

# Reappraising *Readers*: remembering memory-work

Gerald Noonan

**Résumé:** *Dans cet article, Gerald Noonan nous fait redécouvrir les livres de lecture de l'école ontarienne du début du siècle. Qu'y trouvait-on? Du matériel scolaire digne d'édifier la jeunesse et de mousser le nationalisme canadien naissant. Et c'est à travers les oeuvres actuelles de Robertson Davies, Eli Mandel, Homer Watson que Noonan retrouve les florilèges du passé.*

Ghostly effects of memory-work assignments are conjured up from the Ontario Fourth Reader of 1910 by Ralph Allen when he says of it: "Deep in the heritage of every boy and girl who had gone to school outside Quebec lay the seeds of his or her personal education for nationhood." Ontario Readers, Allen suggests, were tools of the state in that they were a "perennial best seller," and with material "either borrowed straight from England or borrowed from England and slightly modified" were among "the basic texts for citizenship in the English-speaking parts of [Canada]" (5). One-room schoolfuls of chanting children would recite memorized Browning:

Oh, to be in England  
Now that April's here. . .

while turning a blinder eye, presumably, to the nature sprouting all around them in the backyards of their own nation.

Considering that the First World War with its awesome total of slaughtered soldiers was only four years away, there were more serious side effects possible. A boy who spouted at 11 years of age [from Sir Francis Hastings Doyle's *The Private of the Buffs*]:

Yes, Honor calls!--with strength like steel  
He put the vision by;  
Let dusky Indians whine and kneel,  
An English lad must die

might well have become a 19-year-old soldier at the Armistice. As a survivor of the carnage, he might have forgotten, and just as well that he should, that in his school reader: "Under the title 'An Elizabethan Seaman,' James Anthony Foude contributed an essay on the special joy it gives God to see a man die with his boots on" (Allen 7).

Meanwhile in Quebec, Allen notes, there was a different text, and: "Drake and Nelson and the Thin Red Line were almost wholly foreign to it. The equivalent heroes, who had the considerable virtue of being far closer to home both historically and geographically, were Champlain, the Jesuit Martyrs, and Dollard's heroes of the Long Sault. In the literature classes of French Canada, the English classical poets and writers received approximately as much attention as those of Spain and Germany" (8).

Allen does not declare that the Quebec *différence*, nor English Canada's colonialism, was necessarily conditioned by school texts. "There was no compulsion on the children of English Canada [nor on those of French Canada]--any more than there had been on their parents or their parents' parents--to accept wholly or only the patterns of thought imparted in their public schools." Nonetheless, he does raise the moot point. In eras when reading material was more restricted to schoolboard issue, and thereby gained official sanction, the effect on society (down through parents' parents to parents to children) could hardly be inconsequential.

Bruce Curtis, the author of a recent article about the first government-funded schools in Canada West (1840-1867), asserts, in fact, that the prime concern of pioneer legislators was to make their citizens useful and reliable--and, in the fearful decades following the American and French revolutions, loyal. Some educators even worried about the effect of literacy and the uncontrollable danger of a little knowledge--(who knows what they might read outside the official texts?)--and were concerned about the lure of fiction toward "monstrous and erroneous" experience, leading to lunacy (Curtis 358).

The early educators hoped that schools, ideally, would produce individuals able to read and cipher, and disciplined enough to maintain the capitalist state and the established social order. The root verb in the word "Primer" (Webster: to fill, load)--as with village pumps--suddenly becomes noticeable.

Within that broad, and cautious, policy, even the spelling book and the spelling bee were suspect, because both harboured a threat to centralized control. The old-time spelling book, Curtis reports, could include not just letters, the words that the letters spelled, and the definitions of the words, but an appended anthology of "stories, poems, songs, prayers, geography, grammar, history, and arithmetic lessons" (349)--and that made it possible for individuals to learn on their own and at their own pace. If students were able to educate themselves, and merely have the results heard by the teacher, "then the proper order of education was inverted" (351). Dominance of the teacher and the confinement of learning to collective processes under "an agency of 'British Constitutional Government'" (360) was seriously undercut.

