Frontier College and the Construction of a Canadian National Identity

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Abstract: This study examines the nature of the ‘imagined national community’ constructed by Frontier College in its literacy education programs from 1899-1933, and how this identity was embodied in its curriculum and instructional practices.

In the construction of modern nation-states, literacy in national print languages has been key to the creation of ‘imagined communities’ of shared identity among citizens, as Benedict Anderson (1991) has so eloquently argued. By the sixteenth century, the emergence of capitalist, secular society, together with advances in the technology of printing, made possible the new age of ‘print-capitalism.’ Once the almost exclusive domain of the literati—‘tiny literate reefs on top of vast illiterate oceans’ (p. 15), books, newspapers, circulars and other printed materials could now be mass-produced in vernacular languages for an ever-widening community of readers. Readers of vernacular languages ‘gradually became aware of the hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people in their particular language-field, and at the same time that only those hundreds of thousands, or millions, belonged’ (p. 44). Thus an imagined nation-state could now be constructed in ‘languages-of-power’ for consumption in a ‘unified field of exchange and communication’ predicated on literacy.

In Canada, Gerald Friesen (2000) tells us that the transition from ‘oral-traditional’ and ‘textual-settler’ societies to a ‘print-capitalist’ society took place from about the 1840s to the 1930s. During this time, the development of literacy and the newspaper publishing industry provoked a transformation in Canadians’ perceptions of both space and time, and made possible an imagined national Canadian community. In the collective ceremony of reading similar stories in a daily or weekly newspaper at roughly the same time, the construction of this common identity was immediate; synchronous: ‘Now (Canadians) could study maps of a vast country, engravings of distant scenes, and pictures of great parliamentary moments that they might never see in “real life,” and they could realize that they encountered them simultaneously with their compatriots from sea to sea’ (Ibid, p.147). Readers across Canada were now united in their imaginations just as ‘rail lines and telegraphs linked physical spaces’ (Ibid.), and a common language of nationalism could be engraved in the consciousness of disparate adults.

What Friesen does not emphasize in his accounting of the making of the imagined community of Canada is its location within the larger narrative of British Imperialism and its imagined imperial community. Here was not a nation, but a world ‘imagined as race and empire,’ into which Canada was fitted as one colonial territory among many (Willinsky 1998). Both the educational legacy of British imperialism and its language-of-power, English, were crucial in defining Canada’s national identity. As John Willinsky (1998) tells us, in the building of the empire, schools taught students to divide the world according to imperialist racial and ethnic lines. English, for its part, ‘was imagined as a civilizing beacon, a light to lesser peoples out of their own dark ages’ (p. 200). Leaving aside the question of the imagined community of French Canada and its own imperial discourses, English was clearly the unifying language of empire and nation-building in Canada, and hence of literacy and education, as it was throughout British imperial space. In Canada, Friesen (2000) notes that new

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forms of popular adult education and communication also worked alongside literacy, language and schooling to construct the imagined nation: ‘a remarkable generation of social reformers, including E.A. Corbett (adult education), John Grierson (film), and Graham Spry and Alan Plaunt (radio), took the lead in new cultural agencies and along with thousands of others, employed magazines, books, political manifestos, adult education classes, radios and educational films to build a Canadian version of print-capitalist society’ (p.151). Along these lines, Frontier College, Canada’s longest running adult literacy initiative (Selman, 1998), and its founder, Alfred Fitzpatrick, also clearly had a role.

Inaugurated in 1899 as the Reading Camp Association by Presbyterian minister-educator Fitzpatrick, Frontier College focused its work on bringing literacy and citizenship education to the laboring immigrant men of the remote logging, rail and mining camps at the Canadian frontier. Key to this endeavor were hundreds of university-educated ‘labourer-teachers’ sent out by the College to work and teach alongside the men, in the hopes that this would promote their ‘Canadianization.’ In these terms, Frontier College is a rich analytical site on which to examine the construction of a Canadian national identity through adult literacy education. Taking as its context the grand project of Canadian nation-building in the first decades of the 20th century, this study poses two questions: (a) What was the nature of the ‘imagined community’ of national identity promoted by Frontier College in its literacy education programs from 1899-1933? (b) How did the curriculum content, teaching and learning processes, labourer-teachers and administrators promote this identity among adult learners?

Research for the study included a review of published secondary and primary sources identified in the Frontier College Historical Research Bibliography (www.frontiercollege.ca/) and other key works, and archival research in primary documents contained in the Frontier College fonds (MG28 I124: 1860-1978) of the National Archives of Canada.

