

Shining a Light on the Edge of the North Atlantic: Past and present

by Helen Woodrow and Bill Fagan

■ Before the invention of schooling, at a time when most people were book starved and belly hungry, many immigrants travelled to the “New found land.” Most carried few possessions, but they packed trunk loads of beliefs and hopes. Some had experienced injustice in their homeland and they imagined the possibilities for a just and prosperous future in the fishing colony.

In 1830, five fishermen who settled at Stone Island were charged for erecting fishing stages near their homes. An English mercantile firm saw it as an infringement on their access to the resource. The arguments presented by one of the accused, Edward Keough, probably reflected the ways we use literacy to protect community. Edward could not alter how the court viewed the power of the elite. The stages did remain, however, as the future of the settlement depended on the production of salt fish. Keough became known as the “Professor at Stone Island,” even though he never taught. His belief in the importance of learning was his legacy to the generations to follow.

In 1909, the Fisherman’s Protective Union (FPU), inspired by the leadership of William Coaker, held its founding convention (see McDonald). The FPU called for free and compulsory education for children, and non-denominational schools for the colony’s small outposts. At that time, schools were church controlled and it wasn’t until the closing years of the century that the government sought to implement such reforms. The FPU also advocated for the development of a night-school system for adults.

In 1931, one of the first organized efforts to help adults address their learning needs was developed by the Newfoundland Adult Education Association (NAEA). The NAEA was formed on October 31, 1929 during the visit of Alfred Mansbridge, the President of the World Association for Adult Education. The membership of the new organization consisted of senior educational officials and their spouses from the Department of Education, the school boards, officials of Memorial University College, and other local educators.

Unlike the FPU reformers, the NAEA was an urban, professional organization led by representatives of a privileged class. The NAEA implemented a model for adult education called Opportunity Schools, designed by American Wil Lou Gray of South Carolina. In Newfoundland, the Opportunity Schools offered

literacy and other classes for adults at a number of locations throughout the island. Statistics available from March 1932 (not long before the end of democratic government in the Dominion of Newfoundland) and June 1935, indicate that 68 schools operated in 40 different communities. Over 2,700 people participated through night classes and study groups.

One year after the Opportunity School program began, the NAEA faced serious problems. An article prepared by William Blackall for the *Newfoundland Quarterly* ended with a familiar refrain: “I shall be very thankful if some reader of this Magazine who is in a position to do so, will help the Newfoundland Adult Education Association by making a contribution of Two thousand Dollars, or a considerable portion thereof, as we are sorely in need of funds.” From the perspective of the present, one might ask if adult literacy educators are the masters of the “appeal” genre.

By 1936, the Commission of Government’s Department of Home Affairs and Education had created a division of adult education. The former president of the NAEA, Vincent Burke, was now the director of adult education. The division assumed responsibility for the Opportunity Schools and 33 schools offered various adult classes that year. In 1948, the year prior to Confederation with Canada, 98 schools were operating.

Teacher Sara Coady attracted 31 pupils to the school on Fogo Island in 1936 (see Luedee). Like Zephilia Horton of the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, Coady used music to make the vital link between culture and learning. The division of adult education would also attract an employee who was the first person to receive a doctorate in adult education in British North America. Florence or Florrie O’Neill of Witless Bay had taught miners on Bell Island in 1928 at the request of the Dominion Steel and Coal Company. The work on Bell Island might be one of the first examples of industrial workplace literacy in the province. However, it was O’Neill’s time working with school-aged children during the Depression, and her thoughts on what we now call family literacy, that led her to commit to adult education.

Under O’Neill’s administration, housewives, laundresses and flotation workers at the Buchans Night School wrote articles for *Further Education*. Adult education teachers worked with loggers at

12½ Camp at Millertown and Whalen's Camp at Bishop's Falls. On Bell Island it was reported that one student who was called upon to work an evening shift paid a man to work in his place so he could attend night school.

O'Neill echoed Stamp's belief that the purpose of adult education was threefold: to help people earn a living; to help people live a life; and to help people mould the world (Stamp, in Selman). She also called for changes in the denominational education system. Like Coaker, O'Neill wasn't against religion; she just wanted people, particularly those living in rural Newfoundland, to have a better education system. Why have three denominational schools in a community, for example, when one school could provide much better service to all pupils? Her doctoral thesis envisioned a structure for community adult education that responded to more than individual learning needs. O'Neill's adult education plan was never implemented by the department (see McManus).

Can we truly understand O'Neill without considering the context in which she worked? She was a well-educated woman, forthright and assertive. At the time, only single women could be employed in government, and O'Neill worked in a sea of men. She fought many battles for her staff and this made her male superiors a little annoyed. At that time, for example, division staff included film projectionists, who were generally male and received a better salary than teachers, who were mainly female. Projectionists also received travel allowances, while teachers paid their own expenses. Teachers who boarded in Corner Brook and taught at the tuberculosis hospital were charged for the meals they ate at their workplace during working hours. The government argued that it couldn't be "taken advantage of," even though the cost of meals cut into the teachers' meagre salaries. O'Neill proposed that the Tuberculosis Association pay the cost of the food, but the government viewed that as remuneration from another employer.