Similarly, one of the major drawbacks (from a centralist viewpoint) of the spelling bee, besides an escalation toward more and more obscure words (shades of "Balderdash" and "Trivial Pursuit"), was its popularity in, and in-

volvement of, the wider community. Curtis suggests that "it represented [an undesired] community control over education."

The competitive nature of the bee was suspect too. Curtis quotes one commentator of 1848: "it is a good thing to excel, but to stimulate a child to exertion [by means of spelling sides or teams] was extremely dangerous" (352).

As is indicated by Ralph Allen's historical consideration of the Ontario Reader of 1910 and its successors and predecessors, educators in large part continued the efforts of their forerunners in Canada West, and chose school-book material for edifying nationalistic, sociological, or ideological reasons. It is not at all clear, though, as Allen would allow, that the effect of spelling books and bees, of Browning and jingoism, was exactly as expected, or, in some quarters, as feared.

If the intent of "The Little Red Hen," for example, was to inculcate the moral good of sheer industry, the effort was lost on Robertson Davies.

I remember that the first day I went to school. . . [he says] . . . I was humiliated to find that it involved a tedious encounter with a creature called The Little Red Hen . . . Hers was the first story in the *Ontario Primer* [that word again] and . . . the Little Red Hen was larger than the cat, the dog and the pig with whom she shared the farmyard. Much later in life, when I became interested in the ikons of the Orthodox Church, I discovered the reasoning behind this apparent absurdity; the Little Red Hen was morally bigger than the cat, the dog and the pig, so she was drawn larger, just as saints in ikons are drawn larger than pagans or people of mere ordinary virtue. The story was that the Little Red Hen found some wheat; she called on the cat, the dog and the pig to help her plant, reap, grind and make bread from the wheat, but they refused. But when the Little Red Hen said, "Who will help me eat the bread?" they were eager for a share. This was the Little Red Hen's finest hour. She declared: "You would not plant the wheat, you would not cut the wheat, you would not grind the wheat, you would not bake the bread; you shall not eat the bread. My little chicks shall eat the bread. And they did" Davies 3).

An eternal problem for educators, surely, whether in Canada West or Canada now, is that children's responses are just so hard to predict. Kids like Davies, particularly like him, saw (or sensed) right through that Little Red Hen.

This is unexceptionable doctrine. . . Not Karl Marx, not Chairman Mao at his finest, could have improved on the political doctrine of the Little Red Hen. Yet--somehow I did not like it. During my life I have met a great many Little Red Hens, and they are quick to point out that they are the salt of the earth: they are always working for the good of somebody else. They are morally superior; they know best. It never occurred to the Little Red Hen that the dog had been guarding the farmyard for her; that she had been free to enjoy the physical beauty and music of the cat; that barnyard culture owed an immeasurable debt to the philosophy and personal dignity of the pig; no, in the conduct of her life she was confined within the world-view of a hen, and she asked no more.

The saving grace of the *Primer*, Davies says, was that after the little pigs that went "Wee, wee", then Humpty Dumpty, then Jack and Jill there came--"wonder of wonders--Christina Rossetti's poem 'Who has seen the wind?' which was our first glimpse of poetic beauty. . .Of course, I did not know that it was a fine lyric, but I felt its grace, and I knew it came from a source very far away from the Little Red Hen" (3,4). Davies concedes that "the Readers contained a good deal of what was commonplace, and much of that was of a narrowly moral tendency," but he praises those who chose the material because "they were not confined to somebody's notion of what children at that time of life might most easily understand" (4). He cites "a mind-stretcher for children" by F.W. Bourdillon "who, when we were eight, told us that

The night has a thousand eyes.  
And the day but one;  
Yet the light of the bright world dies  
With the dying sun.

