

Lawrence A. Cremin: Hostage to History¹

Sol Cohen

Ambition may often result in a form of self-imprisonment, with psychological consequences that I cannot begin to fathom.... Our chosen vocation can become a compulsion, a form of entrapment.

Michael Kammen, "Vanitas and the Historian's Vocation"²

On 4 September 1990, Lawrence Cremin, the most influential American historian of education of the post-World War II era, died suddenly of a heart attack. He was just shy of his sixty-fifth birthday. His untimely death caught everyone by surprise. There was so much one wanted to know about him, so many questions left unanswered.

Cremin never got around to writing a memoir or an autobiography. I can discover only one book review, and that from 1961, and two interviews, neither by an historian of education.³ The few obituaries written by historians of education who knew him best are eulogies, commemorative pieces, encomiums; they are venatory celebrations of Cremin's life and career.⁴ The rest is a strange silence. One would have thought the educational and historiographical world would be filled with Cremin memoirs, appraisals and reappraisals, symposia, conferences and forums, perhaps a biography; at least a *festscrift*. It has been almost a decade since his death. It's time to break the silence.

What follows is a reflection on Cremin's career as an historian. It is personal, subjective, and partly autobiographical. I should preface it by making my relationship with Cremin clear: I'm a former student of his, and I did my professional training in the history of education with him. He was from the late 1950s to the mid-1960s my adviser, and I would say my friend, though we were never,

¹Committee on the Role of Education in American History (c. 1961): Paul H. Buck, Clarence Faust, Richard Hofstadter, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Richard J. Storr, Ralph Gabriel, Walter Metzger, Robert Merton, Timothy L. Smith, Bernard Bailyn, and Lawrence A. Cremin.

²*Reviews in American History* 10 (1982): 11.

³I have found just two: Lynn Olson, "History: A Lamp to Light the Present," *Education Week*, March 16, 1988, 5, 20; and Paul L. Houts, "A Conversation with Lawrence A. Cremin," *National Elementary Principal* 54 (1975): 23–35.

⁴Ellen Condliffe Lagemann and Patricia Albjerg Graham, "Lawrence A. Cremin: A Biographical Memoir," *Teachers College Record* 96 (1994): 102–13. Diane Ravitch, "Lawrence A. Cremin," *American Scholar* 61 (1992): 83–89. I can find only one other obituary: John Calam, "Lawrence A. Cremin, 1925–1990," *Historical Studies in Education/Revue d'histoire de l'éducation* 2 (1990): 175–6. I don't include Calam in either category.

until 1988, almost the end, really friendly. I was Larry's teaching assistant (although a private, formal person, he insisted on being called "Larry"). I did my doctoral thesis under him. Upon its completion, he saw to its publication by Teachers College Press. Larry helped secure all of my faculty positions, first at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, then at Cornell University, and finally at UCLA.

In writing this, I discovered a different Lawrence Cremin (and possibly a different Sol Cohen) than I expected. My understanding of Larry the historian took on life as a narrative in a recognizable literary genre: Larry became an actor in a familiar kind of story, the romance quest. I think the story has an honourable ending, but, as much as I willed it to be otherwise, it is an ineffably sad story. Larry received many honours in his lifetime. Viewed conventionally, his career as an historian was a great success; he was a winner of Bancroft and Pulitzer Prizes in history. Had everything gone according to plan, this would have been another homage to Larry. Instead, it has become a meditation on vanitas, and the privileges and perils of celebrity.⁵

With *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876–1957* (1961), winner of the 1962 Bancroft Prize in American History, Larry changed the historiographical landscape of American education. At the age of thirty-seven, he had achieved a kind of fame no historian of education had ever before enjoyed. Then, in 1964 he accepted an invitation from the Committee on the Role of Education in American History to deliver a paper on the historiography of American education, subsequently published as *The Wonderful World of Ellwood Patterson Cubberley: An Essay on the Historiography of American Education*. This led to his acceptance of a commission, that same year, to prepare the trilogy *American Education*. I think this was a calamitous mistake. After that, it seems to me, Larry's career as an historian took a downward trajectory. I am ahead of my story, but I have indicated its central theme.

This account concerns primarily Larry's career as historian, but inevitably touches his career as administrator, first as president of Teachers College, Columbia University, and then as president of the Spencer Foundation. It is striking how little we know about the paths academics choose to follow in their careers. Larry's career may suggest lessons for our own professional lives and for the historian's vocation.

I am deeply concerned to tell Larry's story properly, but can report only what I remember, what I learned, and what I imagine. Memory is fallible, knowledge partial, and imagination a trickster. Although dealing with real people and real

⁵This is a subject we don't ordinarily discuss. But see Michael Kammen, "Vanitas and the Historian's Vocation," *Reviews in American History* 10 (1982): 1–27, and Patricia Nelson Limerick, "Turnerians All: The Dream of a Helpful History in an Intelligible World," *American Historical Review* 100 (1995): 697–716.

events, what follows is, in Hayden White's sense, "an image of [a] life that is and can only be imaginary." However problematic this account, a beginning has been made. I believe history is written (and read) against forgetting. I hope this account will encourage others who knew Larry to share their reflections on his life, his times, and his work, before they forget.

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I begin with the personal. After moving to Los Angeles I lost touch with Larry for some time. Although we exchanged copies of our publications, he said nothing about my work, nor I about his. In the 1970s our correspondence was episodic and brief. There was a letter from me in December 1974 congratulating Larry on his appointment as president of Teachers College, to which he didn't reply. Then, toward the end of 1975 I wrote an article on the historiography of American education for the *Harvard Educational Review*. I wrote Larry in December saying I wished I had the time to interview him and other members of the "old Committee on the Role of Education in American History, especially [Bernard] Bailyn," about their part in the tumultuous events that unfolded in and around the history of American education in the mid-1950s and early 1960s. But Larry never replied, nor did he acknowledge the article when I sent him a copy after it appeared. In 1981, Larry won the Pulitzer Prize in history for *American Education: The National Experience, 1783-1876*, the second volume of the trilogy. I wrote to congratulate him. His reply was brief. He thanked me for the letter and about the Pulitzer said only, "it's a nice surprise." He closed with a hurried "All best." We had no further correspondence until the spring of 1988, when a regular correspondence began.

Sometime in May 1988, I received a warmly inscribed copy of *American Education: The Metropolitan Experience, 1876-1980*, the final volume of the trilogy. I responded on 20 June with a long letter. I wrote Larry congratulating him on a "terrific accomplishment." The book's "richness of detail and breadth of learning," I said, "give a new dignity and interest to all those forms of education which make up the American educational experience and which have heretofore not been seen as related and interlocking parts of a whole or of a configuration." One implication, I continued, "is that all those who focus exclusively on the school for whatever project they have in mind have a limited vision of the alternative sites for intervention, while overburdening the school." I added, "I hope your readers understand that we can enter into the historical record at different points and that we don't have to do history as a consecutive narrative." Then I mentioned that I was working on the mental hygiene movement, and was thinking of studying the movement in the context of "the discursive landscape of American education." Larry answered promptly on 27 June thanking me for the letter, then adding, unexpectedly, "that sounds like fascinating stuff you're working on." He was taken by my phrase, "discursive landscape of American

education”; “a lovely [his favourite word of praise] phrase,” he called it. And then came a surprising close: “Take care.”

