

Forum

Does Lawrence Cremin Belong in the Canon?¹

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I begin by noting briefly my own limited (but to me) important connection with Lawrence Cremin. I first heard him at an History of Education Society session marking an anniversary of the publication of *The Transformation of the School*.² In my opinion, his brief response at the end of the session more accurately and certainly more succinctly identified the limitations of that work than did the panelists. Later, on the initiative of my colleague and sometime Cremin student, John Calam, Cremin spent some time with us at the University of British Columbia as a Cecil Green Fellow.

Cremin influenced my work much earlier than these sessions, however. When I decided to do a PhD in something other than political history, my search for a topic led to the *Transformation*, which opened my eyes to the history of education as an interesting and legitimate field of study. Thus my eventual discussion of schooling as a dimension of child-centred social reform in Canada owes much more to Cremin, Timothy Smith, and Robert Wiebe than to such contemporaries as Michael Katz and Joel Spring. As both teacher and scholar I am pleased to acknowledge my debt to Lawrence Cremin.³

My comments following touch lightly on three questions:

Is the notion of a canon an appropriate one to apply to historical literature?

If there is a canon, then what criteria apply in selecting works to be on it?

Do any of the works of Lawrence Cremin meet these criteria?

Much recent discussion of the curriculum in universities, especially in the humanities and literature studies, has turned on the topic as to whether there are certain works so central to the western tradition that they should be read by all. With what E.P. Thompson describes as his "customary confidence," the American literary critic Harold Bloom has recently attracted new attention to this notion.⁴ As Bloom employs the term in *The Western Canon*, canonical texts are literary ones, those "authoritative in our culture."⁵ To him the canon is the choice of books that answers the question: "What shall the individual who still desires to read attempt to read...?"⁵(19)

¹ My thanks to W.A. Bruncau, John Calam, Michael Marker, and J. Donald Wilson for their assistance with this paper.

² *Progressivism in American Education, 1876-1957* (New York: Knopf, 1962).

³ I also acknowledged this debt in my review of Cremin's third volume in *Educational Studies* 21(3) Fall 1990, 315-8.

⁴ E.P. Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (New York: Norton, 1993), xii.

⁵ Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Riverhead, 1994).

Originally, of course, the canon referred to those books of the Bible that Jewish and Christian experts judged to be authoritative, in the latter case even as the authentic word of God. In more recent centuries it has meant the "great books" that formed the core of what was read in the traditional university.

Bloom examines twenty-six writers—"selected both for their sublimity and their representative nature"(2)—in order to isolate the qualities that make a work canonical. His selection is made up mostly of works of literature. He begins with Shakespeare—"the largest writer we will ever know"(3)—and Dante, and ends up with such modern writers as Samuel Beckett and Marcel Proust. No historian appears in Bloom's selection, but an appendix listing all the works that he would admit to canonical status includes a few histories.

Bloom's work has engaged many critics. Some have attacked the whole notion of a series of "authoritative texts." Others have savaged his choices, especially the emphasis on western culture, and on dead white males in it. (Only four women—Austin, Dickinson, Eliot, and Woolf—are numbered amongst Bloom's select twenty-six.) If there are authoritative texts, they say, then the list should be for the whole wide modern world. It should include core works by women, and by both men and women from other traditions beyond the western one.

I don't propose to discuss either of these criticisms. Instead, I want to play with the canon as an "if ... then" proposition: if there is a western canon, or more narrowly, if there is a canon in history, then who should be included in it? In turn, if there is indeed an historical canon, does it contain any works in the history of education?

What qualities does Bloom say a canonical work possesses? Initially he mentions "strangeness, a mode of originality that either cannot be assimilated, or that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange."(3) Later, he adds that "the tang of originality must always hover in an inaugural aspect of any work that incontestably wins the agon with tradition and joins the canon."(6) Bloom also argues that "Great writing is always rewriting or revisionism and is founded upon a reading that clears space. ..." (11) To these criteria I would add those set by John Calam: "[T]he book which prevails ... will achieve conceptual sharpness, resolute delimitation, rich context, and economical delivery. It will disclose its methodology unobtrusively and allow readers uncluttered access to the principal argument."⁶

A central element in the traditional programme in the honours and post-graduate study of history used to be the required course or seminar in the history of history. As they were taught in my days as a student at the University of British Columbia, these courses introduced us to the perennial qualities of the discipline, its critical turning points, and its major practitioners. I still recall the

⁶ Letter to the writer, September 22, 1998.

pleasure brought by reading and discussing such works with “the tang of originality” starting with “J,” Herodotus, and Thucydides, up to Bury, Acton, Ranke, and Toynbee. Although not described as such, these works represented what our mentors viewed as canonical ones. As Bloom put it, the “strength of the canonical is manifested in the quiet persistence of the strongest writers.” (260)

Works of history deserving canonical status illuminate the past, even a well-researched part of it, in a new way. (In Bloom’s terms, “Great writing is always rewriting or revisionism.”(11)) Thus, although the writings of historians are of their own time and place, we can continue to read some with pleasure and profit long after they cease to speak to contemporary historiographic interests. But although most of us might agree with this proposition, the practicalities of the historian’s professional life mitigate against its practice. The pressures of a modern graduate school, with its compulsion to come to grips with an ever-proliferating literature, lead most of us to think it perilous not to be right up-to-date on any topic. We are all familiar with the feeling of being trumped in a seminar by an instructor, or worse still by a fellow student, or, later, by our own students, telling us that a new book or article that we have yet to read or perhaps even to hear of demolishes our carefully thought-through position. Although we should perhaps know better, we join practitioners of other academic disciplines in the trap set for us by the cult of the latest.

