

George D. Perry
*The Grand Regulator: The Miseducation of Nova
Scotia's Teachers, 1838–1997*

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On 17 May 1997, the final graduating class of the Nova Scotia Teachers College in Truro accepted their diplomas, observed and supported by close to one thousand alumni. The occasion marked the end of an institution that began in November, 1855 with the opening of the Provincial Normal School, attended by 54 students. The author establishes in the Introduction his intent to tell “the story of teacher training in Nova Scotia” during that 142-year period from 1855–1997, largely as an institutional history, but “with a sharp focus on the philosophy and practice of training” (13).

It must be noted at the outset that Perry is unhappy with the very idea of teacher training. “Good teaching cannot be standardized,” he argues in the Preface; “there can be no pedagogic routine. Teaching at its best is a highly individualized and idiosyncratic endeavour” (xv). Even worse, in his view, was the early involvement of elite government-appointed bureaucrats, supported by so-called educational experts. “State-run teacher training was at its core anti-democratic” (6), Perry asserts in the Introduction. From his perspective, a small minority that had itself benefited from a classical education sought to control the outcome of the new universal education through standardized methods of instruction which would instill appropriately deferential attitudes and vocational skills in the children of the rural poor and working class. Though the teacher-training institution established in 1855 lasted for more than 140 years, it was “haunted by its origins” (277), and deserved the oblivion to which it was consigned, having contributed so centrally to the “miseducation” of Nova Scotia’s teachers referred to in the book’s title.

Part One of the book consists of four chapters that outline the process by which the concept of teacher training took hold among political reformers in Nova Scotia,

culminating in the establishment of the Provincial Normal School. While partisan politicians such as Joseph Howe and Charles Tupper had bit roles to play, the central protagonist in this part of the story is Alexander Forrester, a Presbyterian clergyman and educator who would serve not just as the first principal of the Normal School, from 1855 till his death in 1869, but also for part of that time as the provincial superintendent of schools. It was he who coined the phrase “the grand regulator of the teachers” (38), referring to a uniform system of educational instruction that would be reinforced through appropriate teacher training. Though the legislation that created the Normal School fell far short of his centralizing vision, it was his energy and force of will which ensured that the Normal School opened on time, and survived the growing pains of its initial years.

Though established as a teacher-training institution, many of the students in the early years attended the Provincial Normal School in order to take more advanced academic work than was available to them in their local schools. This dual role was frustrating to Forrester and his successors, and in 1893, the curriculum was changed to focus more exclusively on the theory and practice of teaching. Indeed finding the “elusive balance between scholarship and training” (107) is the theme of Part Two of Perry’s book. The crux of the problem, he points out, is that “the emphasis on ‘how to teach’ continued to be compromised by the low scholastic standing of most students” (171). And, until well into the twentieth century, prospective elementary teachers need not enrol in the Normal School at all, if they could pass written teacher examinations (known as the Minimum Professional Qualification) and had at least a Grade 9 education.

Part Three begins by acknowledging the reality that elementary teachers in Nova Scotia were predominantly female, and that they typically taught for only a few years before marriage. Keeping the licensing standards low ensured a ready supply, but also devalued the worth of the Normal School program. It was not until 1930 that professional training became a requirement for a teaching licence. Based on a combination of interviews and correspondence, Perry then examines the motivation of young women from the late 1920s to the 1950s who took teacher training, as well as their perceptions of how this training influenced them as teachers. The author’s self-acknowledged antipathy to state-sanctioned teacher training did not prepare him for the largely positive recollections he encountered. “The interviews I conducted with former student teachers,” Perry admits, “suggest that my critical perspective on teacher training as it was experienced at the Provincial Normal College will be sharply questioned” (xix). He concedes that the program built confidence within the student teachers, and developed their practical skills. But to Perry it was still just training. “The fundamental expectation that teachers be well educated was still not being met” (274).

Perry’s concluding chapter places the final closing of the Nova Scotia Teachers College in the context of similar closures and amalgamations across the country. The relative isolation of Truro had perhaps prolonged its independent existence for a decade or two, but in the end, that factor all but guaranteed its disappearance. The perceived need to combine broad-based general academic studies with teacher education

in a university environment proved insurmountable for the venerable teacher-training institution. Though he mentions that his father had taught science at the Normal Teachers College for thirty years, and his mother taught student teachers in home economics, it seems fair to say that Perry does not regret its passing.

In assessing Perry's thought-provoking book, one aspect that begs further scrutiny is his apparent assumption that the "state" in Nova Scotia was both overbearing and undemocratic. For instance, in the Preface he writes: "once teacher training became the business of the state, the honourable and timeless art of teaching was twisted" (xiii). Yet, it is clear from his account that partisan political considerations led the elected provincial legislature to deprive successive Normal School principals and superintendents of education of the powers and policies they deemed necessary to enact their vision. Moreover, he acknowledges that Nova Scotia, with seventeen hundred independent school sections until well into the twentieth century, was not a very powerful educational state, in any case. Who, we might ask, *was* the "grand regulator"?