In January 1989, I was invited by J. D. Wilson to review *American Education: The Metropolitan Experience*—1,500 words with “a bit more leeway” as to length—for *Historical Studies in Education/Revue d'histoire de l'éducation*. I agreed, but was now stuck. Easy enough to say “We don’t have to do history as a consecutive narrative,” but how to review a history that precisely illustrates that nice, but abstract, principle? I was numbed by the book’s length, its lack of a unified narrative line, the sheer quantity of the materials. I griped to Wilson that *The Metropolitan Experience* was “a monster of a book” and that I was “having difficulty finding the proper voice.” I said I needed more time, more space. After an awful struggle, I turned in a review of about 6,000 words, which was accepted and published in full in autumn 1989.⁶

In the meantime, on October 31, 1989, Larry wrote from New York to “wonder if [he] might ask a favor.” He needed a copy of Frances Littlefield Davenport’s 1946 UCLA PhD thesis, “The Education of John Dewey,” which we had in our library on microfilm. He said he had embarked on a biography of Dewey and was “having a marvelous time of it.” The “only drawback,” he went on, “is that the archive is in beautiful downtown Carbondale” [Center for Dewey Studies, Southern Illinois University], and “the nightlife leaves much to be desired.” He hoped that the request wouldn’t prove burdensome. This was the first I knew of his latest project. On November 13, I wrote Larry to tell him that the thesis was in the mail, that I had glanced through it, it appeared to be a competent piece of work, and it would make a few nights in Carbondale pass quicker.

That same fall of 1989, the *History of Education Quarterly* carried a “Forum” on *The Metropolitan Experience*, with commentaries by Robert L. Church, Michael B. Katz, and Harold Silver, and an uncharacteristically sharp response by Larry. Rather casually, I wrote, in that same letter of 31 October, that “one would think *HEQ* or someone among the trio of Church, Katz, and Silver would give readers some idea of the book’s contents before doing their thing.” Since I gathered from Larry’s response that the “Forum” must have really stung, I added: “Is that why your response seemed unusually cross?” Then, with much trepidation, I informed Larry that I had done a review of *The Metropolitan Experience* for *HSE/RHE*, that it would be available soon, and that he should look for it, as I wasn’t sure *HSE/RHE* supplied offprints.

I was uneasy about my review because it was decidedly mixed and ambivalent; I found myself touching practically all the criticisms that Church, Silver, and Katz had made of *The Metropolitan Experience* and then some, but I was able to describe the book’s contents at considerable length and I began and ended

⁶*Historical Studies in Education/Revue d'histoire de l'éducation* 1 (1989): 307–26.

the review on a note of tribute. I called *The Metropolitan Experience* a "seminal work." I said it opened up a prospect on American education that is "inexhaustibly suggestive of fruitful avenues of research." I said Larry's discussion of newspapers, magazines, radio and television, and advertisements and motion pictures were all worthy of book-length treatments in themselves. I also described the volume as shapeless and redundant. I called Larry's treatment of ideas the least satisfactory part of *The Metropolitan Experience*. At critical moments, I said, especially in his discussion of change in education, Larry relies on lists and the quantifiable. I complained that for Larry, "the discipline of education no longer exists as a distinct, bounded field or object of knowledge." I noted quirky lapses of judgment. I questioned how he could give the natterings of Margaret Mead about "Island Earth"—the dedication and last word in the volume and the trilogy is Mead's—the status of educational theory. And, although Larry believed history should be a "lamp to light the present," it was a stretch to point out the relevance of *The Metropolitan Experience* to the then-contemporary (late 1980s) debates about school reform. But, I went on to say, all the problems of *The Metropolitan Experience* were largely a function of its ambitions. I called it a "boldly imaginative and fascinating work." One finishes *The Metropolitan Experience*, I said, "with the feeling that there are more 'transformations' of American education that Cremin will yet write about." I ended the review: "If, as Eugen Weber states, historiographical progress is made not in depth . . . but in breadth—a widening of vision—Professor Cremin has made a seminal contribution to historiographical progress." Somewhat tongue-in-cheek, I asked Larry to read the review backwards, starting with the last paragraph, then going to the beginning.

On November 20, 1989, Larry wrote to say he had received a copy of the Davenport thesis, that he was grateful for my kindness, and offered to reimburse me for the costs of xeroxing and posting the manuscript to New York. Meanwhile, he said, it was good to be in touch and he was eager to catch up on my work. He ended the letter: "Take care—and again, my sincere appreciation for your great kindness."

Larry wrote again on January 12, 1990. By now he had read my review of *The Metropolitan Experience*. He called it "a lovely review." He was "grateful for the time and effort that were patently involved"; it "provided a marvelous lift." Referring to the *HEQ* "Forum," he said I was correct in my estimate of why he was "less irenic than usual in [his] response to Silver and Church" (sic). He continued: "disagreement troubles me not in the least—it's what makes the world go 'round, but the kind of insistent misunderstanding and misrepresentation that marked the Silver and Church reviews does trouble me, and it was that I was responding to."

A few weeks later, Larry sent me a copy of *Popular Education and Its Discontents*, his last book. I replied to say I thought *Popular Education and Its Discontents* "an essential book," and there was "no one who can do what you do—

which is to bring the conversation about public education to a higher level, but who can do it in plain language for the teacher and non-specialist as well as the specialist." Larry answered on 9 February 1990, his last letter to me, expressing gratitude for my kind words about the "little book," and remarking, "'essential' is a lovely word!"

I have to go back in time now, almost to the beginning of my relationship with Larry.

I was Larry's teaching assistant when he was writing *The Transformation of the School*. He rarely talked about the book and never asked me to look at a draft; all I knew was that he was writing a history of progressive education and that he was sublimely confident about what he was writing. I recall he once questioned me about its title. Which did I prefer, he asked, *Progressivism in American Education: The Transformation of the School*, or *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education*?

Finally reading *The Transformation of the School* was a delight but not a surprise. The book contained little that was new to me; in fact, it was *so* familiar. *The Transformation of the School* was Larry's lectures in his course in history of American education for which I was his T.A.

New York intellectuals went mad about Larry. A history of education by a young, unknown historian of education at Teachers College, Columbia, was deemed important enough to generate encomiums in the *New York Post*, the *Saturday Review*, the *Reporter*, and the *New York Times Book Review*. In *The Reporter*, Martin Mayer called *The Transformation of the School* "a major work of educational history" by "a first class historian," and one of the "distressingly few links between Teachers College and Columbia University, between teacher training and the intellectual community at large."⁷ Fred M. Hechinger, education editor of the *Times*, called *The Transformation of the School* "masterful" and a "fascinating tale," adding, "it is not the least remarkable fact that this sensitive and brilliant history comes from a young professor at Teachers College."⁸

Historians were almost as enthusiastic. Richard Hart called *The Transformation of the School* the "definitive history of the Progressive Education movement," and "almost a comprehensive history of education in America [and] an excellent example of historical scholarship."⁹ Frederick Rudolph called *The Transformation of the School* a "pioneer history of the American school in a period of tremendous change." It was a book "that social and intellectual historians will have to read."¹⁰ Larry's reputation received a tremendous boost when Arthur Mann

⁷*Reporter*, June 8, 1961: 39-40.

⁸*New York Times Book Review*, July 9, 1961, Sec. 8, p. 3.

⁹*American Quarterly* 14 (1962): 99-100.

¹⁰*Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 48 (1961): 549-51.

praised *The Transformation of the School* in the *American Historical Review* as “an important book by a scholar who is practically alone today in trying to break down the parochialism separating the fields of education and history.” Mann called the book as a “major contribution to both the substance and the method of social and intellectual history.”¹¹ Significantly, Larry and *The Transformation* were hammered in some education journals: *Educational Theory*, *Studies in the Philosophy of Education*, and even *History of Education Quarterly*. I put it down to personal pique, or a narrow-minded “functional” conception of the kind of history historians of education should be writing. And Larry won the 1962 Bancroft Prize in American History.

