Literacy in Historical Perspective

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Edited by Daniel P. Resnick

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Preface

In July 1980 the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress and the U.S. National Institute of Education sponsored a conference entitled "Literacy in Historical Perspective." Its purpose was to bring historians and educators together with government officials to learn about literacy research already in progress and to discuss research that was needed. A description of the conference and list of the participants is found in the Library of Congress *Information Bulletin,* October 10, 1980. The Center for the Book is pleased to present eight of the papers commissioned for that meeting in this volume. Special thanks go to the National Institute of Education for its funding and to the other conference organizers: Ramsey Selden, literacy team leader at the NIE when the meeting was held, and Daniel P. Resnick, professor of history at Carnegie-Mellon University and editor of this book.

Established in 1977 by Librarian of Congress Daniel J. Boorstin, the Center for the Book is a national catalyst for promoting books, reading, and the printed word. By bringing together members of the book, educational, and business communities for symposia and projects, it strives to improve communication among all those who care about books and reading. Its publications, which deal with a wide range of subjects, enable the center to reach a broader audience. Subjects of previous publications include reading and reading promotion; the past, present, and future role of the book in society; television and reading; and the international role of the book. While the Library of Congress provides administrative support, the center's program is financed primarily by tax-deductible contributions from generous individuals and organizations. Further information is available from the Center for the Book, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540.

John Y. Cole
Executive Director
The Center for the Book

Spreading the Word: An Introduction

by Daniel P. Resnick

Daniel P. Resnick is professor of history at Carnegie-Mellon University, a member of the Program in Applied History and Social Science, and the principal organizer of the conference at which these papers were presented. He is currently at work, with Lauren B. Resnick, on a book on testing and standards in public education. Professor Resnick has published articles on changing historical standards for literacy, on selection in education, and on various aspects of testing.

Of all the ways employed by the human spirit to demonstrate and memorialize its playfulness, its participation in communities, and its search for knowledge, writing is the most complex. Like the more primary modes of communication—song, dance, and gesture, which it has succeeded but not replaced—the written word is both expressive and functional, belonging to the world of art and of everyday life. Its practice has given form to our civilization, to recreation, commerce, politics, and science.

Writing and the collateral skill of reading—decoding and finding meaning in text—are no more than five thousand years old, a gift to the Western world from ancient Near Eastern and Aegean civilizations. Nothing in the nature of reading and writing required that it be the skill of a chosen few. Indeed, the phonetic alphabet to which we have been heir from these ancient sources faithfully transcribed the spoken tongue, creating a bridge to the oral tradition of preliterate cultures.

Yet for most of history, reading and writing have been the monopoly of a small elite who served the religious and secular authority. But because the art of fashioning letters and deciphering their meaning lay within the reach of nearly all, the barriers that surrounded access to the printed word were destined to fall.

Within the Western world, the spread of literacy was assured, even before the revolution of printing at the end of the

Looking Back from the Invention of Printing

by Michael T. Clanchy

Michael T. Clanchy is reader in medieval history at the University of Glasgow. He has been at work for several years on a study of how readership grew and became secularized in the last few centuries before the introduction of the printing press in England.

Extending the argument presented in From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066–1307 (*Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979*), *Dr. Clanchy says that our modern view of literacy as public and useful has its roots before the introduction of the printing press in high medieval civil administration and public law.*

The invention of printing with movable type in Europe in the middle of the fifteenth century is commonly seen as the starting point of a new age. Modern and progressive times begin with printing; the period preceding it is obscurantist and medieval. Without printing, literacy could never have advanced, and our modern world would have been inconceivable. In this way of thinking, the invention of printing is associated with the Renaissance, which revived classical learning, and the Reformation, which brought knowledge to the people. The thousand years of European history between 450 and 1450 then became a negative time, the Middle Ages, sandwiched between the classical world of antiquity and the modern world of progress. This frame of thought fails to put the invention of printing, and the literate culture which produced it, into a sufficiently long historical perspective. Historians tend to overdramatize and to present the period in which they specialize—whatever it is—as the starting point of a new age. The history of medieval literacy has suffered from this. For example, Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin entitled their work on the effects of printing *L'Apparition du Livre* (translated as *The Coming of the Book*), and Margaret B. Stillwell entitled hers *The Beginning of the World of Books, 1450 to 1470.*[1] These are excellent

The Environment for Literacy: Accomplishment and Context in Seventeenth-Century England and New England

by David Cressy

David Cressy, a historian at Claremont Graduate School, has been working in the area of literacy studies since his undergraduate years at the University of Cambridge. He is the author of Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing In Tudor and Stuart England *(Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1980) and other books and articles.*

For the past few years, he has been doing work on England and America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the paper that follows, he looks at the cultural context for literacy in the two societies and why it spread. He is particularly concerned with the economic determinants of literacy growth.

