

Introduction to Special Issue on the History of Rural Education in Canada

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Although historians have tended to focus on urbanization as a key element in the “modernization” that Canadians experienced in the first half of the 20th century, rural and (very) small town populations comprised a significant portion of Canadian society, economy and culture until the 1950s. Indeed, even though 1921 marks the census year in which more Canadians were, for the first time, described as living in communities officially designated ‘urban’ rather than ‘rural’, until 1941 the majority of Canadians lived in communities with fewer than 1,000 people. Indeed, the rural population of Canada grew continuously throughout the entire century after 1871, more than doubling from three million to about seven and a half million by 1971. While the proportion of Canadians living in rural areas declined slowly in the first half of the twentieth century, and more rapidly thereafter, it was only in 1976 that the rural population fell in absolute numbers for the first time.¹

But as rural citizens or sojourners, Canadians were not always rural in the same way that those in other countries were. The promise of arable lands first drew Europeans to what historical geographer Cole Harris has termed “The Reluctant Land,” principally so that they could support themselves by agricultural production on family farms.² But far vaster than arable lands are the expanses of land inhospitable, or only intermittently hospitable, to commercial agriculture because of long and cold winters, a short growing season, and/or poor soil. Fortunately for people, First Nations and otherwise, seeking independence on their own rural lands in Canada after 1800, even if rural environments were only marginally suited for agriculture, they provided a wealth of “resources” that could be tended, grown, gathered, killed or extracted (vegetables, hay, cattle, firewood, deer, pigs, fish, maple syrup) either for home consumption, for barter or sale within the community or for sale in international markets. Most rural people, in other words, participated in a wide spectrum of economic activities throughout the year and over their life course. In a country where industrialization occurred first in the countryside (typically called ‘the bush’,

but including work on agricultural lands, lakes, rivers and seas) the off-farm, non-agricultural work of rural land owners and their families provided much of the seasonal and intermittent workforce needed in nascent logging, fishing, mining and other rural industrial enterprises, just as the wages earned in this way provided vital support for farm households.³

If rural economies, cultures and societies were integral to Canada's history well into the twentieth century, the work of Canadian social and economic historians has not always reflected the dominance or significance of those rural populations. The historical importance of urbanizing trends has deflected historians' attention away from the rural, compounding some contemporary conceptual problems besetting its historical study; for rural societies "take on a particularly rigid and emblematic identity, most commonly appearing as the timeless, traditional societies that provide the baseline against which urbanization and industrialization can be measured."⁴ Too often defined by the exception they seem to provide to significant historical change, rural societies "tends to take on a coherent discursive identity as a pre-industrial or traditional 'other'" and, as a result, are either sentimentalized or ignored—but are effectively marginalized in either case.⁵ Even those historians with a particular interest in studying elements of rural Canadian society, economics or culture must encounter the serious methodological difficulties that a widely dispersed and decentralized population presents to a researcher. Living and working largely outside the close disciplinary gaze of the bureaucratic state well into the twentieth century, rural people arguably had lives that differed significantly from their urban and suburban counterparts as the twentieth century progressed;⁶ unfortunately, they are very difficult to 'see' in the kind of easily-accessible collections of documents available to many urban historians. Many aspects of rural work, rural economies, rural family life, and rural society and culture generally, were simply not recorded, and certainly not by a single government or commercial enterprise able or willing to preserve routinely generated sources.

Despite the considerable conceptual and methodological difficulties confronting historians of rural Canada, the last twenty years have witnessed important advances in the field, particularly in environmental history, First Nations history, the history of resource extraction, regional histories and microhistorical studies.⁷ Historians of education in Canada have long been successful in noticing and examining the varied complexities of rural societies.⁸ Rural schools were often the best-documented and the most accessible rural institutions: educational records, which may "provide the best single source of information about nineteenth century rural society,"⁹ give historians a rich evidentiary base for the study of rural Canada. Furthermore, historians of education, with their focus on the relations and interactions amongst men, women, children, local societies and the emerging educational state, "have been well-suited to explore the complex contours of rural society, where the family, the land, a variety of waged occupations, and land-based economies combine to create cultures and economies that differ in some important ways" from those of urban populations.¹⁰