When Larry won the Bancroft Prize for *The Transformation of the School* he was thirty-seven years old and on top of the world. I was on the faculty of the School of Education at University of Massachusetts, Amherst, working on my doctorate while teaching courses in foundations of education, history of Western education, and history of American education from the colonial beginnings to the mid-twentieth century, and also responsible for supervision of student teaching (high school) in western Massachusetts. When Larry won the Bancroft, it gave me the confidence to inform my Dean, Albert Purvis, that I wanted to keep History of Western Ed, concentrate on courses in history of American education, and be relieved of the foundations of education course and all supervision of student teaching. Dean Purvis acceded to everything.

The Transformation of the School gave Larry entrée into the world of history's and professional education's elite. At the American Historical Association Larry seemed to know all the prominent historians of the day. At the American Educational Research Association he was treated as a celebrity. A gibe I vividly recall had to do with 120th Street being “the widest street in the world” because it separated Columbia University from Teachers College. Larry turned 120th Street into a corridor.

Larry's moment didn't last long. *The Transformation of the School* was a milestone in American educational historiography; its romantic mythos, played from a death-and-resurrection metaphor, set the stage and became the pivot around which all subsequent histories of American education would explicitly or implicitly revolve, either responding to, attacking, defending, or copying its genre and general perspective. Thirty-five years on we are apt to note the book's deficiencies. But for reasons I've explained elsewhere, Larry was the right person and *The Transformation of the School* the right book for its time, 1961, a perfect match for the historical profession's “horizon of expectations.” It remains a great story and indispensable for interpreting every modern history of American

¹¹*American Historical Review* 47 (1961): 156–7.

education.¹² I think *The Transformation of the School* marked the pinnacle of Larry's career as an historian.

In the spring of 1964, Larry and Bernard Bailyn were invited by the Committee on the Role of Education in American History to organize a symposium on historiography of American education. At this symposium he presented the paper later published as *The Wonderful World of Ellwood Patterson Cubberley*. Larry was subsequently invited by officials of the American Historical Association and the United States Office of Education to prepare a "comprehensive" history of American education. He eagerly accepted. This was the beginning of Larry's fall as an historian. It began with *The Wonderful World of Ellwood Patterson Cubberley*.

To understand better the events of 1964, and after, I should fill in some additional context. In December 1954, Clarence Faust, president of the Ford Foundation Fund for the Advancement of Education, called a conference of some of the most distinguished historians of the time—Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., Merle Curti, Richard Storr, Paul H. Buck, Ralph Gabriel, Walter Metzger, and Richard Hofstadter—to explore the possibility of encouraging historical investigation of the role of education in the development of American society. Although the history of American education as a special field of study by that time had a long history, the conferees pronounced that the history of education had been "shamefully neglected by American historians." Faust stressed that none of the historians invited to the conference could be described as a "specialist" in history of American education, that is, none was a member of a professional education faculty. The group held a second meeting in May 1956, at which time it became the Committee on the Role of Education in American History.

In spring 1957, the Committee announced that financial assistance was available to faculty or graduate students in history departments to support monographic studies calculated to bring "thorough knowledge of education immediately into the mainstream of historical scholarship and instruction."¹³ Meantime, according to a memoir Richard Storr published in 1976, the Committee had in 1956 or early 1957 appointed a sub-committee of junior historians to

¹²John L. Rury, "Transformation in Perspective: Lawrence Cremin's *Transformation of the School*," *History of Education Quarterly* 31 (1991): 67–76.

¹³Paul H. Buck, Clarence Faust, Richard Hofstadter, Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., and Richard J. Storr, *The Role of Education in American History* (New York: Fund for the Advancement of Education, 1957); *Education and American History* (New York: Fund for the Advancement of Education, 1965).

advise it; the sub-committee included Larry, Timothy Smith of Johns Hopkins University, and Harvard University's Bernard Bailyn.¹⁴

In 1960 Bailyn published his famous critique of American educational historiography, *Education in the Forming of American Society: Needs and Opportunities for Study*. Bailyn, who was formally invited to join the Committee on the Role of Education in American History in 1961, flogged "educational missionaries" like Ellwood P. Cubberley and Paul Monroe, who pioneered the history of education as a special field and wrote the most influential textbooks—particularly, Cubberley's *Public Education in the United States: A Study and Interpretation of American Educational History* (1919). Bailyn's critique of the Cubberley school of historiography is well known. What has to be repeated is Bailyn's conception of a new history of education in which education would be defined "not only as a formal pedagogy but as the entire process by which a culture transmits itself across the generations [and] in its elaborate, intricate involvements with the rest of society."

Larry, who was formally invited to become a member of the Committee in 1961 as well, reviewed Bailyn's *Education in the Forming of American Society* in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*. Larry seconded Bailyn's criticism of Cubberley's historiography and applauded his new way, which Larry depicted as "conceiving of education in Platonic terms." He praised Bailyn's hypotheses as "original and imaginative, [pointing] to a vast and hitherto inadequately explored literature." Larry hoped "they will prove sufficiently provocative to set in motion the kind of informed historical scholarship that to date has been all too rare in the field of American education."¹⁵

In 1965 Larry published *The Wonderful World of Ellwood Patterson Cubberley*. Although he acknowledged Cubberley's contributions to professional education, Larry reconvicted him of the four "cardinal sins against Clio": anachronism, parochialism, evangelism, and isolation from the mainstream of American historiography. Larry observed, inexplicably, that the book is still read, . . . it has not been superseded." Inexplicably, because this was four years after publication of *The Transformation of the School* and twelve years after the appearance of R. Freeman Butts's and Larry's *A History of Education in American Culture*, which had gone into a second printing in 1953, not to mention Merle Curti's essential *The Social Ideas of American Educators*, which had come out in a new edition in 1959. Who was reading Cubberley in 1965? Larry declared that a general reinterpretation of Cubberley was much needed: the "anachronism and parochialism of his work require correction, as do its evangelism and its isolation from the mainstream of American historiography." (In fact, much of Larry's critique of Cubberley is incomprehensible to me. I have recently reread Cubberley's *Public*

¹⁴Richard J. Storr, "The Role of Education in American History: A Memorandum for the Committee Advising the Fund for the Advancement of Education in Regard to This Subject," *Harvard Educational Review* 46 (1976): 334.

¹⁵*Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 47 (1961): 678–79.

Education in the United States and concluded that Larry, as well as Bailyn, were carried away by the occasion, and that both of them flagrantly misread *Public Education in the United States*; their critique is inaccurate or overdrawn on virtually every count. Larry's and Bailyn's assessment of Cubberley came to be widely accepted among historians of education for so long precisely because no one was reading Cubberley.)

Having cleared Cubberley out of the way, Larry went on to describe his vision of a new history of American education. Recall that Bailyn had urged historians to consider education "not only as formal pedagogy but as the entire process by which a culture transmits itself across the generations" and in its "elaborate, intricate involvements with the rest of society." Larry defined the scope of history of education even more expansively, suggesting that historians consider "what agencies, formal and informal, have shaped American thought, character, and sensibility over the years, and what have been the significant relationships between these agencies and the society that have sustained them." That question, he said, would project the historians' concerns "beyond the schools to a host of other institutions that educate: families, churches, libraries, museums, publishers, benevolent societies, youth groups, agricultural fairs, radio networks, military organizations, and research institutes."