The Nation Imagined

In the years from 1900 to 1930, a great flood of immigrant workers—some 5 million in all—arrived in Canada to work in the burgeoning factories of Canada’s cities, to homestead the vast western prairies or pick up seasonal jobs in the resource extraction industries of the frontier (Iacovetta 1998, p. 359). In many ways this tide of immigrants stoked Anglo-Canadian’s worst fears of the country being overrun by ‘undesirable’ foreign elements (Avery 1995, 1979). Not only were many immigrants not of the most desired type—homesteading agriculturalists, but they also came in increasing numbers from questionable racial, ethnic, religious and political backgrounds, or had a history of labor agitation, or all of these (Ibid.).

On the Canadian frontier, by 1918, an estimated 200-250,000 men labored in 3,700 bush camps spread across the country, mostly in low paying, physically demanding jobs under primitive living conditions (Cook 1987, p. 37). It was these marginalized immigrant men which Frontier College sought to educate and assimilate into the Anglo-Canadian nation, partly out of human compassion for their plight and partly to defuse the threat of ‘undesirable’ foreigners. By 1920, two decades into its work, Frontier College had posted some 600 laborer-teachers in logging, mining and railway camps across Canada, and had enrolled over 100,000 men in its literacy classes (Cook, 1987, p. 47; Fitzpatrick 1920, p.150). In Fitzpatrick’s view, these were exploited men who labored under slave-like, demoralizing conditions and could benefit greatly from the opportunity to participate in literacy and citizenship education. His hope was not only to promote literacy and citizenship, but also, by exposing inhumane working conditions, to garner public support for the provision of government social services in the camps for exploited campmen. All this was framed within the Social Gospel tradition of which Fitzpatrick was a part, an activist Christian reform movement which embraced what were seen as society’s neediest persons.
Fitzpatrick’s most influential work, *The University in Overalls*, was published in 1920, at the height of both foreign immigration and the Social Gospel Movement in Canada. In it was a public appeal at once to ameliorate working conditions in the camps, advocate for homesteading settlement schemes, celebrate the literacy work of Frontier College and argue for the extension of university education out onto the frontier. The book also contained a composite conceptual mapping of the imagined community of the Canadian nation to be imbied by immigrant men. In Chapter 10, entitled ‘The Instructor as Canadianizer,’ Fitzpatrick put forth a nationalizing curriculum including instruction in ‘intelligent English,’ the structure of government, the geography and history of Canada, and Canadian ideals of democratic society (pp. 139-40, 144). These themes were then given concrete form in Fitzpatrick’s *Handbook for New Canadians* (1919), a combined instructor’s guide and literacy reader given to all laborer-teachers heading for the frontier. The reader was later published separately as *A Primer for Adults: Elementary English for Foreign-born Workers in Camps* (1926), available to laborers for a nominal fee.

The *Handbook for New Canadians*, in addition to the curriculum themes outlined in *University in Overalls*, also included readings on counting money, measurement of time, space, weight and volume, homesteading, recreation, life in logging, rail and mining camps, dealing with the bank, post office, hospital, etc., health and sanitation, religion, and notably, two pages of lovely drawings of ‘familiar Canadian birds and fish.’ In part, the literacy primer taught that time and space should be divided up and ordered into a ‘totalizing classificatory grid’ representing the imagined conceptual domain of the British Empire (Anderson 1991, p. 184), much in the way Canadian schooling brought the world into a single system of ordered imperial thought (Willinsky 1998). In the *Handbook*, a Canadian’s identity is clearly positioned within the imagined space of the colonial empire. In the *Primer*, for example, is a world map visually centered on the ‘Dominion of Canada,’ but emphasizing the spatial importance of the empire over nation even in its title, which reads: ‘MAP OF THE WORLD SHOWING IN RED THE BRITISH COMMONWEALTH OF NATIONS OF WHICH CANADA FORMS A PART.’ Likewise, under the *Handbook* lesson ‘Imperial Relations,’ the identity of a Canadian citizen is explained as a personal geography of concentric allegiances:

> Canada forms a part of the British Empire, the many parts of which owe allegiance
to the Crown. So that every Canadian is at the same time a citizen of a Municipality,
a Province, a Dominion, and a world-wide Empire. We can love the municipality in
which we live, whether in a county or a city, but we must be true to it as part of a
Province, and that in turn as part of the Dominion, and beyond even Canada we must be
loyal to the world-wide union of peoples known as the British Empire. (p.175)