High claims were made for literacy by a succession of writers from the sixteenth century onward. In England and in New England, among churchmen and businessmen, there was a widespread belief that reading and writing were essential skills which led to a broad range of benefits. Most writers stressed the spiritual and religious advantages in being able to grapple directly with the word of God in the Bible, and some of them drew attention to the worldly advantages associated with being able to write. And most of them, whether explicitly or implicitly, associated literacy with a variety of civic and moral benefits, as if it were the indispensable correlate of civilization.

Reforming bishops in Elizabethan England urged "every man to read the Bible in Latin or English, as the very word of God and the spiritual food of man's soul, whereby they may better know their duties to God, to their sovereign lord the king, and their neighbour." This was a theme that was frequently

Toward a Cultural Ecology of Literacy in England, 1600–1850

by Thomas W. Laqueur

Thomas Laqueur, a historian at the University of California, Berkeley, has a strong interest in popular culture and education in England from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. He has explored this area in Religion and Respectability: Sunday Schools and Working Class Culture, 1780–1850 (*New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976*) *and a number of related articles.*

In this essay, he reviews such matters as the availability of schooling and economic incentives, whose role in the spread of literacy in this period may have been exaggerated. Literacy, he argues, was often sought because it helped a threatened traditional culture to defend itself against the new forces of the market.

The historical study of literacy suffers from over a decade of revisionism. It was once thought that the industrial revolution created tens of thousands of new and increasingly technical jobs which required an increasingly educated workforce. Now it appears that literacy rates in the new industrial towns fell throughout the second half of the eighteenth century, and until at least 1850, they remained well below the literacy rates of the composite national average and still further below the average of nonindustrial towns of comparable size.[1] Indeed—as the recent experience of Pakistani workers in English industry or Turkish workers in German manufacturing suggests—in order to perform routine factory tasks one need not even know the language of one's host country, much less be able to read or write.

Moreover, literacy does not seem to be correlated with modernity as modernization theorists once thought; a higher percentage of people could read and write in eighteenth-century Northumberland, Cumberland, and Westmoreland—the dark corners of the realm—than in any other region of the country excepting the Metropolis. Nor do literacy and the "modern personality"

Illiterate Americans and Nineteenth-Century Courts: The Meanings of Literacy

by Edward Stevens

Edward Stevens is professor of education at Ohio University. His recent book, with Lee Soltow, The Rise of Literacy and the Common School in the United States *(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), draws on sources as diverse as wills, census records, school attendance, book ownership, and pedagogy to describe the growth of American literacy from the colonial period to 1870.*

In this paper, Professor Stevens examines the position of the illiterate person before the courts during the nineteenth century, as witness, party to contracts, and juror. By the end of the century, he argues, the illiterate person had come to suffer certain disabilities, expressed especially in litigation over contracts, which dimmed his prospects for justice and left his position increasingly untenable in a free market economy.

This essay studies the problem of the meanings of literacy and the consequences of those meanings by bringing to bear on the problem the relatively unexploited data base or case law. Because law itself is a pervasive context for human behavior, the use of case law makes it possible not only to study the meanings of literacy, but also to analyze those meanings within specific behavioral contexts. Law, as Haskins has explained, is "not merely a complex of rules and procedures for the settlement of controversies"; it is, rather, "a means of classifying and bringing into order a vast mass of human relations, and it is these human relations that constitute much of the stuff of which history is made." [1] Similarly, Hurst has noted that law has "entered into the order or individual lives, as well as that of institutions," and the formal records of the law have themselves helped to shape the experience of participants in the legal process.[2] Nowhere is this situa-

Functional Literacy in Nineteenth-Century China

by Evelyn S. Rawski

Evelyn Rawski, professor of history at the University of Pittsburgh, has researched a broad range of topics in the history of China during the last four centuries and is the author of a number of books and papers that present the results of those investigations. In Education and Popular Literacy in Ch'ing China *(Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1979), she deals with the movement for popular literacy before the 1911 revolution.*

Drawing on her work on education and popular culture, Professor Rawski argues for recognition of the relatively high degree of literacy achieved in China by the end of the last century. The success of that literacy experiment is traced to the support provided by the culture, the expectation of rewards for learning, and the usefulness of what was taught.

In a nonalphabetic language such as Chinese, literacy cannot be acquired through the memorization of a small number of symbols, but demands knowledge of many distinct characters for reading and writing. The Chinese had no phonetic syllabary, as did the Japanese, to ease the task, nor was there any concept of limited or functional literacy in traditional China. Those who were considered educated had mastered the orthodox classical curriculum, which was dominated by the Confucian classics and the large corpus of scholarly commentaries, histories, and literary materials handed down from previous centuries. This curriculum was well-defined and universal through the empire and was intended to prepare students for the civil service examinations and thence for government service. Advanced literacy was the virtual monopoly of a very small group of men who formed the elite of the society.