In addition, Larry argued, a new, more inclusive history of education would allow for cross-fertilization between the history of education and new fields such as the history of science and the history of communications, borrow from the social sciences for its methods, and view [history] in a "broader Western—nay—world context." Larry suggested that this approach would allow historians to become bolder in enquiring into "the impact of education, broadly conceived, on the American mind and character," an enterprise, he cautioned, "fraught with methodological difficulty." Cubberley, Larry said, "may well have been correct in his judgment that at least one clue to the genius of American civilization lay in education." "It remains to be seen," Larry concluded, "whether anyone in our own time can portray the relationship more accurately, comprehensively, and imaginatively."¹⁶ To provide that more accurate, comprehensive, and imaginative history of American education would become Larry's quest.

Larry may or may not have been aware of it at the time—I have to think he was—but at that symposium of Committee on the Role of Education in American History he was being auditioned for the lead role in the Committee's new history of American education.

In the spring of 1964, soon after he presented his paper on Cubberley, as Larry describes it, "there occurred one of those unexpected events that give decisive direction to a person's life and work." W. Stull Holt, secretary of the

¹⁶*The Wonderful World of Ellwood Patterson Cubberley: An Essay on the Historiography of American Education* (New York: Teachers College, 1965), 52.

American Historical Association, asked Larry whether he would be willing to prepare “a comprehensive history of American education” under the joint sponsorship of the Association and the U.S. Office of Education for the latter’s approaching centenary in 1967. Larry’s reply was “enthusiastically affirmative.”¹⁷ Subsequently, Holt and United States Commissioner of Education Francis Keppel obtained a “generous grant” for the project from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, then led by John Gardner.¹⁸ Larry agreed to produce three volumes in seven years. He managed to produce the first volume in six years, the first two volumes in fifteen years; it took another eight years for the third. In the end, *American Education* took Larry twenty-three years to complete.

Larry was fond of aphorisms. He liked one that goes something like this: “The only thing more tragic than a person who does not get his heart’s desire is one who does.” The commission must have been a dream come true for Larry, his heart’s desire. But it was a Faustian pact. Larry abandoned a field he commanded—the history of progressive education; still mostly unexplored territory, the foundation of his reputation and of his professional identity as an historian — only to be trapped by an impossible publishing commitment and a hopelessly unconstrained and unfocused conception of education.

What had Larry gotten himself into? Why? I can’t believe Larry had clearly thought this through. The potential rewards in prestige and fame, even the monetary rewards, may have been obvious, but so, to Larry or someone, should have been the potential problems.

The most obvious problem was the extraordinary definition of education to which Larry was committed: “the deliberate, systematic, and sustained effort to transmit or evoke knowledge, attitudes, values, skills, and sensibilities.” The warning signs were clear. And this is not hindsight. According to Storr’s truly startling memoir, it turns out that neither Bailyn nor Cremin were all that inventive. Their new approach to the history of education—to consider the role of education “not in its institutional forms alone, but in terms of all the influences that have helped shape the mind and character of the rising generation”—was first broached to the Committee on the Role of Education in American History in December 1954 by Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., and was then modified by Storr before being circulated to the entire Committee.

The Committee seems to have been bouncing ideas around until it got to Schlesinger’s “seminal” idea—inspired by de Crévecoeur’s question, “What then is the American, this new man?”—which had to do with the role of education in

¹⁷*American Education: The Colonial Experience, 1607–1783* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), xii.

¹⁸The astounding sum of \$200,000, according to a former colleague, John S. Brubacher of the University of Michigan, in his review of *The Wonderful World of Elwood Patterson Cubberley* in *Teachers College Record* 67 (1965): 231.

"the formation of American character as a conscious work of art." Whatever Schlesinger had in mind, Storr thought he knew exactly what it was. "To comprehend American character," now this is Storr explicating Schlesinger, "one must grasp the meaning of the sum total of the intellectual, emotional, and other influences that have poured in upon Americans to make them what they are." Education, Storr continued, "might be defined, objectively, as the sum of these influences or, subjectively, as the reaction of human beings to them [but] the touchstone of education is the intent to shape intellectual traits."¹⁹

Some time later, in December 1955 or early 1956, Storr recalls, Schlesinger complained that he, Storr, had "left the definition of education fuzzy." Still later, Storr and Larry sparred over Storr's definition of "education." Storr recalls that Larry thought the final report of the Committee (1957) "did not leave the distinction between education and other kinds of formative experiences sufficiently clear to show what the historian of education was *not* committed to study" (italics mine). Storr thought both Schlesinger and Larry agreed with his "generous" conception of education but that they were concerned lest the historian of education bite off more than anyone could chew.²⁰

If Storr's memory is accurate, it is striking that Larry would subsequently define education even more expansively to include "any effort to transmit, evoke, or *acquire* knowledge, values, attitudes, skills, or sensibilities, as well as any learning that results from the effort, direct or *indirect*, intended or *unintended*" (italics mine). And all three volumes would be concerned with the emergence and modification of "the American *paideia*," which Larry defined as "a vision of life itself as deliberate, cultural, and ethical aspiration." Larry went even further with this opaque concept by attempting to encompass within it a variety of efforts to shape public opinion, influence political action, and "export American culture and civilization to other regions of the world." As Douglas Sloan notes, "Cremin's and Bailyn's definition of education is so abstract and encompassing that it raises the question: what is educational history and what isn't?" Sloan asked: "Where do the educationally significant strands of the total social cultural network begin, interweave, and end? If everything can educate, and if everything affects education, what is educational history about?"²¹ Then, what historian could live up to the challenge Larry set in the conclusion of *The Wonderful World of Ellwood Patterson Cubberley*? (According to Ellen Lagemann, in the course of a

¹⁹Storr, "The Role of Education in American History," 332.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 334. At the time, Storr dismissed their reservations as "conservative." Commenting on these events two decades later, Storr admitted that he may have been recommending an approach to skew research away from "conservatism and established and more readily definable modes of education [that] may have been more important than his memorandum (of 1957) implied."

²¹"Historiography and the Historian of Education," in *Review of Research in Education*, ed. Fred N. Kerlinger, vol. 1 (1973): 259.

memorial tribute, Larry wrote *American Education* "in the hope that it would long be regarded as the magisterial, definitive work of scholarship.")

Why was Larry chosen for the project? (Was Bailyn offered the project? Bailyn would seem as logical a choice as Larry. Did he get first refusal?) Why did Larry think he could do it? True, the early 1960s were Larry's moment. No historian of education was held in higher esteem. He was by far the country's pre-eminent historian of education. But still, Larry was just a young historian with a bright future. His reputation as a historian rested on just one book, *The Transformation of the School*. But, if, as I propose, the symposium at which he presented *The Wonderful World of Ellwood Patterson Cubberley* was an audition, Larry passed the audition with flying colours.

"Less is more," is another aphorism of which Larry was fond. Why three (huge; none less than 600 pages) volumes? Why so immodest a project? Why not one volume, which could appear in 1967, the U.S. Office of Education's centennial year? If three volumes, why wasn't the assignment distributed among three historians; say, Robert Middlekauff, John Demos, Gordon S. Wood, or Bailyn for volume 1, Wilson Smith, Thomas Bender, or Daniel Calhoun for volume 2, and Larry for volume 3? Why did Larry take on all three volumes? Why did Larry think he could do it? Who, if anyone, was advising Larry? Bailyn? Schlesinger? Hofstadter? Someone must know the answers to these questions. Or maybe they are unknowable and unanswerable.