Essays in this collection demonstrate that education, both within the formal structures of the classroom and outside of them, provides a remarkable lens on Canadian

rurality. Each of the essays in this Special Issue makes important contributions to our understanding of Canadian social history through the study of education. Patricia Kmiec argues that an examination of Sunday School teacher education in the mid-nineteenth century provides us not only with important insights into the important place of religion in society, but of the role of local communities in adult education, particularly for women. Terry Wilde examines an educational ‘matter of life and death’ in Ontario’s rural resource extraction hinterland: adult education, literacy and the ‘problem’ that masculine identity presented to both in the northern mining camps. Sarah Spike looks at the photography of itinerant school photographer Frank Adams, arguing that historians can infer some important messages about rural culture, society and education from the distinctive group photographs of rural school children that he took in pre-World War One Nova Scotia. Like Wilde, Françoise Noel focuses on education in resource-based, northern and rural Ontario, but, like Spike, her focus is on rural schooling and rural community—but from the vantage point what Regulation 17 reveals about the politics of language in relation to both. Amy von Heyking and Patrice Milewski each examine progressive educational reform of the 1930s in Alberta and Ontario respectively, and come to some very different conclusions about just ‘what happened,’ why, and what it might all mean for our understanding of education and society. Ruth Sandwell examines a remarkable experiment in adult education, rural activism and the ‘new media’ of public radio broadcasting in the 1940–1965 period in her study of the CBC National Farm Radio Forum. Following up on the theme of rural education as activist activity articulated by Sandwell, Nancy Janovicek looks at two radical ‘free school’ movements in rural British Columbia in the post-World War II period, teasing out—as so many authors in this collection do—some complex relationships between rural education, rural community, rural economics and Canadian social history.

Taken together, this special issue challenges us to think more about the particular contribution that a rural focus brings to the study of education. The essays in this collection all argue the importance of particular places, and kinds of places, to an understanding of the social changes accompanying the rise of modernity and the modern educational state. A focus on rural places allows us to articulate the way that particular rural people saw themselves and each other, and to distinguish this from the way that rural people were understood, or misunderstood, ‘from the outside.’ The emphasis on place that is integral to a rural focus, therefore, can help to tease out issues of agency and identity that are sometimes obscured within discussions of monolithic bureaucratic initiatives and a normalized modern, urban (and therefore almost placeless) experience.

If essays in this issue, taken together, demonstrate what the study of rural places can bring to an understanding of education through time, education also illuminates historians’ understanding of rural. Many of the articles in this collection follow on Mike Corbett’s important article published in *Historical Studies in Education* in 2001, arguing that if rural communities were essentially as diverse as the landscapes that supported them, evidence suggests that they nevertheless differed in some coherent ways from the urban and industrial societies that were slowly displacing them in the

nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹¹ For many of the essays in this collection carry with them the suggestion that rural is indeed emerging as a category of analysis that may be as significant in the Canadian nineteenth and twentieth century context as race, class and gender. The essays here demonstrate clearly that the study of education, formal and informal, provides a dynamic, contested place in and from which to explore the experience, the identity and transformations within, the rural.