You will not be surprised to learn I have admitted those classical historians studied in my youth, some of whom I mentioned above, to my canonical list. Before turning to historians of education, however, let me mention briefly add one historian whom we did not read but whose seminal work influenced or even transformed the writing of the history of many nations. Although modest in size, Frederick Jackson Turner’s two essays on the frontier were infused with the “tang of originality.” Since their publication virtually all historians of colonial settlement around the world have consciously or unconsciously written in their context. Turner asked: What is there about a new land that makes its people become different from those whom they left behind in the homeland? Although Turner’s own answer to his question has been debated or transformed, the underlying notion—that the colonial experience is profoundly transforming—has not. Teaching and learning are embedded in the transformation: “Even as he dwelt among the stumps ... the pioneer had the creative vision of a new order of society.... He decreed that his children should enter into a heritage of education,

comfort and social welfare....⁷ In Bloom's formulation, Turner's thesis "so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange."

What works come to mind when we look to the classics in the history of education? Does "the tang of originality" hover over any works in our field? In Bloom's terms: "What shall the individual who still desires to read attempt to read...?" Which books are essential reading for those who want to grasp a sense of the way in which the field has emerged with its distinctive characteristics? Again, I'll avoid laying out a definitive list—I don't have one—but will mention a few of those I would include on it.

First, Philippe Ariès' *Centuries of Childhood*.⁸ Ariès freed children in the past from a frozen world in which childhood was seen as an unchanging human phenomenon, a period in life that by definition could not have a history. Ariès said "Look! there were children!" and put them back into time and space. Once they were there we also understood that teaching, and especially learning, are also tightly bound into time and space. That precisely what Ariès himself described has now been revised almost out of existence does not diminish his importance nor the pleasure and profit to be derived from reading *Centuries*.

Next, Henri Marrou's *A History of Education in Antiquity*.⁹ In a masterful survey ranging from Homeric times up to the Middle Ages, Marrou turned our attention away from the traditional approach to the topic as a history of educational ideas in the ancient world. Prior to Marrou this often didactic genre skipped from man to man, outlining the main educational themes raised by such ancients as Plato, Aristotle, and Quintillian. Marrou, looking at what was actually much more broadly taught in the ancient world, moved the philosophers into the background to give pride of place to the practical and influential Isocrates.

An edited collection may seem an odd choice for canonical status, but Lawrence Stone's two-volume *The University in Society* remade the field of the history of higher education. The essays, Stone explained, were "all interested in the relationship between formal education and other social processes, rather than with either the history of educational institutions as such, or with the history of changes in the curriculum and scholarship as such."¹⁰ Their appearance marked an academic watershed.

⁷ Frederick Jackson Turner, "Contributions of the West to American Democracy," *The Turner Thesis Concerning the Role of the Frontier in American History*, ed. George Rogers Taylor (Boston: Heath, 1956), 30.

⁸ *A Social History of Family Life*, translated by Robert Baldick (New York: Knopf, 1962); originally published with the more accurate title *L'Enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1960).

⁹ Translated by George Lamb (New York: Mentor, 1956).

¹⁰ Lawrence Stone, ed., *The University in Society*, vol. 1, *Oxford and Cambridge from the 14th to the Early 19th Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), v.

Amongst new ways of looking at the past is the understanding that women were historical rather than a-historical creatures. In the history of education this has meant noting both the role of women as learners and teachers and, perhaps more important, the domestic dimension of education, with its focus on "silent" as well as "book" learning. In a way that parallels the cooperative style in which many feminist historians have worked, a number of them, especially Alison Prentice, Geraldine Joncich Clifford, and Marjorie Theobald, added this new, central dimension to the history of education. Although each has written important articles and books, the extent of their transformation is most immediately accessible in the volume of essays *Women Who Taught* edited by Prentice and Theobald.¹¹

Here I add parenthetically that Bernard Bailyn's *Education in the Forming of American Society* probably deserves a footnote in the canon.¹² After laying out a persuasive argument for a history of education rooted in anthropological notions of socialization, Bailyn cleverly left this likely impossible task to others. Nonetheless, his influence was widespread. The now classic—even canonical—*Canadian Education: A History* acknowledges the debt it owed to Bailyn's argument.¹³ Although most of the essays in this important, pioneering volume are in the critical context suggested by Bailyn, their actual content is more in keeping with the sort of analysis demonstrated by Cremin's *Transformation*.