Larry was trying to cross over from history of American education to American cultural history, to redefine himself as an historian of American culture from the European Renaissance to the beginnings of settlement in the New World. To be blunt, I think Larry was out of his element. Larry knew more than anyone about the history of American education, from the colonial beginnings and its antecedents in antiquity to the present. He had been teaching it for years and he had co-authored with R. Freeman Butts the comprehensive *A History of Education in American Culture* (1953), but he was no specialist in any subject or chronological period except the Common School Movement of the mid-nineteenth century and the Progressive Movement in the twentieth century. History of American culture was not his forte; Larry was erudite but did not possess the temperament, habits of mind, or, as it would soon turn out, the time to keep abreast of developments in historiography, American or European. Larry's forte was the good story about American education with a strong narrative line situated within a broad context of social and intellectual phenomena, as epitomized in *The Transformation of the School*, or the "little book," exemplified by *Popular Education and Its Discontents*.

Moreover, there was never a disclaimer from Larry that what he was doing was a reconnaissance of the field following up on a recommendation of the Committee on the Role of History in American Education or Schlesinger or Storr or Bailyn. Nor did Larry ever protect himself with any sense of the contingency or provisionality of history. ("Magisterial, definitive"? It makes me want

to shout, "Larry, don't say things like that. It sounds so old-fashioned, so nineteenth-century.") Or did he think the project unassailable with that team—the Committee on the Role of Education in American History, the American Historical Association, the U.S. Office of Education, and the Carnegie Corporation of New York—behind him? In 1965, the Committee on the Role of Education in American History disbanded; Schlesinger, Storr, Holt, Bailyn, everyone involved forgot all about Larry and the "new" history of education.²²

It's bewildering to think about. Even senior historians seldom try anything so immodest as a three-volume "comprehensive" history of anything. Did Larry, after he finished *The Transformation of the School*, ask himself: "What do I do next?" Of course. It is well-known that Larry was a compulsive worker who didn't believe in vacations. But, again, the history of progressive education was his domain and still very much unexplored territory and unfinished business. Was *American Education*, the project, just a career move? The opportunity of a lifetime? An offer Larry couldn't refuse? His ticket to fame and fortune? Clearly these are rhetorical questions, and to raise them here is (provisionally) to answer them in the affirmative. After *The Transformation of the School*, Larry aspired to be more than just a historian of education and a university professor. Larry began to enjoy the culture of laurels.

American Education: The Colonial Experience, 1607–1783 finally came out in 1970. Whatever reservations anyone might have had about the project were excised by the reviews. There were positive reviews by Arthur G. Powell and Theodore R.Sizer, both on the faculty of the Harvard University Graduate School of Education—Sizer its Dean²³—as well as by Merle Borrowman, Dean of the School of Education at the University of California, Berkeley.²⁴

The reviews by specialists in colonial history must have given Larry special satisfaction; they were an historian's dream come true. No other history of early American education, said Robert Middlekauff, who would himself win the Bancroft Prize in American History in 1971, "begins to approach Lawrence A. Cremin's study in breadth of knowledge, in imaginative definition of the problems of colonial educational history, or in insight in discussing them." Middlekauff goes on to say that "much in Cremin's method, his research and his conclusions, is fresh and original." He "confronts in a major way . . . the rela-

²²Bailyn's involvement in history of education was ephemeral, a brief flirtation, over in 1963, when he contributed "Education as a Discipline: Some Historical Notes" to *The Discipline of Education*, ed. John Walton and James L. Kuethe (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1963). In his presidential address to the American Historical Association in 1982, "The Challenge of Modern Historiography," there is no mention of the "new" history of education, of any history of education, or of Larry. *American Historical Review* 87 (1982): 1–24.

²³*Harvard Educational Review* 41 (1971): 250–55; *Saturday Review*, 20 March 1971, 50–1.

²⁴*Teachers College Record* 73 (1971): 117–20.

tionship of education to society." Cremin's achievement is "especially important for American social history as well as for the history of American education." Middlekauff concludes by calling *American Education: The Colonial Experience* "a detached reconstruction of the history of early American education—massive in research, monumental in range, and penetrating in assessments."²⁵ Jack P. Greene exclaimed that "[Cremin's] inclusive conception of education is broad enough to have enabled him to produce the most comprehensive study ever published of seventeenth and eighteenth century Anglo-American culture." The book was "remarkable for its scope and for the author's impressive mastery of a vast and intricate subject." Greene lauded the volume as a "major work of synthesis and analysis" and "a necessary starting point for all subsequent studies of the first two centuries of American education."²⁶

John Demos also registered his admiration for *The Colonial Experience*: "There is no way to fault the erudition, the thoroughness, and the sheer sweep of it all. Simply, to have mastered such a huge range of historical materials is a major personal *tour de force*." Then Demos, in a chilling foreshadowing of things to come, went on to depict several problems with *The Colonial Experience*. For one, "if earlier historians have defined education too narrowly, [Cremin] has tried to encompass too much." Cremin "ends by claiming for 'education' virtually the entire range of cultural history. The result is frankly bewildering." And two, "it is ironic . . . that Cremin begins from a set of 'revisionist' premises, and proceeds to write in the manner of an earlier generation of historians." But Demos was hopeful that in subsequent volumes Cremin would "be able to sharpen his view of the subject, break free from the old conventions of structure and style, and adopt a more vigorously analytic posture towards his evidence." If so, Demos concluded, "we may yet have the definitive history of American education that he—and perhaps *only* he—is qualified to write" (sic).

Larry had got *American Education* off on the right foot, but the first volume had taken him almost the whole seven years allotted for the completion of the entire trilogy. Then, in May 1974, Larry was elected president of Teachers College. This is the view from hindsight, but it is clear that Larry should have let go of the project then, the perfect time, with those reviews as repayment to his sponsors. After that, the project no longer had much relation to Larry's primary interests and responsibilities and less to his time.²⁷

I think Larry wanted to be president of Teachers College more than he wanted anything. But now he was embarked upon a new career. Once he became president of Teachers College, his priorities had to change. There was a whole different rhythm to his working life as an historian; he had a life other

²⁵*Journal of American History* 58 (1971): 432–4.

²⁶*Reviews in American History* 2 (1973): 183–7.

²⁷I have found *Rhythms of Academic Life*, ed. Peter J. Frost and M. Susan Taylor (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1996) illuminating.

than books. The rigours of historical scholarship meant less to him as his career shifted. His working days could no longer be dedicated to Clio. There were administrative duties—governance, policy planning, curricula reform, mentoring, and monitoring faculty; dealing with numerous constituencies, internal and external; responsibilities for fund-raising; ceremonial functions; public appearances; working with policy makers, and so forth.

Larry was perpetually in motion, never at rest. In the 1970s he lectured at Harvard, Stanford, the University of Wisconsin, Southern Illinois University, the University of London, and other universities. In 1976, he flew to UCLA to deliver the John Adams Lecture and spent three full days in Los Angeles. He gave invited lecture series, which resulted in two books: *Public Education* (1976) and *Traditions of American Education* (1977). He led a delegation of American educators that visited China during the summer of 1978. He served on the Board of Directors of a half-dozen major organizations, all the while continuing to teach and to edit his Classics in Education series. Larry was now a full-time administrator and a part-time historian. In the meantime, in 1973, Larry secured additional funds from the Carnegie Corporation and soldiered on with the second volume of *American Education* whenever he had a spare moment. Then, in the late 1960s, the radical revisionist movement erupted. It came too soon. Larry didn't have very long to enjoy his status as president of Teachers College and the country's premiere historian of education.

