Lawrence A. Cremin

Traditions of American Education

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PREFACE

TO HAVE BEEN INVITED by the University of Wisconsin to inaugurate the Merle Curti Lectures is one of the loveliest honors that has come to me, and I am profoundly grateful. The occasion affords me the opportunity to acknowledge on behalf of an entire generation of American historians the debt we owe Merle Curti for the inspiration and example of his scholarship. And it gives me the chance to acknowledge as well the debt I owe him personally for his encouragement, his counsel, and his generosity over the years, and, most treasured of all, for the gift of his friendship.

The opportunity to deliver the lectures came at a propitious time in the course of my own scholarship, namely, the midpoint of my efforts on a three-volume comprehensive history of American education. Indeed, the lecture committee invited

me quite explicitly to use the occasion to discuss aspects of my work in progress. As a result, the first lecture, dealing with the period from the beginnings of colonization to the achievement of independence, is derived essentially from *American Education: The Colonial Experience*, which was published in 1970. My theme there is the successful transplantation of European educational institutions to the New World and their gradual modification under novel conditions. The second lecture, dealing with the first century of nationhood, is drawn from *American Education: The National Experience*, which has been fully drafted but not yet published. My theme there is the development of an authentic American vernacular in education, expressly intended to advance a popular *paideia* compounded of democratic hopes, evangelical pieties, and millennial expectations. And the third lecture, dealing with the period since Reconstruction, is based on *American Education: The Metropolitan Experience*, which has been substantially sketched but not yet fully drafted. My theme there is the transformation and proliferation of American educative agencies under the influence of industrialization, urbanization, technological innovation, and transnational expansion.

As in the larger work, I have defined education broadly, as the deliberate, systematic, and sustained effort to transmit, evoke, or acquire knowledge, attitudes, values, skills, or sensibilities, as well as any outcomes of that effort. And I have given particular attention in the lectures to the changing configurations of education at different times in American history and to the various ways in which individuals have interacted with those configurations. The more general theory underly-

ing all this is explicated in the note on problematics and sources appended to the lectures and is further elaborated in *Public Education*, which may be regarded as a companion to the present volume.

I should like to state my gratitude to H. Edwin Young, Chancellor of the University of Wisconsin at Madison, to David Fellman, Theodore S. Hamerow, Jurgen Herbst, Carl F. Kaestle, and Stanley I. Kutler, and to Merle Curti himself, for their gracious hospitality during my stay at the University in March of 1976. I should also like to acknowledge the generous assistance of Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, Steven L. Schlossman, Judith Suratt, and Toni Thalenberg in the research on which the lectures are based and in the preparation of the lectures for publication. And I should like finally to express my appreciation to the Carnegie Corporation of New York for its continuing encouragement and support of my scholarly endeavors.

L.A.C.

CONTENTS

THE COLONIAL EXPERIENCE: 1607–1783

THE SETTLEMENT of America, it has been said, had its origins in the unsettlement of Europe—in that vast and pervasive upheaval that scholars have come to call "the general crisis of the seventeenth century." The elements of the crisis are well known: the dissolution of the feudal economy and the rise of mercantile capitalism; the intellectual turbulence occasioned by the Renaissance and Reformation; the turmoil of the Thirty Years' War and the political rebellions that erupted almost simultaneously in a half-dozen different countries. "These days are days of shaking . . . ," the English preacher Jeremiah Whittaker lamented to the House of Commons during the winter of 1642–1643, "and this shaking is universal:

the Palatinate, Bohemia, Germania, Catalonia, Portugal, Ireland, England." [1]