Notes

- 1 For more details on Canada's slowly changing demography and its predominantly rural economic, social and political nature well into the twentieth century, see R.W. Sandwell, "Notes towards a History of Rural Canada, 1870–1940," in John R. Parkins, and Maureen G. Reed, eds., *The Social Transformation of Rural Canada: New Insights into Community, Culture and Citizenship* (Vancouver: UBC Press, forthcoming 2012).
- 2 R. Cole Harris, *The Reluctant Land: Society, Space and Environment in Canada before Confederation* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008).
- 3 Sandwell, "Notes towards a History of Rural Canada, 1870–1940."
- 4 R.W. Sandwell, *Beyond the City Limits: Rural History in British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), 5. Ian McKay's *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994) still provides the best overview of the position of the rural as an alternative 'psychic space' within Canadian historiography. Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973) continues to provide vital insights to the discursive meaning of the rural in modern Britain.
- 5 Sandwell, *Beyond the City Limits*, 5.
- 6 For a discussion of rural Canadians as people outside of the liberal gaze, see R. W. Sandwell, "Missing Canadians: Reclaiming the A-Liberal Past," in Jean-François Constant and Michel Ducharme, eds. *Liberalism and Hegemony: Debating the Canadian Liberal Revolution* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 246-273.
- 7 See Sandwell, "Introduction: Finding Rural British Columbia," *Beyond the City Limits*, 3-14; R. W. Sandwell, Introduction: Reading the Rural with a Microhistorical Eye," *Contesting Rural Space: Land Policy and the Practices of Settlement, Saltspring Island, British Columbia, 1859–91* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 3-14; Sandwell, "Notes Towards a History of Rural Canada;" R.W. Sandwell, "History as Experiment: Microhistory and Environmental History," Alan McEachern and William Turkel, eds., *Method and Meaning in Canadian Environmental History* (Toronto: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2008)), 122-36.
- 8 See, for example, John Abbott, "Accomplishing A Man's Task: Rural Women Teachers, Male Culture, and the School Inspectorate in Turn-of-the-Century Ontario," in *Ontario History*, 78, 4 (12, 1986): 313-330; Linda Ambrose, "Better and Happier Men and Women: The Agricultural Instruction Act, 1913-1924," *Historical Studies in Education/Revue d'histoire de l'éducation*, 16, 2 (2004): 257- 85; Rosa Bruno-Jofré, "Citizenship and Schooling in Manitoba, 1918-1945," *Manitoba History* 36 (Autumn/Winter 1998–9): 26-36; Mike Corbett, "A Protracted Struggle: Rural Resistance and Normalization in Canadian Educational History," *Historical Studies in Education/Revue d'histoire de l'éducation*, 13, no. 1 (2001): 19-48; Chad Gaffield, *Language, Schooling, and Cultural Conflict: The Origins of the French-Language Controversy in Ontario* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987). Chad Gaffield, "Children, Schooling, and Family Reproduction in Nineteenth-Century Ontario," *Canadian Historical Review*, 72, 2 (1991), 157-191; Jennifer Goldberg, "I thought the

- people wanted to get rid of the teacher: Educational Authority in Late-Nineteenth Century Ontario,” *Historical Studies in Education/Revue d’histoire de l’éducation*, 23, 1 (2011): 41-60; Brian Low, “Lessons in Living: Film Propaganda and Progressive Education in Rural British Columbia, 1944” in R.W. Sandwell, ed. *Beyond the City Limits: Rural History in British Columbia* (Vancouver, UBC Press, 1999) 62-79; Mary Anne Poutanen, “‘Unless she gives better satisfaction’: Teachers, Protestant Education, and Community in Rural Quebec, Lochaber and Gore District, 1863-1945,” *Historical Studies in Education/Revue d’histoire de l’éducation* 15, no. 2 (2003): 237-272; .Stortz, Paul J. and J. D. Wilson. “Education on the Frontier.” *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 26, 52 (11, 1993): 265-290; Neil Sutherland “Children in Formalist Schools,” in Neil Sutherland, *Growing Up: Childhood in English Canada from the Great War to the Age of Television* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997); Sharon Yvonne Wall, “Making Modern Childhood, the Natural Way: Psychology, Mental Hygiene, and Progressive Education at Ontario Summer Camps, 1920–1955,” *Historical Studies in Education/Revue d’histoire de l’éducation*, 20, 2 (December 2008): 73-110; J.D. Wilson, “I Am here to Help if You Need Me”: British Columbia’s Rural Teachers’ Welfare Officer, 1928-1934,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 25, 2 (Summer 1990): 94-118; J. D. Wilson, “The Visions of Ordinary Participants: Teachers’ Views of Rural Schooling in British Columbia in the 1920s,” in Pat Roy, ed., *A History of British Columbia: Selected Readings*, (Toronto: Copp Clark, Pitman, 1989).
- 9 Sandwell, “Introduction,” *Beyond the City Limits*, 9. See pages 9-10 for an overview of the contribution of educational historians to rural British Columbia history.
- 10 Sandwell, “Introduction,” *Beyond the City Limits*, 9.
- 11 Corbett, “A Protracted Struggle.”