Even as Larry was finishing *American Education: The Colonial Experience* there came another great change in American educational historiography. Radical revisionism represented a new, exciting, and morally imperative approach to the history of American education, one that I favoured for a time.²⁸ I found the radical revisionists' conflict approach to historiography compelling, but I could not stomach their hyperbolic anti-Americanism, hostility to liberalism, and ad hominem adversarial style. Radical revisionism was polarizing the history of education community in the United States and in Canada. The atmosphere of intimidation at the annual meetings of the History of Education Society and Division F of the AERA in the seventies was such that mundane calls for civility (I was on the Board of Directors of HES in these years) were greeted by some members of HES and Division F as acts of heroism. I remember how I felt; I was convinced

²⁸“The Industrial Education Movement,” *American Quarterly* 20 (1968): 95–110; “Urban School Reform,” *History of Education Quarterly* 9 (1969): 298–304; “A Humanistic History of American Education,” in *Humanistic Foundations of Education*, ed. Carl Weinberg (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972), chap. 2; “New Perspectives in History of American Education, 1960–1970,” *History of Education* 2 (1973): 79–96.

that the radical revisionists were trying to take over the History of Education Society and *History of Education Quarterly*.²⁹

During most of the controversy, Larry was an absent presence. He seemed unaware or indifferent. Larry maintained a stance of massive aloofness while everything he stood for was challenged, not only his romance emplotment of educational historiography, but civility in discourse, comity among colleagues, and a non-partisan HES and *HEQ*. The field of history of American education he had struggled so mightily to revive in the late 1950s was going down around him. With a few words, publicly spoken or written, Larry could have restored civility in discourse and elevated the debate over radical revisionism from the level of politics and power to issues of historiography. The radical revisionists had raised questions about the historiography of American education that could no longer be ignored. Larry could have seized the moment to undertake a defense or reappraisal of progressive historiography of education, or a reappraisal of radical revisionist scholarship, or, in response to the new set of critical perspectives and approaches, even to rethink *American Education*. He did none of these things. Whether because of the constraints of office, or because he abhorred controversy, or because he was intellectually isolated, for a long time Larry did nothing.

At some point in 1976 or 1977 Larry realized that something had to be done; the radical revisionists had to be taken on. Larry never offered his own judgment on the controversy but instead chose Diane Ravitch, a former student and protégé, for the assignment; she became his spokesperson in the revisionist affair. Larry saw to it that her *The Revisionists Revised: Studies in the Historiography of American Education* (1977) was solicited and then published by the National Academy of Education, of which Larry was a founding member and a former President (1969–1973). *The Revisionists Revised* helped alter the intellectual climate. It stopped the momentum of radical revisionism cold and created a space to think. Thanks to Ravitch, everyone who had heard only one side of the controversy learned there was another side—in effect, Larry's side—of the controversy.³⁰ Ravitch paid the price in public vilification by radical revisionists.

²⁹Some historians of education who survived this decade may have mixed feelings about Harvey Graff's reminiscence: "By 1970 . . . the rejuvenated *History of Education Quarterly*, newly under the editorial direction of Paul Mattingly, became for a decade the journal of record for the field in North America and a major site for revisionist scholarship and its best criticism" (sic); "Towards 2000: Poverty and Progress in the History of Education," *Historical Studies in Education/Revue d'histoire de l'éducation* 3 (1991): 195.

³⁰"The Revisionists Revised: Studies in the Historiography of American Education" was subsequently revised and published as *The Revisionists Revised: A Critique of the Radical Attack on the Schools* (New York: Basic Books, 1978). It was answered by Michael Katz, "An Apology for American Educational History," *Harvard Educational Review* 49 (1979): 256–66. Larry finally responded, to Katz anyway, in 1980 in the course of a long footnote in *American Education: The National Experience*. "My own interpretation," Larry briefly remarked, "suggests

(Whether it was wise or prudent of her to have accepted the assignment, along with its circumstances and consequences, are topics about which I hope she will soon speak.) Larry paid a price as well. In part due to his refusal to engage personally and publicly the radical revisionist controversy, Larry's status as the pre-eminent historian of American education was eroded.³¹

American Education: The National Experience, 1783–1876 finally appeared in 1980. It was too long in the making; its historical moment had passed. *American Education* was conceived in and meant for a different age and a different audience. Larry's theoretical framework and conceptional language were formed in the late 1950s and early 1960s. What was new in the early 1960s or even in 1970 had become passé by 1980. Larry's conception of education as culture or enculturation and the questions and "problematics" he posed in the early sixties, which then seemed fresh and promising, could not survive the passage of time. They had, as it were, a built-in expiration date for their usefulness. Everyone involved in the Committee on the Role of Education in American History had moved on, except Larry. (Larry forgot Carl Becker's admonition that each generation writes its own history, which he was fond of quoting in his classes.) And Larry could not or would not come up with any different questions or problematics. By 1980, when *The National Experience* came out, most of the audience of historians had left. The day of the American-centred grand narrative written in the romance genre was over.³² The historiographical mainstream had moved on, but Larry was never able or willing to change course.³³ Larry was convinced he was on the right course.

If the reviews of *The Colonial Experience* were a dream come true, those of *The National Experience* were a nightmare. They ranged from outright rejection to lukewarm acceptance, from the dismissive to the critical, but with some balance.

Larry was always afraid of being tarred with the same brush he used against Cubberley. Larry prefaced *The National Experience* with the advice that he had "tried steadfastly to avoid the related sins of Whiggishness and anachronism." In the *American Historical Review*, Michael Katz dismissed *The National Experience*: "Cremin does not set his history within any systematic exposition of American social and economic development. . . . His book reads as though the work of a

that Katz overgeneralizes from specific findings" (pp. 549–50).

³¹He became marginalized, to use the current terminology.

³²Its heyday was the turn of the century; by the late 1950s, when the postwar/Cold War generation of historians began to write, it was already in trouble. Dorothy Ross, "Grand Narrative in American Historical Writing: From Romance to Uncertainty," *American Historical Review* 100 (1995): 651–77.

³³See "A Note on Problematics and Sources" in Larry's *Traditions of American Education* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), or any of the Prefaces to *American Education*.

generation of social historians on his period barely exists."³⁴ Cremin "presents his story as the emergence of a liberal and liberating tradition." From reading this book, Katz continued, "one would have little hint of the violence, poverty, corruption, and racism that marked late nineteenth and early twentieth century America." Katz concludes: "Thus Whiggism and anachronism are avoided."³⁵

The reviews in *Teachers College Record* and the *New York Times* make painful reading. Bennington College historian Rush Welter, in *Teachers College Record*, no less, starts out with praise for Larry: "There is no doubting the scope of Cremin's research, the seriousness of his purpose, or the significance of his achievement." Welter goes on: "As many reviewers of the first volume noted, his history will undoubtedly dominate inquiry in the field for many years to come, just as Ellwood P. Cubberley's work dominated it previously." It is clearly a major study, Welter continues, "one that makes room for the whole range of contemporary scholarship and incorporates it into a definitive account of the American experience conceived as an educational quest." Then: "But it is also a monument to that quest, one strikingly similar to the Cubberley-inspired volumes that Cremin has sought to repudiate, and one that seems to me to warrant a similar fate." Cremin "shares Cubberley's unexamined belief that the development of American educational institutions has been inherently progressive." *The National Experience* is, "at bottom, establishment history [and] establishment history is also likely to be Whig history, and Cremin's is no exception." Cremin "incorporates criticisms of common schooling made by modern revisionist historians only to smother them." Welter rubbed it in: "Cremin largely ignores questions of pedagogical practice and pays scant attention to pedagogical theory."

