



# TEN YEARS OF ADULT EDUCATION

*A Report on a Decade of Progress  
in the American Movement*

BY

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## FOREWORD

"STEP by step takes a man over the mountain," runs a proverb of my country-side. Workers and students on any one of the slopes of the heaped-up mountain of adult education activities are aware of the formidable bulk of the undertaking of which they are a part. But only dimly aware. Above and beyond and around the small field in which they are delving—university extension, working women's summer schools, discussion-forums, business men's evening drawing classes, museum study—they feel rather than see a daunting mass looming and sprawling in grassy foothills and sterile ravines and rocky crags and stagnant swamps and rich alpine pastures. If, stopping for a moment to draw breath, they cast a look up and around them, they are really daunted by the numbers of all those apparently disorganized ramifications of the idea to which they have given their allegiance and their services. Like all people who stand still to look at difficulties rather than advancing to attack them, they see impossibility spelled out in large letters over the task of mapping that confusion. How could anybody, they wonder, ever find his way over and around through that wilderness, let alone bringing back any intelligible and trustworthy account of what is there.

This book is such an account of the whole field, as

it is today, in 1934, brought back after a comprehensive survey by the man who has been Director of the American Association for Adult Education ever since its beginning. He has looked at what is going on in every corner of adult education, and has set down here a complete and impartial report on what he has seen. For Mr. Cartwright is not only in an official position which gives him access to more information on those formidably numerous and heterogeneous facts than anybody else, his is the right kind of personality for ordering and classifying and appraising them. He has never forgotten that he is the director of a series of research experiments in a new field that needs exploring more than immediate settlement, and has never allowed himself to think or act as a partisan of this or that theoretical (and as yet unproved) conviction. Read the chapter on "Education and Propaganda" for a sample of this mental quality of his which has been beyond price in the first years of a movement separated from propaganda only by a knife-edge, as is adult education in a democracy.

In another unceasing battle between partisans he has stood as quietly aware of the real proportions of the situation and of the true perspective of the whole, in the fight between those who are hotly convinced that vocational training of some kind—the definite increase in a directly useful skill—is the only form of adult intellectual effort that has any real vitality, any roots in reality, and those others who affirm as energetically that the only kind of adult education worthy

of support is disinterestedly free from any monetary or material purposefulness. Surrounded by people excitedly crying out that the elephant is all legs and motive force, or all body and stability, or all supple waving trunk and flexible unstrenuous grace, he has never lost his clear perception that it is none of these things and all of them—that it is a large and very complex living creature. So that when he looks at one or another part of the enterprise to which he has given his days and nights for the last decade, he looks fairly and without prejudice, and one may accept his report as fact.

Of the step-by-step tireless industry which has made him so familiar with every corner of the sprawling adult education mountain, the reader can get an idea by looking at Chapter VIII on “The Size of the Problem” in which are set down tentative figures both of the staggering numbers enrolled in one or another form of adult study (twenty millions is the estimate) and of the staggering sums spent on this effort—ten to twelve billion dollars. The interests and activity of the American Association for Adult Education being most in the exploration of the possibilities of this little-studied field, the most complete outfit of facts and statistics is in Chapter IX, with its detailed report on all the activities that have been undertaken as experiments. But his chapter on other, permanently established forms of adult education—parent education, college alumni reading, private correspondence schools, museums, libraries, etc.—although not so but-

tressed by detailed inside information, is full of substance and should not be missed by anyone wishing to know what is taking place in this rapidly shifting corner of the American scene.

Above all this report is invaluable to anyone interested in adult education because it provides for the first time some written impressions of the different personalities emerging as leaders in one or another part of this new work. It is of distinct value to have a report which gives—well, let us say to people working in the discussion-forum field, some idea of the extremely interesting and promising research into reading as a function of the literate modern world. Beneath the accounts of experimentation and of operation in this new and yet old field of adult education lie the life-narratives of several hundred earnest and self-sacrificing American men and women. Through their individual efforts and organizational activities they are breaking new ground in an untried and often unexplored area of educational endeavor. To them should go the credit for the establishment of the American movement for adult education. The accomplishments chronicled in this volume are theirs.

Perhaps Mr. Cartwright shows himself a good guide in this uncharted region of American activity most of all by his capacity to take into account the great mass of details, the bewildering variety of facts, ascertained and guessed-at—and still not to lose his sense of direction. No one of the idealists of the movement, winging the irresponsible way of idealists in the thin air of

theory, unhampered and unbruised by collisions with fact, has ever made a better statement of the goal toward which this mass movement is fumblingly trying to direct itself, than he when he says, "Intellectual pursuits can suffer no depression. The ambition of adult education is to set men free—from governmental oppression, from materialism, from bad taste in living, in music, in drama, in recreation, and most of all free from the utter drabness of unfilled lives."

DOROTHY CANFIELD FISHER.

