

Michael Corbett  
*Learning to Leave: The Irony of Schooling  
in a Coastal Community*

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“Farewell to Nova Scotia,” the province’s unofficial anthem, is a song of departure, not a song of arrival. Individuals and families have been leaving the Atlantic region for other parts of Canada and the United States in large numbers since the late-nineteenth century. The scholarly literature on out-migration from Atlantic Canada is substantial. And it demonstrates that it is usually the young—between twenty and twenty-nine—that move first; that young men, more than young women, move more often; and that rural areas feel the incision of demographic collapse first. Yet in his sensitive and sophisticated analysis of out-migration from Digby Neck, Nova Scotia, Michael Corbett poses a question that economists, sociologists, and historians—who have studied the same phenomenon in other locales—have missed: what role does formal education play in rural depopulation?

Using Paul E. Willis’s classic *Learning to Labor* as a starting point, Corbett argues forcefully that the educational practices found in Digby Neck’s public schools between 1963 and 1998 not only reproduced class divisions, but did so in a markedly geographical way: working-class kids were “streamed” into working-class jobs that existed locally, either as fishermen, fish plant workers, or housewives, while middle-class kids were groomed for middle-class jobs that existed globally. Within this pedagogical context, educational success was defined by teachers, counselors, and administrators—clearly, obviously, and repeatedly, from the kids’ perspective—in terms of leaving the community; failure was associated with staying. “You weren’t made to feel great about yourself and where you were from. You were conditioned that way in school,” one of Corbett’s many informants observed. “You know, a lot of teachers felt like they was almost like a missionary coming to liberate you from this type of life. Those who don’t make it, well maybe you can go fishing” (128-9).

To his immense credit, Corbett situates his consideration of education, class, and mobility in a gendered historical framework. He examines closely the broader, structural transformation of Atlantic Canada's fisheries in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s—when more expensive boats, new harvesting technologies, higher fish quotas, and corporate ownership became the norm—and links it directly to the intimate contexts of family, school, and community, where decisions about work and education, staying and leaving were made. In the boom years of the fishery, when local work and ready money were abundant, great numbers of young men rejected the abstracted learning of formal education in favour of the immediate and practical benefits of the “community occupational structure” (146); educators at all levels, who not only taught this esoteric material, but also believed that their students were suited to use only their brawn, not their brains, made this mass migration to the fishery all but complete. “They were marginalized in school, and they marginalized themselves,” Corbett writes, “because they lacked both the financial and cultural capital to make higher education a legitimate possibility” (148).

For young women, the boom years of the fishery produced a different set of pressures and possibilities. Without the option to work directly in the fishery—inheriting of fishing licenses favoured sons, not daughters—they tended to stay in school longer than their male class mates (and longer than their parents) and were more likely to leave Digby Neck to either marry men who lived “not far” away or, in rare cases, pursue post-secondary education. “For us girls it was different,” one interviewee recalled. “We had to hope school would give us something” (159). Often it didn't, and when the boom years of the fishery ended, and rates of out-migration increased, many young men and women came to regret their original choices.

With this core insight about class, education, and mobility in mind, Corbett goes on to argue that young people's decisions to forgo formal education were entirely rational: they were not dropping out of school, but dropping into their communities—intimately known places where kin ties were strong, expectations were clear, rewards were obvious, and a commitment to staying was the norm. In other words, the students' actions were a form of resistance, at once class-based and place-based: “Could it be that rural resistance to formal education can be understood as recognition that one's social capital is localized and of little value in the face of the placeless and individualistic mobility ideology of liberal schooling” (29). Without romanticizing rural life, Corbett reads this resistance in a (cautiously) hopeful way: it reminds us of the resilience of peripheral areas, forecloses simplistic narratives of rural decline and decay, and brings to light the failures of past educational practices, which equated learning with leaving.

That resistance also suggests that it is not too late for teachers, policy-makers, parents and students to “reason otherwise”—to borrow from historian Ian McKay—about the position of formal education in rural contexts, and to take seriously the notion of a “place-based” pedagogy that links schooling “to the specific struggles and problems encountered in particular rural areas” (269). This approach would not indulge in nostalgic visions of rural life, nor would it permit insularity and parochialism to take root. Indeed, Corbett knows full well that formal education must always encourage

young people to transcend the familiar, the known, and the obvious—in a phrase, to leave—for in that experience there is intellectual growth, personal maturity, and deep learning. Yet after learning to leave, he maintains, a student must also be able to return, and ultimately choose for themselves, “how and where to construct an identity and to discover where one belongs” (273). The long-term future of rural communities in Nova Scotia may depend on such choices—and the potential role of educators in that process.