Now to Cremin himself. Does he rate a place on an "A" or even a "B" list? Does he have a place amongst those who triggered or demonstrated a major change in the direction of the field? To respond I will comment briefly on both the *Transformation of the School* and his three volume history of American education from the colonial era up to the 1970s.

Although education sometimes figured in general American historical works before the 1950s, the topic was customarily dealt with in an uncritical, even celebratory fashion. Then, at a time when the topic of modernization was producing a rich body of historical literature, Cremin's *Transformation of the School* appeared. In discussing modernization, it showed how discourse on education and educational practice was a major element in one of the great watershed eras in American history. Cremin demonstrated that children and their schooling were central to the goals of those searching for a non-Marxist, non-revolutionary response to the ills and opportunities of the new urban industrial society. After the *Transformation*, one could not write about the Progressive or other eras in

¹¹ Alison Prentice and Marjorie R. Theobald, eds., *Women Who Taught: Perspectives in the History of Women and Teaching* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991).

¹² *Needs and Opportunities for Study* (New York: University of North Carolina Press, 1960).

¹³ Edited by J. Donald Wilson, Robert M. Stamp, and Louis-Philippe Audet (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall, 1970).

American history without discussing education, and one could not write seriously about the history of education without also considering its social, economic and political contexts. Cremin's pivotal role in re-framing the writing of American history was thus analogous to that played by Frederick Jackson Turner.

Of Cremin's three volume history, I think the second the best. The first, although a fascinating survey, and a pleasure to read, is I think flawed by its focus.¹⁴ It is conceived around an entity—American society—that did not yet exist. Cremin himself wrote, in the second volume, that a “nation is in one respect a people, in another respect a place—an identifiable territory the people may call their own.”¹⁵ It is certainly possible to write about the history of colonial education in the narrower senses of schools, teachers, and curriculum. However, to tackle it in the broad cultural way that Cremin does, distorts the topic. His sources are as much drawn from England as from the colonies. They, and the way he deals with them, suggest the “people” and the “place” of his text are really the then trans-Atlantic English-speaking world. By centring his discourse on some of the colonies rather than the metropolitan centre, Cremin gives us an incomplete sense of the whole of which the colonial dimension was an increasingly important part.

A certain parochialism also characterizes Cremin's third volume.¹⁶ The “metropolitan” experience in education was shared by the countries of Europe and the many areas of the world in which Europeans had settled. Much of the response to metropolitan problems was transnational. Transnational and national networks in science, health, social welfare, and education came together in the latter years of the nineteenth century.¹⁷ Americans were and are major players in these networks. From these networks came many of the ideas and practices that came to characterize the response to modernization. With the exception of the topics of settlement houses and technical education, however, Cremin over-emphasizes the American role in these movements and under-estimates or ignores that of others.

I rate the second volume as the best of the three since it describes an America whose historical experience was most in accord with Cremin's own vision of the nation. America of the national period was suffused with that optimistic view of itself—what Alice Felt Tyler's canonical study labelled as “freedom's fer-

¹⁴ *American Education: The Colonial Experience, 1607–1783* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

¹⁵ *American Education: The National Experience, 1783–1876* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 8.

¹⁶ *American Education: The Metropolitan Experience, 1876–1980* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

¹⁷ I discuss these transnational networks in *Children in English-Canadian Society: Framing the Twentieth Century Consensus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), 233–6.

ment”—which even the great blood-letting of the Civil War could not diminish.¹⁸ Although clearly the theology of the national period is not Cremin’s, it does accord with his outlook. In a significant passage, Cremin wrote

The image [of a Christ-like bard in Whitman’s *Song of Myself*] is one of a general American Resurrection, in which the preparatory blossoms have been growing for millennia. ‘This was a great defeat,’ Emerson says of Golgotha, and then adds that as Americans we demand victory ... [Whitman’s] *Song of Myself* celebrates the Resurrection as a great American victory ... the American religion’s mode of treating the United States itself ... as the general Resurrection. (264)

What of Cremin would I put in my canon in the history of education? Certainly the *Transformation* because of its influence on others both inside and outside the field. Add one’s choice amongst the three volumes because of their broad sweep, their extraordinary range, and the sparkle of their writing. Each volume contains insights that well repay their reading.

Historians write in their own time and for their own time. Most of what we write fades away. It fades away not because it is bad, or inaccurate, or misconceived, but because it is no longer seen as relevant. Sometimes it may achieve a brief second life in reflective sessions at conferences and in bibliographic essays of the sort that Cremin himself wrote so well. Commenting on his list of works of the twentieth century likely to achieve canonical status, Bloom notes that “Cultural prophecy is always a mug’s game.” (516) I would add, however, that so long as one does not take it too seriously, it is a game that can be fun to play. How would you answer my three questions?

¹⁸ Alice Felt Tyler, *Freedom’s Ferment: Phases of American Social History from the Colonial Period to the Outbreak of the Civil War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1944).