If Welter's review wasn't hurt enough, there came Johns Hopkins University historian Kenneth S. Lynn's brutal review of *The National Experience* in the *New York Times*, Larry's *New York Times*. Lynn began by praising *The Transformation of the School* as "one of the freshest, most beautifully focused books on the history of American education that has ever been published." Then the blows. Cremin, Lynn wrote, was himself transformed by Bernard Bailyn's *Education in the Forming of American Society*, and became Bailyn's "disciple." Cremin's review of *Education in the Forming of American Society*, Lynn declared, "was more than a rave; it testified to a conversion experience." Thenceforth, "Mr. Cremin was no longer his own man, he was another man's disciple." Then:

It would be a pleasure to say that volume two was worth waiting for, but such is not the case. Instead, it confirms the suspicion engendered by volume one that Mr. Cremin is engaged in an impossible task.... One of the many unfortunate consequences of [Cremin's] quixotic effort at comprehensiveness is that neither the child nor the schoolhouse receives adequate attention, and another is that the book is so incoherent as to be almost unreadable.

³⁴*American Historical Review* 86 (1981): 205-6.

³⁵See also Michael W. Sedlak's review in *Journal of American History* 67 (1981): 125-6.

Lynn continued, derisively:

In his next volume, Mr. Cremin will presumably attempt to embrace radio and television and all the other educational components of 20th-century American civilization. At the slowing rate at which he is turning out his history, we can look for volume three about the year 2000.³⁶

Lynn advised that "in lieu of completing *American Education*, Mr. Cremin . . . immediately return to writing more manageable books of the sort he offered us 20 years ago."

The National Experience received some balanced reviews, notably Daniel Howe's in the *History of Education Quarterly*, which, though critical, assessed the book's strengths and contributions as well as its shortcomings.³⁷ Howe praised *The National Experience* as a "magisterial work" and its publication a "major event in the field." Howe lauded its "extraordinary breadth" and called it "magnificent in scope." Cremin's volume, he said, "comes closer to being a comprehensive textbook of American cultural history during the first century of independence than anything else we have." "Its massive bibliography," he continued, "will be of lasting benefit to scholars." But, Howe noted, the breadth of Cremin's conception entails sacrifice: "There is too little on the schools and colleges themselves." His allusions to politics "are typically vague, brief, and unrelated to ideas." Cremin ignores theories of social change. Cremin does not pursue consistently or systematically the thesis he lays out. Nevertheless, Howe found *The National Experience* "an impressive accomplishment." In his penultimate assessment of the volume, Howe observed: "If it is not altogether satisfying as a history of education, it is an indispensable prolegomena to any future one."

That he won the Pulitzer Prize in history for *The National Experience* must indeed have come to Larry as a "nice surprise," and as solace and reaffirmation.

But there was still one more volume to go. Howe concluded his review of *The National Experience* with these words:

Cremin has another volume in his set to produce and some of the problems pointed out can be remedied there. Unfortunately, the difficulty of his task increases with each volume, for his subject becomes ever vaster and more complex as it moves through time. One cannot withhold admiration from so ambitious an enterprise as this.³⁸

That was very generous of Howe. But I think one could. I think for Larry to carry on with the project was folly.

Now it was 1980. It may be that none of us has enough time to read, let alone to reflect about historiography, but Larry had even less time than most.

³⁶*New York Times Book Review*, January 25, 1981: 23.

³⁷Daniel Howe, "The History of Education as Cultural History," *History of Education Quarterly* 22 (1982): 205-14. See also the review by David Tyack and Theodore Mitchell in *American Journal of Education* 110 (1982): 175-81, and Marvin Lazerson, "Lawrence Cremin's Democracy in America," *Reviews in American History* 9 (1981): 382-6.

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 214.

Then, again, a moment came, another opportunity for Larry, or someone, to say, enough. In 1984, Larry resigned as president of Teachers College and in April 1985 was elected president of the Spencer Foundation. That was the other moment. I wonder if anyone—his closest friends and colleagues or the sponsors of the project, the American Historical Association, the U.S. Office of Education, and the Carnegie Corporation of New York, or his publisher, Harper & Row—ever said to him: “Larry, you were supposed to take seven years, it’s going on twenty, you’ve won a Pulitzer, you’ve done enough.” Probably not. In any event, I don’t think Larry was pressured to finish *American Education*, I think he chose to finish it. That *The National Experience* won the Pulitzer Prize in all likelihood staved off doubts about the continued viability of the project and kept the juices flowing.

American Education: The Metropolitan Experience, 1876–1980 finally came out in 1988. Working on *The Metropolitan Experience* all those years in the 1980s must have been drudgery. (The volume doesn’t seem part of the project; it has no connection to or continuity with volumes 1 and 2. And it was unnecessary. Everything that needed to be said, all the arresting ideas, Larry had already said in two other “little books”: the aforementioned *Public Education*, and *Traditions of American Education*.)³⁹ The reviews of *The Metropolitan Experience*, as he implies in his letter to me of November 20, 1989, referring to the *History of Education Quarterly* “Forum” on the volume, baffled and frustrated Larry.

In the *American Historical Review*, Laurence Veysey began by saying of *American Education*, the trilogy, that it “has unveiled itself in splendid isolation from most scholarship in the field.” *The Metropolitan Experience* was the best of the three volumes, Veysey conceded, but “has no real bite.” Cremin’s definition of education was so broad “that schooling itself has had to be nearly left out. The book has everything but the main thing.” The thrust of the book is “celebration of diversity,” but Cremin’s “avoidance of all sharp-edged notions of conflict makes his story seem unreal.” Veysey claimed that Larry was deeply influenced by Daniel Boorstin, but “Cremin lacks Boorstin’s grace.” Veysey concludes: “Those seeking a broad account of American culture in the last century . . . would do better to read Boorstin.”⁴⁰

In the *Journal of American History*, Thomas James of Brown University gave *The Metropolitan Experience* a more sympathetic review. He noted that Cremin handled his “capacious conception of education with extraordinary skill and

³⁹Larry begins his “Bibliographical Essay” in the first volume of *American Education: The Colonial Experience* with a richly self-revealing quotation from Ecclesiastes: “Of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh.”

⁴⁰*American Historical Review* 95 (1990): 285. Larry did need a model. He may have borrowed two of his titles—*The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (New York: Random House, 1958), and *The Americans: The National Experience* (New York: Random House, 1965)—from Boorstin.

breadth of learning." James called *The Metropolitan Experience* a "virtuoso performance everywhere alive with intellectual interest." Cremin, he said, may be disinclined to ironic dissection of motives, and less attentive to domination and inequality as enduring aspects of American education than to appreciative reconstruction. Still, James concluded, "it will be difficult to imagine anyone attempting to understand the history of American education without attending closely to Cremin's work, not only to disagree with him, as will be inevitable given his consensual and idealistic frame of reference, but also to grasp the centrality of education in this nation's quest for cultural self-definition."⁴¹

In *Educational Studies*, Neil Sutherland of the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, reproved the strain of American exceptionalism running through *The Metropolitan Experience*. He found Cremin's portrait of New York City a salutary antidote to much of what appears in the popular culture. But, he continues, since it plays down those elements that might contribute to a darker view of it, "we see New York not as it has been so much as how it should have been, and so for much of the views of America in the book as a whole." Nevertheless, Sutherland concluded, *The Metropolitan Experience* is a "major book," the "culmination of a great work, an outstanding historical accomplishment," and the "final installment of an exemplary work of liberal humanism."⁴²

Larry wrote his masterpiece the first time out. *The Transformation of the School* profoundly modified our view of the history and historiography of American education. His posthumous reputation is assured by *The Transformation of the School. American Education* has been consigned, in Macauley's phrase, to "the dust and silence of the upper shelf." The fate of *American Education* is cause for reflection.