The mind has a thousand eyes,  
And the heart but one;  
Yet the light of a whole life dies  
When love is done."

That, Davies, says, is "an educational time-bomb, for it reaches its target, and explodes later. I suppose it was fifteen years after I read that poem in school before I really understood what it meant, but when I needed it, there it was, ready to mind" (4).

The same Bourdillon poem was received differently on the prairie by the young Eli Mandel who, despite, as he says, "all those bad poems" survived to become a prominent Canadian critic, poet, and professor of English literature. In *Another time* (Press Porcepic, 1977) Mandel writes:

All those bad poems. . .somehow stuck in my mind and became the forms and language I would always have to work with: Henley's "Invictus"; Fisher's "I met her on the Umbrian Hills"; Bourdillon's "The night has a thousand eyes"; Dana Miller's "And this I hate"; and the writers: Stevenson, Vachel Lindsay; Rupert Brooke; Alfred Noyes; Christina Rossetti; Alice Meynell; Tennyson; Bliss Carman; the whole panoply of 19th century versification ranging as it does from the impossibly sublime to the intense inane. . .The contradictions didn't strike me then; only later, only now, in the attempt to locate a self, a place (72-73).

Davies cites other selections, a Pindaric ode by Ben Jonson, excerpts of Don Quixote, Mr. Pickwick, Ali Baba, Sir Walter Scott, R.L. Stevenson, and later such Canadian writers as Wilfred Campbell. "Nowadays," he says, some of the choices "would probably be condemned as elitist, for they gave children hard nuts to crack, and it is certain that not every child cracked them" (5). Davies

disagrees with "later educational psychologists who were so earnest in their desire that a child should not be confronted with anything it could not fully comprehend, and who never understood how warmly intelligent children respond to what they partly comprehend" (4).

In his own case--a counter to Browning's "April" perhaps--Davies remembers responding in High School to Wilfred Campbell's "How one winter came in the lake region":

That night I felt the winter in my veins,  
Joyous tremor of the icy glow;  
And woke to hear the north's wild vibrant strains,  
While far and wide, by withered woods and plains,  
Fast fell the driving snow.

That, he says, "was literary adventure, for there was our own weather and our own landscape transformed into poetry" (6).

It must go without saying--neither Allen nor Davies nor Mandel nor Curtis mentions it--that the charms of poetry, about recognizable weather and landscape and emotional concepts ("The night has a thousand eyes"), were extended well beyond the confines of the textbook through the glories of memory-work, escalated and echoing, a couple of generations ago, to the higher plane of "elocution." I know one Canadian veteran of the Second World War who quotes Rupert Brooke at the drop of a . . .drop:

If I should die think only this of me,  
That there's some corner of a foreign field  
That is forever England. There shall be  
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed,  
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware. . .

Perhaps that 11-year-old pupil of 1910, who was postulated earlier, went on to survive the First World War--and was *enabled* to do so--silently chanting in his mind, "Let dusky Indians whine and kneel/An English lad must die", or perhaps lines from the Ontario Reader's Kipling, "Oh Motherland, we pledge to thee,/Head, heart and hand through years to be."

O, the joy of memory-work, of poetry possessed--how untraceable are its ways! My father, a farmer for much of his life, would recite from Tennyson's "The Brook":

I come from haunts of coot and hern  
I make a sudden sally,  
And sparkle out among the fern  
To bicker down a valley.

.....

For men may come and men may go  
But I go on for ever.

An uncle, also a graduate of eight years in the country school, would spout Shakespeare: "Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,/Sermons in stones, and good in everything" (*As you like it*, II, i).