Of course, many Chinese were able to read at lower levels of skill, even though they were not considered educated by the standards of their culture. Because they possessed knowledge of only a limited number of characters, such persons usually had

Schooling and Literacy in Late Imperial Russia

by Ben Eklof

Ben Eklof is a specialist in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russia and the Soviet Union at Indiana University in Bloomington. He has published articles on Russian popular education, the Mir, and teachers before and after the Revolution. He is preparing a book on the late Imperial Russian school system.

In this chapter, Professor Eklof revises our understanding of popular education in the Russian countryside before the Revolution by stressing its sources in the peasant effort to learn and use the skills needed to maintain an existing and vital rural culture. To support this argument, he draws heavily on survey material gathered by the Tsarist Ministry of Education.

The history of literacy and education in late Imperial Russia is a largely uncharted field, despite a fabulous abundance of sources. There is, for example, no satisfactory history of the humble, rural primary school. It has been virtually ignored in favor of the secondary schools and universities that were producing the radical culture which allegedly led to the Revolution. Yet, a study of primary schooling, its interaction with peasant culture, and its successes in developing reading, writing, and numeracy skills can make an important contribution to our understanding of the relationship of formal education and functional literacy. At the same time, this kind of study is closely linked to one of the major concerns of late Imperial Russian historiography, the continued vitality of the Russian peasant commune, which dominated the lives of 80 to 90 percent of the population.

In 1864, three years after Alexander III's emancipation of the serfs, landmark legislation provided guidelines for the establishment of primary schools in the Russian Empire and allowed considerable private initiative in their construction and support. Other legislation that same year established, in thirty-four provinces, local institutions of partial self-government called zemst-

Literacy and Schooling in Subordinate Cultures: The Case of Black Americans

By John U. Ogbu

John U. Ogbu, professor of anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley, has done cross-cultural research on education and stratification in contemporary Africa and the United States. His publications include The Next Generation: An Ethnography of Education in an Urban Neighborhood *(New York: Academic Press, 1974) and* Minority Education and Caste: The American System in Cross-Cultural Perspective *(New York: Academic Press, 1978).*

Professor Ogbu's current work is on the paradox of high educational aspirations and low school performance among urban black Americans. This chapter criticizes some of the theories that have been introduced to explain poor performance and assesses the meaning of failure. Improvement, he suggests, will require a different structure of social rewards and incentives.

The preparation of this paper was supported by a grant from the National Institute of Education and by the Faculty Research Fund of the University of California, Berkeley. The editors of the Journal of Social History *have kindly granted permission to use in this article portions of Professor Ogbu's essay "Peasant Sloth Reconsidered" (vol. 14, no.3).*

Literacy is currently receiving a good deal of attention from researchers, policy-makers, and professional educators. Common concerns are the development of literacy among children and the problem of literacy competence or functional literacy among adults. In industrialized nations like the United States these problems are regarded as particularly acute among the lower class and subordinate minorities.

The literacy problem of subordinate minorities, the focus of this paper, is threefold and relative, the latter because it derives partly from comparing minorities with the dominant group. One

Readings on Literacy: A Bibliographical Essay

by Tela Zasloff

Tela Zasloff is a doctoral candidate in the rhetoric program at Carnegie-Mellon University and has an M.A. in English literature from the University of California, Berkeley. She has held a number of research and editing positions. Her current interest is in research on writing.

In this essay we will look at literacy as it ranges over various fields that are not represented directly in this volume but which have influenced the thinking of its contributors. Most of our attention will focus on cognitive anthropology, social psychology, and sociolinguistics, but we will also consider contributions from philosophy, religion, rhetoric, and developmental economics.

The following sample of books and articles from these fields articulates the concerns of distinct disciplines and the direction of research in progress. No matter what the authors' special concerns about literacy, they concur on its cultural significance: the manner in which social groups rely on written language reflects and modifies the structure of their thought processes, the nature of their self-expression, and their dialogue with others. A pervasive theme of the works under review here is that we must keep challenging our own assumptions about written language if we hope to understand ourselves and our communication with others.

The Oral Tradition

Many students of literacy speculate about the consequences of moving from oral to written modes. They have asked whether the introduction of writing does not bring a sense of alienation from society, a stratification of concepts and values, and a loss of ability to memorize and remember. This section covers a half-dozen articles and books by leading scholars concerned with the oral tradition and its legacy.