This ordering of the imaginary world is then elaborated and given a linear and vertical geography in a lesson on ‘The Good Citizen’ (Figure 1). The imagined Canadian here is a man who now locates himself in a vertical hierarchy of personal identity with God as superior, followed by Empire, Canada and family. The good Canadian man is protector of weaker females, is diligent, helpful to others, honest and clean, but does not deny his virile campman masculinity.
**Figure 1: Ordering the World: The Imagined Citizen**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Photo: [5-6 Campmen sit around a room reading newspapers and magazines. In the room are some tables, chairs and a small chalkboard posted on a pillar. One man is lifting a pointer and peering at the chalkboard as if trying to decipher the meaning of the words. On the board are written three words: ‘Making Canadian Citizens’]</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caption: ARE YOU A GOOD CITIZEN?</td>
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**Text**: The good citizen

- Loves God.
- Loves the Empire.
- Loves Canada
- Loves his own family.
- Protects women and children.
- Works hard.
- Does his work well.
- Helps his neighbor.
- Is truthful.
- Is just.
- Is honest.
- Is brave.
- Keeps his promise.
- His body is clean.
- Is every inch a Man.

*source: Handbook for New Canadians, p. 56*
This construction of ideal citizen is repeated in various guises in other lessons in the Handbook—readings on Canada’s flag, national holidays, gratitude to the UK for investing money in Canada: ‘British money has done much to develop Canada’ (p. 62), on working hard, on saving and remitting money: ‘I shall send some money home to my mother’ (p.67), on recreation: ‘Point out the need for supervision and control of the community over questionable recreation’ (p. 120), on obeying the police and laws of the country.

Sanitation, personal cleanliness and table manners also run as a strong theme in the imagined Canadian identity, in part because of Fitzpatrick’s desire to improve unsanitary camp conditions and in part due to his own Anglo-Canadian norms of personal hygiene. In a lesson on ‘Personal Cleanliness’ for example, a photo of a modern tiled bathroom with gleaming white porcelain flush toilet, bath and sink, wastebasket and neatly folded towels is captioned: ‘VIEW OF A SANITARY BATHROOM.’ The text below then reads: ‘Take a bath every day—it is not too often. You will look better, you will feel better; bathing helps to keep you well. Clean, healthy men are always good citizens (p. 85).’ Or on table manners: ‘I must cut with my knife and use my fork for eating, not grab food with my hands. It is wrong to grab with one’s hands or eat with one’s knife’ (p. 61). The ideal of immigrants as naturalized citizen and settled homesteader is also emphasized. Detailed procedures for obtaining naturalization have their own chapter, and were clearly related to fears that immigrants might in fact elect not to assimilate the desired model of good citizenship:

We must educate (the foreigner) to our standards both at the frontier and on the homestead or one of two alternatives confront us: either we shall see him go back to Europe taking with him money that had better be put to use here; or worse, drift into the hovels and overcrowded tenements of our towns and cities (Fitzpatrick 1920, p. 138).

Settling immigrants in stable, family-based homesteads as fully legalized citizens was the counterpoint to the transient, rough and tumble masculine society of labor camps at the frontier, filled with men of diverse nationalities as yet unsure in their loyalty to the proper Anglo image of the Canadian nation, if loyal at all. Settling itinerant workers on the land in stable, clean and prosperous communities, with wives and children as a ‘civilizing’ presence, was thus to be encouraged. Handbook lessons along these lines included a 4-page ‘Visit to an Alberta Farm,’ ‘The Soil,’ ‘Taking up Land in Northern Ontario,’ ‘Taking up Land in the West,’ ‘A Workman’s Home,’ and ‘The Workman’s Family:’ ‘I am glad when the work is done for the day. I can go home to my wife and little family’ (p. 52). This movement towards stability was reinforced as well in regular circulars of teaching suggestions sent out to laborer-teachers in the field: ‘Explain method of taking up land in New Ontario. Show them that certain dues and assessments must be performed. Encourage them to get back to the land…’

The Teaching of Nation

The literacy curriculum contained in the Handbook and adult literacy Primer was one representation of the imagined national community crafted by Frontier College. The white, college-educated men who were sent to the frontier to teach the curriculum were another. Here, the idea was that contact with ‘wholesome,’ clean-living, loyal Canadian, English-speaking men who could nonetheless do a

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hard day’s work in a logging, mining or rail camp, would serve as the model of good citizenship which immigrant men would emulate. The good citizen imagined in the *Handbook* was first embodied in the laborer-teachers and then sent out almost as a missionary epistle to the men, but in the primary cause of nation-building rather than religious conversion. In the initial contract given to laborer-teachers going to the field, instructor supervisor Edmund Bradwin outlined his expectations of literacy instructors in this regard:

While you stand for staunch Canadianism, and for British institutions, do not get into arguments, avoid expressing pet opinions, teach rather by example and daily wear and tear. You will be measured by your worth, not by your theory. Quietly and unassumingly you are a moulder of Canadianism.\(^3\)

As Bradwin saw it, 'The aim should be (1) to at least teach them the three r’s, and (2) to make them intelligent and safe citizens of Canada and empire.'\(^4\)

The design of literacy classes followed the seasonal and daily rhythm of work found in the camps. Laborer-teachers had a minimum three month contract, usually in the summer, and worked by day alongside campmen, usually doing the least skilled jobs. They shared the same food, lodging and work conditions as the campmen, and as model citizens, took pains to treat them with respect and ‘neighborliness.’ Once they had attained the reciprocal respect of the men, they would offer English, literacy and citizenship classes by night. As Fitzgerald saw it, the classes should initially build on the ‘stock of words’ which the workmen already possessed, and additional English taught them should be of some use in their daily lives while at the same time helping to shape them into good citizens. At all times, according to the *Handbook*, instructors should treat the men as adult learners and not school children, for ‘the system of training for the boy or girl is not suitable for the middle-aged’ (p. 6). A typical night’s work should involve 20-30 minutes of drilling new words, 15-20 minutes writing a drill from the blackboard, and 10-15 minutes on civics, citizenship, ‘social intercourse,’ and relaxation (pp. 5-12). The basic approach was to introduce new vocabulary, initiate drills and discussion around the vocabulary and reinforce it in writing, in this way drawing out the men to freely speak their minds and the instructor to freely try to shape them:

As the working-fund of words is gradually acquired, the instructor, by firing questions back and forward, can convey practical suggestions and advice to his class on home life, cleanliness of habits, food, and work; and in time he may proceed to more abstract ideas on the duties of citizenship and the place of the new-comer in the country’s life. (p. 6)

The realities of camp life and the need to improvise as a teacher were also acknowledged: ‘Mr. Fitzpatrick does not hold any instructor to hard and fast rules. Each camp will vary and it is left to the judgement of the man on the spot how best to adapt his plans. In general, however, stick to the method, plans, lessons and themes given in Fitzpatrick’s Handbook,’ wrote Bradwin in one of his periodic suggestions to the field.\(^5\)

In addition to the *Handbook* and the literacy Primer, a good supply of newspapers, periodicals and books were supplied to the camp for the service of the campmen and laborer-teachers. This practice harkened back to the early days of the century, before the idea of laborer-teachers was adopted, when

\(^3\) Vol. 134, Circular Letters 1920: ‘Frontier College.’

\(^4\) Ibid.

\(^5\) Ibid.

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Fitzpatrick was an itinerant educator hauling packs of books out to campmen, trying to establish reading tents or rooms. By 1920, instructors were enjoined to subscribe to the nearest daily newspaper, always have ‘4 or 5 fresh magazines for a Sunday or every ten days,’ and ‘send to the Toronto office for a bundle of stock magazines…Give Canadian and British magazines preference.’ Here, Anderson’s (1991) analysis of the importance of newspaper reading as a unifying force in print-capitalist societies is clear, and as well in *Handbook* injunctions to the campmen: ‘The man who reads keeps in touch with the world. Read a good paper every day. The newcomer should aim to read a paper written in English’ (p. 108). From Bradwin: ‘If some event fills the day’s news, discuss it – take the appointment of a new Premier – how is it done, why, what does it mean to the country, what part does the individual vote play in it – discuss from a broad point as an instructor of Canadians.’

**Conclusion**

Into the print-capitalist, immigrant society of early 20th century Canada came Frontier College with its particular blend of literacy and citizenship education on the frontier, the nexus of which shaped an imagined national community of Canadians. The nation presented is one of the good citizen embalmed in Social Gospel traditions, occupying the divided space of empire, fearful of foreign influences on Anglo-Canadian society, celebrating masculine prowess. It is a distinctly gendered identity, in which women appear only as appendage family members, if they appear at all. It is a construction of class and education composed on the consciousness of laboring immigrant men. It is also a construction of nation conceived against the ‘Other’ of Communism, labor agitation and undesired races (Walter, 2002). It is a history well worth examining for its relevance to literacy, adult education and nation today.

**References**


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7 Ibid.
Fitzpatrick, A. 1920 *The University in Overalls: A Plea for Part-time Study*. Toronto: Hunter-Rose Co..