O'Neill's last days with the government of Newfoundland were as the director of the 4-H clubs. She toiled away in a basement office without natural light, fresh air or a budget to run her program. She was recruited to work as a director of adult education for the federal Department of Indian Affairs in Ottawa and, with much regret, left Newfoundland in 1962. Florence O'Neill died in Ottawa in 1990.

Where are we now?

Adult literacy educators in Newfoundland and Labrador have rarely had an opportunity to come together with colleagues from across the province. In November 2007, over 70 learners, college instructors, community program staff, volunteers and other literacy educators attended the Institute on Excellence in Adult Literacy Practice. Delegates had an opportunity to explore emerging programs in the community and the workplace, and examine particular issues faced by Aboriginal and multicultural initiatives. Workshops covered a variety of topics including proposal writing, building effective partnerships, conducting informal assessment and recognizing prior learning.

In her opening keynote address, "Finding the Cracks Where the Light Shines Through," Helen Woodrow examined historical and contemporary responses to literacy in Newfoundland and Labrador, and reviewed some of the recent research from the US, UK and Canada. Helen traced the history of literacy to the present and ended by



Stone Island.

encouraging participants to capture their perspective on the local landscape by sharing a sentence or poem, a painting or sketch. Pointing to a large sheet of newsprint posted at the back of the room, she urged delegates to make their insights and knowledge visible. She also invited them to join a group to write an article about the literacy landscape. Unfortunately the writing had to be done over Christmas, when tradition dictates that work is shed for celebration. That dampened people's interest in the task and Bill Fagan was the only volunteer.

To prepare this article, Helen and Bill worked independently, through content analysis, to categorize the more than 30 responses into seven categories. The number of responses to each is indicated in parentheses: bureaucracy (9), supports (6), community (4), collaboration (4), age cohorts (4), advocacy (1) and leadership (1). Interestingly, all of these categories are embedded in the story of adult education in Newfoundland and Labrador. Certainly they are the highlights of Florence O'Neill's story. Present-day adult literacy stakeholders still see bureaucracy as a key issue. One participant wrote:

I see government and policy-makers increasingly exercising control over my community...We are not people who need taking care of. We...have knowledge about where we want to go. We need to make government answerable to us, not the other way around. Why do we always give them control? Why are we always afraid to speak?

The participants were also aware of the need for supports in adult education/literacy programs and addressed this concern as follows:

Learners get lost in a system where the supports are not in place for transition—[they are] expected to complete in three years what everyone else completes in 12.

There seem to be no strategies aimed at improving [ABE students'] reading levels. Many times they drop out or are discontinued due to this. Something needs to be put in place to help them improve their reading while they work toward their goals.

Some expressed the need to focus on older as well as younger adults. What is also interesting is that advocacy and leadership merited only one comment each. These are very much tied together in the sense that leadership often takes an advocacy role. The one comment categorized as advocacy proposed that Literacy Newfoundland and Labrador (LNL) should take this role. Yet, in the current climate, any evidence of advocacy will result in a loss of financial support from the federal government. The one comment on leadership noted that a broader vision must be adopted. One cannot help but recall Florence O'Neill's support for a three-pronged comprehensive approach to adult education—the focus on earning a living, living a life and moulding the world. Except for LNL, no other organization or individual was named in a leadership capacity. Since bureaucracy was so strongly cited by participants, is it possible that bureaucratic presence is stifling leadership? One participant expressed a fear of not meeting criteria set down by government. That same pressure also explains what has happened to advocacy. What are the conditions for leadership? How can the adult literacy field help generate and support these conditions? Are there leaders but, because of time constraints and other factors, they are not able to make the impact they would wish? After all, great leaders in

Newfoundland history, like Florence O'Neill and William Coaker, did not see their plans to fruition.

Moving forward

Perhaps we need to know and rethink the past before moving forward. This paper has sketched a few historical threads, but there are many more people who are important to our literacy story on the eastern edge of the Atlantic. We invite other adult literacy educators to document important historical moments in their landscapes. Allan Quigley, who wrote in *Literacies* #7, is part of this effort. We believe it is important to understand more about the people who created learning opportunities for adults in Canada's past and how we may learn from them. If you are interested or want to know more, please contact Helen at 709-753-8815 or email hmwoodrow@gmail.com. ■

HELEN WOODROW is an adult educator who has spent close to twenty years in the field of literacy. She has designed numerous professional development programs and engaged with learners, graduates, drop-outs, tutors and instructors on education and research in practice projects. This work has led to learner anthologies and memoirs, oral histories from the fishing industry, and educational resources. Helen was a member of the national research team examining research in practice in adult literacy in Canada, and co-edited *Focused on Practice* (2006).

WILLIAM T. FAGAN has been, and is, a teacher, school principal, university professor, researcher, psychologist, clinical reading specialist, member and president of a Community Centre Board, town councillor, and parent literacy advocate. He is the author of seven literacy programs, Professor Emeritus at the University of Alberta and Adjunct Professor at Memorial University of Newfoundland.

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