

C.F. Kaestle, H. Damon-Moore, L.C. Stedman, K. Tinsley, and W.V. Trollinger, Jr. *Literacy in the United States: Readers and Reading Since 1880*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991. Pp. 338. \$35.00 U.S.

I was not sure how to respond to my colleague's request to review one of many current books about literacy, and especially one written by a historian. To a language educator it seemed possibly to be yet another foray into the ubiquitous critique of the reading skills of Americans—another "Why Johnny Can't Read" or *Illiterate America*. This book, despite its somewhat tedious beginning (i.e., shades of a Mitchener novel), is worth some perseverance.

This book is intended to address some basic issues in literacy. In the main author's own words it examines "how people could read, how much they read, what types of things they read, what function the reading served, what factors influenced the availability of reading materials for people, what social characteristics attached to people with different reading habits, and how these patterns changed over time during the past century" (p. xvii). The ten chapter headings provide a good advance organizer for reading the book: 1. Studying the history of literacy; 2. The history of readers; 3. Literacy and reading performance in the United States from 1880 to the the present; 4. The great test-score decline: A closer look; 5. Literacy as a consumer activity; 6. Surveying American readers; 7.

Highbrow and middlebrow magazines in 1920; 8. Autobiographies and the history of reading: The meaning of literacy in individual lives; 9. Gender, advertising, and mass-circulating magazines; and 10. Standardization and diversity in American print culture, 1880 to the present.

Because of space limitations, I will comment only on those aspects which particularly motivated me to respond: how one defines literacy, the shock of commercialism in printed material, test-scores and real achievement, and the authors' recommendations for action.

The authors present a functional and pragmatic definition of literacy to get the ball rolling: "the ability to decode and comprehend written language at a rudimentary level—that is, the ability to say written words corresponding to ordinary oral discourse and to understand them" (p. 3). Later on they elaborate this simple meaning by differentiating between "reading achievement" and "functional literacy" (literacy skills practised outside the school) and acknowledge that "literacy is elusive, complex" (p. 77). While there is little doubt that the authors realize the difference between "reading" and "literacy," it is somewhat presumptuous to think that the reader will not equate the two as is often the case in the popular press. Further, when the term "literacy" is used in the press it almost always refers to "adult literacy," whereas educators use it for the full range of ages. The danger in this potential confusion is that it results in an oversimplification of the problem and the solution. The reader may wish to

check out this issue by consulting R.L. Venezky et al., *Towards Defining Literacy* (Newark, 1990) in defining literacy.

The bad news, of course, is that a very large number of Americans cannot read and write; in 1982 estimates were 10 to 25 million (p. 75). Canadian statistics are similar with Statistics Canada (1989) reporting that "2.9 million of Canada's adults are too limited [in reading skills] to allow them to deal with the majority of written material encountered in every-day life." However, it is not easy to boil down such a complex concept into one simple statistic and the author points out the pitfalls, especially of diachronic comparisons.

The effect of commercialism on the publishing industry is graphically illustrated in chapter 5, "Literacy as a Consumer Activity." While it is not unknown that advertising substantially supports the publishing enterprise (the May 4th, 1992 *Mclean's* has 30 of 58 pages of ads—mostly full-page and two-page spreads), the degree to which it does is shockingly documented in this chapter. More subtle forms of consumerism were routinely advocated in the pages of *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Saturday Evening Post* (directed at men), and others to shape the buying habits of their readers. As Kaestle puts it: "popular magazines reflect and reinforce a culture divided by gender. The divisions are stubbornly persistent because they are so intimately involved in the social strategies of capitalism and consumption" (p. 271).

Another interesting topic revolves around the issue of declining test

scores and real changes in achievement from the late 1960s to the late 1970s. While in general test scores increased after that time, policy decisions are still being made on the basis of the earlier trends. The authors dismiss the common causes claimed such as open classrooms, relaxation of standards, and the social movements of the 1960s, and find social and economic disruptions of family life a more plausible explanation. The increased attention to test-taking might also account for the turn-around. However, this reason, as well as the emphasis on basic skills, may in fact be counterproductive since higher-level skills may have been overlooked in favour of basic skills and test-taking strategies. Also, other more important questions such as students' positive self-image, whether they do read, appreciating and respecting other cultures, and achievement in not easily tested areas may be in danger of being overlooked (pp. 144-45).

Further, the levels indicating functional literacy doubled between 1930 and 1952 (grade three equivalent versus grade six), and again doubled between 1952 and 1970 (grade six equivalent versus grade twelve) (p. 92). In light of the increasing criteria, a decline in a few months in mean achievement hardly seems practically significant. Yet a recent Economic Council of Canada report, *A Lot To Learn* (*Globe & Mail*, April 30, 1992), criticizing our educational system, has resurrected the same tired arguments—more tests and back to the basics—neither of which has resulted in the higher levels of literacy required

today or which are likely to be needed in the future.

Finally, a few comments about the Epilogue. These few pages are intriguing since the authors present some very forthright personal opinions as compared to the cool historian's logic of the bulk of the manuscript: 1) "an optimistic vision of the future is impossible if higher levels of literacy do not become more widespread" (p. 291); 2) "We must not tolerate this kind of diversity [i.e., dramatic differences in literacy levels across race, ethnic lines, and income groups]" (p. 291); 3) "if people are to be empowered, they require critical reading and writing skills" (p. 292); 4) "higher level critical literacy abilities for all children must become a central goal of schools" (p. 292); 5) "We must fight discrimination, drugs, unemployment, and low wages" (p. 293); 6) "In the absence of imaginative policies that will protect and foster diverse access to print, corporate policies, corporate priorities, and corporate organization threaten important avenues of expression in our society" (p. 293); and 7) "If we can do this [mobilize schools, families, and other institutions in a new escalation of literacy abilities] while preserving the diversity and the broad participation that are essential to democratic life, we will have preserved and deepened the essential connection between literacy and the Republic" (p. 293). Strong words. A strong ending.

Literacy in the United States is a book I would recommend for educators and historians alike. The chapter on the great test-score decline alone makes it worth the price of the

book, the rest is gravy—smooth and rich!

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Paul Litt. *The Muses, the Masses, and the Massey Commission.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992. Pp. 331, illus. \$50.00 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

During the course of her travels across Canada as commissioner for the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, Hilda Neatby felt obliged to tell a group of women in Victoria that "I'm a real farm woman at heart...I can milk a cow, take care of chickens and think I can even help with the plowing." As she was the sternest and most academically-minded of her four colleagues, this bid for folksiness rang false. Yet it was much needed.

In *The Muses, the Masses, and the Massey Commission* Paul Litt offers a long-overdue account of the organization, operation, and recommendations of the Commission which was set up by the Louis St. Laurent government on 8 April 1949 in order to "counteract some of the private sector opposition to government policies in broadcasting and film," to bail the universities out of a post-war financial crisis, to assist existing public institutions in the arts and to establish new ones under the federal government's jurisdiction, and to clarify the government's relation-