Whittaker had every reason to talk of shaking, for England itself was in the throes of a civil war. But the sources of the shaking lay far deeper than the immediacies of that particular conflict. For almost a century, the effects of population growth, land speculation, social mobility, and religious strife had combined to rock the very foundations of English belief and custom. And popular malaise had only been exacerbated by disturbing reports of new planets in the heavens and new continents beyond the seas. Somehow, millennial hopes had linked with grim forebodings to portend that, whatever happened, nothing would ever be the same again. The result was a generation of "vexed and troubled Englishmen," of whom an unprecedented number simply decided to leave the country. A few crossed the Channel to France, Holland, and the Palatinate, where they eventually merged with the native populations. More crossed the Irish Sea to Ulster. But by far the greatest number crossed the Atlantic to America, establishing themselves there in a chain of settlements that stretched some thirty-six hundred miles, from Newfoundland on the north to Guiana on the Spanish Main. In the process, an empire came into being.[2]

Now, it is this fact of empire that holds the key to the dynamics of early American education. For one thing, the North American continent was neither empty nor virgin at the time

[1] Whittaker's lamentation is given in H. R. Trevor-Roper, "The General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century," in Trevor Astin, ed., *Crisis in Europe, 1560–1660* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), p. 59.

[2] Carl Bridenbaugh, *Vexed and Troubled Englishmen, 1590–1642* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968).

of European settlement; it had been populated for centuries by a variety of Indian peoples, who had developed their own historic civilizations based on different combinations of hunting, fishing, mining, and agriculture. Thus, the initial reality of American education was the experience of culture contact. Whether the Europeans ended up enslaving the Indians, or dispersing them, or living side by side with them, they inevitably taught them and learned from them. And, while the literary sources on which historians have traditionally relied make much of the Europeans bringing the gospel to the heathen, it is well to remember that the heathen brought maize to the Europeans, along with much else by way of knowledge, skill, and wisdom that in the end may actually have enabled the Europeans to survive.

Then, too, quite apart from the Indians, the very notion of empire embodied an inescapable commitment to education. However the metropolis conceived of its colonies—as exploitative manufactories, or trading centers, or missionary outposts, or metropolitan exurbs—the metropolis became increasingly dependent upon education to nurture the discipline, the loyalty, and the expertise that were vital to the metropolitan-colonial relationship. In enforcing mercantilist policy, raw power and promised reward could go only so far—how many times, after all, could one proclaim that he who does not work shall not eat? Persuasion and the habits born of persuasion had to prevail. In the long run, it was easier to teach the reciprocal duties of king and commoner, the indissoluble ties of colony and mother-country, and the ultimate value of contentment.

Of course, the English were not the only people to colonize

North America during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Spanish established St. Augustine as early as 1565; the French planted permanent settlements in Acadia and Quebec in 1605 and 1608; the Dutch established New Amsterdam on the Hudson in 1624; and the Swedes founded New Sweden along the banks of the Delaware in 1638. And, beyond these organized quasi-governmental ventures, there were scattered groups of Spanish and Portuguese Jews, Scottish Presbyterians, and German sectarians who came on their own, and growing numbers of blacks who were brought forcibly to be sold into slavery. Obviously, the experience of culture contact went far beyond relationships between Europeans and Indians, it was of the essence in relationships between one group of Europeans and another. Whatever the burdens colonization itself might have placed on education, those burdens were only heightened by the presence of rival colonizers. We see the process at work in the seventeenth-century competition between the Dutch and the English in New York, and we see it too in the eighteenth-century competition between the French and the English in the region of the St. Lawrence. The Intercolonial Wars were cultural as well as military conflicts, with the loyalty of large numbers of Indians and whites very much at stake.

In the end, English culture triumphed, and with it English law, English language, and English custom. And that triumph, I would suggest, was decisive in the development of early American education. On the one hand, it testified to the extraordinary effectiveness of English educational endeavor, and, on the other hand, it set the pattern of much that would

come later. To argue thus is not to deny that the English enjoyed considerable advantage in numbers, wealth, and colonial organization—after all, there were more Englishmen to begin with and they did prevail militarily—it is merely to assert that education had contributed to the victory.