An Alberta-born and educated friend, now a Francophone living in Montreal, shares with me the memory-work echo of poems by William H. Drummond set in turn-of-the-century Quebec:

You bad leetle boy, not moche you care  
How busy you're kipin' your poor grand'pere  
Tryin' to stop you ev'ry day  
Chasin' de hen aroun' de hay --  
W'y don't you geev' dem a chance to lay?  
    Leetle Bateese!  
    ("Leetle Bateese")

or

For de win' she blow lak' hurricane,  
    Bimeby she blow some more,  
An' de scow bus' up on Lac St. Pierre  
    Wan arpent from de shore.  
    ("The Wreck of the 'Julie Plante'")

or even

Ma fren' dat's a fack, I know you will say,  
    W'en you come on dis contree again,  
Dere's no girl can touch, w'at we see ev'ry day  
    De nice leetle Canadienne.  
    ("De Nice Leetle Canadienne")

My friend's wife, a Francophone educated in Quebec, who had no schoolroom encounter with Drummond's work, suffers mid-life amazement at its popularity and preservation in out-of-province minds.

It is similarly ironic that the favourite recitation of Homer Watson, Canada's pioneer landscape artist who achieved fame by breaking away from European models and becoming the first painter "to see Canada as Canada," was a poem by an Englishman recounting an episode from ancient Rome: Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay's "Horatius at the bridge." Watson (1855-1936), though he quit the village school at Doon (now part of Kitchener) at Grade Six, entertained the community at least until the age of 30 by proclaiming with appropriate histrionics:

Hew down the bridge, Sir Consul,  
With all the speed ye may;  
I, with two more to help me,  
Will hold the foe in play.  
In yon strait path a thousand  
May well be stopped by three.  
Now, who will stand on either hand,  
And keep the bridge with me?

In 1879, on a canoe trip down the Grand River, Watson and three companions were welcomed by Pauline Johnson's father at Chiefswood on the Six Nations Indian Reserve below Brantford. It is recorded that an impromptu party developed and that Watson played the piano. It is my private speculation that he also recited "Horatius" with vigour--and that, in the peak of the moment, one among the audience, the teenage Pauline, as yet unknown, was suddenly struck with an idea that would make her famous. Her dramatic renderings from the concert hall stage of

West wind, blow from your prairie nest,  
Blow from the mountains, blow from the west.  
The sail is idle, the sailor too;  
O! wind of the west, we wait for you.

.....  
The river rolls in its rocky bed;  
My paddle is plying its way ahead;  
Dip, dip  
While the waters flip  
In foam as over their breast we slip.  
("The song my paddle sings")

followed by

Captive! Is there a hell to him like this?  
A taunt more galling than the Huron's hiss?  
He--proud and scornful, he--who laughed at law,  
He--scion of the deadly Iroquois,  
He--the bloodthirsty, he--the Mohawk chief. . .

and

Little brown baby-bird, lapped in your nest,  
Wrapped in your nest,  
Strapped in your nest,  
Your straight little cradle-board rocks you to rest. . .  
("Lullaby of the Iroquois")

and others of her poems immediately warmed the hearts of thousands of memory-work veterans across this continent and in England.

Recently, pupils from Doon Public School tried to emulate Homer Watson in a Homer Watson Recitation Contest (with a donated prize of \$150). They recited the Macaulay classic before an appreciative audience at the refurbished city-owned Watson House and Gallery. It is still too early to say whether or not the experience has engendered any new Pauline Johnsons or Homer Watsons, or, for that matter, Macaulays.

For many readers of this journal, it is not too early, and, it is hoped, not too late, to report on the content of early school Readers and/or the memory-work arising therefrom, or from elsewhere. Anyone with a remembrance of Readers past, or of memory-work that keeps coming back like . . . memory work does, is asked to write to this journal: "Readers and Memory-work" CCL, Dept. of English, University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario. N1G 2W1. Recommendations of material that might well be re-inserted in Readers, or of memorable memory-work, are welcome, as is general comment upon the whole nostalgic shaping process of school reading, past and present, and on the potential effect upon current schoolchildren of having, in many cases, no poetry possessed, no lines preserved, forcibly at the time, and then--(faster than a word processor)--magically in memory.

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