the admission of illiteracy.

In my attempts to place the importance of the study of literacy in the context of nineteenth-century society, it has seemed advantageous to consider the question in anthropological or, more precisely, ethnographic terms. The problem lies in ascertaining what difference it meant to be literate or illiterate in everyday life. In a sense, the true role of the social and cultural historian is one of an historical ethnographer, reconstructing the day-to-day existence of the ordinary people of the past.

One of my current working-hypotheses serves well as an example of what this means. Much of the data may be viewed as indicating a paradox. In Ontario in 1861, the society was overwhelmingly literate, over 90 per cent, as evidenced in the census returns. In fact, the rural county, Elgin, that I have examined was 97 per cent literate while Hamilton was 91 per cent. The question then becomes, was this a functionally literate society? Some men, in both the urban and the rural areas, were capable of making large fortunes without the possession of literacy skills. In Hamilton, for example, 20.8 per cent of the illiterates fell into the 40-60 percentiles on a scale of economic rank and 13 per cent were above that range. The rural situation is even more striking. The occupational dimensioning and apparent economic holdings of the illiterate few in Elgin County do not differ substantially from the remainder of the population.

Illiterates, especially in urban Hamilton, were often poorer than the rest of the population and this would relate to educational opportunities. But, if the society was not functionally literate, the advantages accrued from formal education must rest more with the

disciplinary and control factors distilled through the school than with the skills of reading and writing as positive factors in and for themselves.

Now what sort of questions must we deal with to prove the paradox? One must look at the structure of occupations to determine what skills were required: did a carpenter or a tailor need to read? Of what use were literacy skills to those who were not engaged in professional or clerical positions? How did religion and the force of the churches provide a stimulus toward learning to read and write, and was this a material or symbolic force? Did taking a newspaper make one functionally literate? Was advertising, mercantile or political, disseminated through the printed word or by symbol, design, and color? How many individuals were affected by contracts and bills of trade? How important was it to be able to sign one's name and how often was one required to do so? In what context did mentions of reading or writing appear in traveller's accounts, diaries, popular works? How did the hierarchy of literacy skills and their uses differ from the countryside to the city? To answer such questions and many more is to place literacy in its cultural milieu and to understand its importance in the daily workings of the society.

Briefly, let us consider the parameters of the relationships to be found between literacy and the social structure. Lawrence Stone has offered the best general explication of the relevant variables, but rather than taking them in general terms, let us examine some of the relationships my research has uncovered, stressing the comparison between rural and urban Ontario. It seems that in well-settled areas, the mid-century city may be expected to have a lower literacy rate, by five to ten per cent, due to the differing immigration and economic patterns. Urban illiterates would seem to fare less well economically, pointing toward a dissimilar relationship among literacy, wealth, and stratification in the countryside. High ranking exceptional individuals are important in both areas; some need not be plagued with illiteracy as a roadblock to economic success. In both urban and rural Ontario, the illiterate population compared well

with the rest of the populace on indices such as type of dwelling occupied and number of families to a house - rural illiterates corresponded more closely.

Demographically, the rural illiterate differed startlingly from the urban. The sex ratio was much closer, relating both to regional educational and economic differences and pointing to a greater unity of educational experience for the sexes in rural Southern Ontario. The mean number of children is smaller - by a large degree - in both areas, indicating that family limitation may have been practiced by illiterate-membered couples. However, correlation between family size and wealth is contradicted by the rural evidence, as higher ranking illiterate heads of households often had fewer children as listed on the census. But, the census only provides us with the number of children resident when the survey was conducted and not the completed family size. Illiteracy, too, is related directly to age and thus the spread of elementary education.

Geographically, rural illiterates were well-mixed throughout the county, present in most districts and only concentrated in a few. Those in the urban area were slightly more concentrated, especially in Hamilton's Irish districts. The Irish and Catholics comprised a large majority of the urban illiterates, while a finer mixture is found in the countryside due to differing immigration patterns.

A final factor would be that of the school attendance of the children of illiterates and this differed significantly from Hamilton to Elgin County. In the county, education was generally more available and more illiterate parents seized this opportunity for their children, even in areas of concentrated illiteracy. This points to, perhaps, the most significant of the variations between the city and the county - the number of illiterates. Elgin had six hundred fewer, in a population 50 per cent larger, in an economy which probably demanded less familiarity with such skills. In this way the allocation of the abilities to read and write could relate less to economic needs than to social stratification, allocation of resources, and immigration.

Thus, the illiterates of rural Ontario would seem to resemble more closely the rest of the county's residents than did those of the city, even as exceptions to social processes which allocated some form of education to a majority of their cohorts.

Finally, to make sense of our studies, we must discern what it meant to be literate or illiterate. This remains the most difficult task, for the other social sciences have given us little aid. Some clues exist, though. It has been suggested that high levels of literacy have resulted in anomie, psychic rootlessness, basic changes in human and cultural traditions, as well as the rise of logical thought and modern mass media. Literate society has wrought the creation of a new means of communication between men, extending the range of intercourse over time and space. As well, writing has been seen to provide an alternative source for cultural transmission which favors an awareness of inconsistencies, resulting in a sense of change and of cultural-lag - for reading and writing are infinitely more abstract activities than those of speaking and hearing.

Fine resources await the historical study of literacy for the nineteenth-century Canadian city. What to do with this information remains our concern. Perhaps the marriage of the quantitative and the ethnographic approaches will produce the much needed insight into the social processes in which the city developed and in which people lived and worked.

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- * This note is abstracted from "Approaches and Problems in the Historical Study of Literacy" presented at the Little Community Conference, Brandeis University, June, 1972, and is drawn from my ongoing study of "Literacy and Social Structure in the Nineteenth-Century City". Studies of Hamilton and Elgin County, Ontario, based on the 1861 manuscript census have been completed thus far. Case studies of Kingston, London, and Russell County, Ontario using the 1861 and 1871 censuses, assessment rolls, and wills are planned.

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