Arlington, Vermont  
November, 1934

## PREFACE

THE writer makes no apology for the disconnected nature of this report. It is a brief account of the history of a broad educational movement over the period of a single decade. This movement is a patchwork quilt, its colors varying from bright to dim, its pieces both large and small. It is sewn together with threads of thickness and threads of gossamer-like fragility, but sewn together it is and adult education is its name. It does not pretend to adequacy in covering the nakedness of our national ignorance. It is cold and draughty in spots though warm and glowing in others. But faulty as it is, it represents withal a courageous commencement. As such its story is worth the writing. It is presented with the hope that, whatever its present value may be, eventually it may have significance for those who in a later day pore over chronicles of forgotten educational history in attempts to interpret the *mores* of an earlier time.

The compiler of this report is indebted to many of those intimately concerned in various phases of adult education leadership for the last ten years. Many of the factual data included and indicated are attributable to the contributors to the *Handbook of Adult Education in the United States*. For the opportunity of view-



ing the field in perspective, the writer's gratitude is expressed to President Frederick P. Keppel of the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The compilation of the report was his idea. Thanks are also due to the Trustees of the Carnegie Corporation of New York who authorized the study and to whom this ten-year report was first submitted.

MORSE A. CARTWRIGHT.

New York City  
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## PART I—HISTORICAL



## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

BEFORE the month of June, 1924, the term "adult education" was not in use in the United States of America. It is almost exactly ten years since the Carnegie Corporation of New York summoned its first conference on the education of adults. This conference initiated a series of studies, carried on continuously since, whose function has been to blaze a new trail through a veritable virgin forest of educational possibilities. The result has been gratifying in that those professionally interested in education have come to recognize the importance of the adult problem. But more encouraging by far has been the response of large sections of the public to the idea.

New vistas of educational opportunity have enthusiastically been welcomed by increasing numbers of discriminating individuals. In a single decade adult education has progressed from the status of unwanted step-child, ill-clothed and scantily fed, to that of full membership in the educational family. To change the figure slightly, this educational Cinderella is at present the wooed and courted maiden of the instructional ball, with willing swains from the universities, from the

night schools, from the relief authority, from labor, from industry (to name but a few), all anxious to fit a slipper to a mature but well-formed foot. For it has been learned that the adult foot, when raised or lowered in the voting booth and elsewhere, controls the funds by which in the final analysis the whole educational family is supported. The budgetary possibilities of adult education are great as many able administrators have recently become aware. And the fateful hour of twelve is not yet—not even in sight and, in fact, it may never come. Even if it does, there is ample evidence that the American public will consider the glass slipper an excellent fit.

It is interesting that the recently appointed Commissioner of Education of the United States undoubtedly was chosen, not alone for his eminence as an educator of children, but because he had conducted a nationally known experiment in education for adults. This is but one evidence of public recognition of the importance of this old but newly emphasized field of educational activity. No educational council table is now complete without representation of the adult and his peculiar out-of-school problems.

So much for mere growth! Our question in this discussion deals not so much with quantity as with quality, not so much with statistics as with social significance. Do the adult education happenings in America in the last decade constitute a social phenomenon of importance? If so, why and how? Is there an educational ferment—not necessarily a political ferment—

at work in the huge doughy mass of our national ignorance, carelessness and backwardness? It is of vast importance to the United States to know whether there is under way an improvement in the quality of our thinking rather than a mere increase in the amount of it.

It is quite clear that great financial depressions inevitably have the effect of heightening the amount of serious thinking on the part of the public. But mass thinking without qualitative direction from within will avail us little in the way of surcease from our pains, economic or spiritual. If the quality of our thinking is on the up-grade, if a factor of understanding has crept in to give intelligent direction to the followership we customarily accord our leaders, then perhaps there may lie hope ahead.

For the success or unsuccess of a democracy, unlike that of a dictatorship, depends directly upon the degree of intelligence exhibited by the masses. And that degree of intelligence depends squarely upon the amount of educational opportunity that has been continuously open to those masses. Admittedly the process takes time. But if our nation can now be said to be emerging from the present economic crisis with most of its tried democratic institutions intact, it is high time that we concerned ourselves with social and educational insurance against the next depression in the business and governmental cycle.

Those who have closely observed the adult education movement in the last ten years in America believe



that it does constitute a social phenomenon of significance in our national life. They feel that there is a most healthful and promising educational ferment at work among our hundred and a quarter millions. They would have difficulty perhaps in proving conclusively that better thinking is replacing careless acceptance of whatever may come, but they would stake their professional reputations upon the existence of an up-swing in our civilization. That is important, for civilizations never stand still. They go forward or go back. In the hysteria that possessed us from Armistice Day, 1918, to the crash of 1929, it seems clear now that we were retrogressing. In the half-decade since, there are innumerable though inconclusive signs that we are again progressing. It is hoped that some of these signs may be made clear in the pages that follow.

Some of those concerned with adult education would go so far as to interpret broadly the present movement as a major item of proof that the long-awaited cultural awakening in America is at last in progress. They see coordinated with it a recrudescence of interest in the arts and architecture, they interpret the radio as the creator of a national taste for good music, they point to the little theater movement, to local orchestras, to library circulation figures, to museum attendance, all as indications of the healthy growth of a folk culture in America. One would like to agree with these incurable optimists; one would hope that they might be right. Who knows? They may be. But in the meantime much work remains to be done.