What happened to the historian who wrote *The Transformation of the School*? Questions of motive, career rhythm, research methods, reading and writing practices, and intellectual influences will, I hope, be taken up by others closer to Larry and *American Education* than I was. But I think I've suggested some part of the answer. After 1974, Larry became a full-time administrator and a part-time historian. His questions and problematics became outdated. His historiographical horizons never expanded; Larry's Prefaces and references to "standard works" in social and intellectual history scarcely change from 1970 to 1988. Larry had no time to read, let alone to reflect on the presuppositions that shaped his thinking on historiography, nor to rethink and perhaps to revise.

In a review of *Popular Education and Its Discontents*, I ask the question, "Who exactly did Larry write *American Education* for?" I make the point that history is

⁴¹ *Journal of American History* 75 (1989): 13-40.

⁴² *Educational Studies* 21 (1990): 318. And see Jurgen Herbst's more fully rounded "Cremin's American *Paideia*," *American Scholar* 61 (1991): 128-40. See also Jennings L. Waggoner, Jr., "Historical Revisionism, Educational Theory, and an American *Paideia*," *History of Education Quarterly* 18 (1978): 201-10.

written for some particular audience, for some particular community of discourse, and that the reception of a history is determined by, in Hans-Robert Jauss's evocative term, that particular audience's "horizon of expectations."⁴³ From this perspective, misreadings occur when there is a lack of fit or a bad fit between a history and the horizon of expectations of its intended audience. Jauss helps us to understand the reception of Larry's work: its early canonization and its later fall from grace. In the case of *American Education*, there was a bad fit, too great a distance, between it and its audience; that is to say, its audience of historian-reviewers. (Which still begs the question: what audience did Larry think he was writing for?)

American Education is a grand narrative emplotted in the rhetorical mode of romance—the "celebration of the quest," not irony, satire, or tragedy. Larry could not conceal his belief that America was in the midst of an extraordinary and noble experiment in educating the populace of a vast, heterogeneous, and pluralistic society. Larry's histories are stories of consensus rather than conflict; they are celebratory. With Dewey, Larry believed that education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform. Larry believed completely in the idea of progress and the inevitable triumph of democracy. He had a boundless faith in what America could be and in the power of popular education to make what Jurgen Herbst calls "Cremin's American *paideia*" a reality. He believed completely in America's unique mission in the world. Larry had no use for gloomy reflections on the state of the nation or the state of American education; no use for what he called "the neo-Marxian literature of alienation." "A renaissance is coming," Larry predicted in 1975.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s the grand narrative in the romance genre was still credible. By 1980, Larry's American triumphalism and Progressive optimism had been drained of its credibility, while Larry was still writing for a 1960s reader. By 1980, what reviewers of *American Education* expected, demanded, as the only appropriate emplotment for the representation of the past, was the rhetorical mode of irony, satire, or tragedy. But there was something else on the reviewers' horizon of expectations. Michel de Certeau's discussion of the context of the "historiographical operation" is useful here. Our practice as historians is articulated in and circumscribed by a social place—an institution, a position in an institution, a field of professional study, a community of discourse—and therefore "ruled by constraints, bound to privileges, and rooted in a particular situation." Here was Lawrence A. Cremin, *the* historian of American education, *the* Frederick A. Barnard Professor of Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. What reviewers (myself included) expected, wanted, and indeed demanded of Larry was a history of American education, not a history of American culture. Larry was writing an anti-history of education,

⁴³Historical Studies in Education/Revue d'histoire de l'éducation 4 (1992): 144–5.

and he was not open to trial and revision. Larry was committed to a particular way of viewing America, American education, and the history of American education. He would never make a mid-course concession. This was another source of the note of querulous frustration that comes out in so many reviews of *American Education*. Although I believe Larry's nemesis was the project, not the reviewers, I sense something else at work, some personal animus. I cannot ever recall such gratuitously nasty reviews, by American historians, of so distinguished a colleague.

It may be, as Diane Ravitch says, that Larry wrote to please himself and was indifferent to what others thought. But one doesn't publish to please oneself. And Harper & Row didn't publish *American Education* to please Larry. With the one exception I know of—the *HEQ* "Forum"—Larry never responded to his critics (nor, so far as I know, did anyone ever answer for him), so it may have seemed that he didn't care about what they thought. But, as Ravitch also informs us, Larry "remembered every critical review that he ever received." If anyone is wondering what might have been the repressed content of Larry's feelings about his reviewers, they have only to turn to the "President's Comments" in the Spencer Foundation *Annual Report*, 1990, Larry's last report. In the context of some observations about the shortcomings of peer review, Larry delivered himself of these poignant sentences:

Individuals who disagree on substantive, methodological, or ideological questions can easily transform those disagreements into criticisms of quality. . . . Then, beyond that, one must watch out for the kind of "killer" review one sees from time to time in the book review sections of newspapers, or in theater or music columns—the kind of review that manages to be meanly destructive without being even minimally informative. Good reviewing demands qualities of character and sensibility as well as depth of expertise—the capacity to savor excellence without envy.⁴⁴

What finally is there to say? Much, hopefully, from others who knew Larry. But in the meantime, can I bring some moral resolution to my story? I think Michael Kammen's observation in "Vanitas and the Historian's Vocation" holds up well as a means of making some sense of Larry's career as an historian, post-*Transformation of the School*. There was something in Larry's character, some great personal ambition—vanitas—that motivated Larry to undertake *American Education* and to which he devoted a quarter of a century. But there was also something valiant, even heroic in Larry's character. I think of Alasdair MacIntyre's observation that "the unity of human life is the unity of a narrative quest."⁴⁵ The quest, as Northrop Frye points out, is also the archetypal theme of romance. The romance-quest theme runs through Larry's histories and I find it helpful in characterizing Larry's dedication to finishing *American Education*.

⁴⁴The Spencer Foundation, *Annual Report*, 1990, p. 9.

⁴⁵*After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1981), 219.

Quests sometimes fail, are frustrated, or are even abandoned; sometimes the wheel of fortune comes around and the central character, the protagonist or hero, once on top of the wheel, becomes a tragic figure. Sometimes the protagonist never develops but persists for years, going through an endless series of adventures until the author himself collapses. There is also in the romance quest an emphasis on struggle and ultimate success or completion of the quest.

In marked contrast to *The Transformation of the School*, *American Education* is neither discussed nor read today. At the time of his death, Larry had ceased to be a major voice in the historiography of American education. (And his name, as I write, doesn't grace one honour, prize, or award in history of education.) I wonder if somewhere along the long and winding road he travelled as a historian, Larry ever asked himself whether the project, *American Education*, his quest, was worth doing, was worth the effort. I wonder if he ever had any regrets at not having devoted himself entirely to history (or to administration). Did he really think it was all "insistent misunderstanding and misrepresentation"? My guess is that Larry, ever the optimist, never lost hope of ultimate triumph and redemption to come. No matter. If *American Education* started out as *vanitas*, it became a moral obligation. Larry stuck to his contract. This was Larry's achievement: he accepted his responsibility; he honoured the project. He finished *American Education*, at peace with himself, free to return to John Dewey, and to place the school and the history of education once more at the centre of his concerns.