How, then, do we explain this remarkable effectiveness of Anglo-American educational effort? I believe it derived from four sources. First, England itself had undergone a phenomenal educational development during the Tudor and early Stuart eras. There had been a revival of the ancient prophetic function within the Anglican church, with the Bible made widely available to the laity and the priesthood charged with the systematic exegesis of its teachings. Under the various statutes of supremacy and uniformity, a vast system of universal compulsory education had grown up, centered in the parish churches, controlled by the Crown and its official ecclesiastical representatives, conducted by an orthodox and closely supervised clergy, and concentrating on a curriculum consisting of the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer (which included an authorized catechism, an authorized book of homilies, and an authorized primer). There had been a contemporary expansion and revitalization of schooling, sparked by the humanists and assisted by a massive infusion of gifts from merchant and gentry families, and there had been a concomitant quickening of Oxford, Cambridge, and the Inns of Court, as new colleges were founded, new social groups gained access, and new subjects of study made their way into the curriculum. There had been a rapid extension of printing that, even under the most stringent royal control, had radically

increased the availability of knowledge and opinion of every variety, including some varieties that the authorities wished to proscribe. And there had been a succession of parliamentary acts requiring that every individual live within the discipline of some family or surrogate family and enjoining all families to see to the proper religious and vocational training of their members. The result was that the English had already had considerable experience with the political and social uses of education by the time of settlement and had worked out a fairly efficient organizational technology for delivering educational services on an unprecedented scale. And it was the Puritans, incidentally, who were to constitute such a significant proportion of the migrants, who had developed to the greatest degree both the readiness to use education for social purposes and the technology for doing so.

Second, not only had the English developed considerable expertise in the business of providing education, they had also learned to take advantage of education in ways that became profoundly important in the colonial setting. They were, after all, increasingly literate, both technically and substantively: more Englishmen knew how to read and more Englishmen actively sought knowledge on a greater variety of subjects, knowledge about what to believe, how to behave, how to raise children, how to stay healthy, how to make money, in effect, how to live and how to die. In addition, the very turbulence of English society during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the uncertainties engendered by that turbulence drove people systematically to search for knowledge and advice that in more stable times they might simply have come by in the

informal processes of growing up. Amidst massive religious confusion, people desperately wanted to know what they must do to be saved; amidst massive social confusion, they wanted almost as desperately to know which fork to use and when. The generalization may not have applied to all Englishmen, but it surely applied to a rising proportion of the so-called middling classes, that they came more actively to church, school, books, and experience, as seekers rather than as passive recipients. In short, the educative style of the English underwent a transformation during the Renaissance, and the counterpart of a newly expanded and more complex technology of instruction was a growing number of more aggressive students, utilizing the various opportunities and institutions of education for their own purposes and to their own ends.

Third, the English conception of colonization moved farther and faster than that of any other European power during the early seventeenth century, from an earlier version that saw colonies as exploitative bands of transient men in the employ of metropolitan sponsors to a later version that saw colonies as permanent, self-sustaining communities of men, women, and children. As these communities came into being, they recreated the churches, the schools, the print shops, and especially the family forms they had known in England. The process not only released Anglo-Americans from the vicissitudes of metropolitan interest, emigration, and wherewithal, it also enabled them to propagate their ideas, values, and customs with comparative vigor. The very institutions that ensured self-sufficiency became weapons in the competition of cultures.

Finally, there was the peculiar linking of God, king, and

Mammon that stood at the heart of the English notion of empire. The colonists were seen (and indeed they saw themselves) not merely as patriots and adventurers but as agents of God's grand design for the world. It is no surprise to learn that the Puritan preacher John Cotton found scriptural sanction for the voyage to New England in his sermon to the Winthrop fleet at Gravesend in June, 1630: "I will appoint a place for my people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in a place of their own, and move no more; neither shall the children of wickedness afflict them any more, as beforetime." Moreover, as Carl Bridenbaugh has pointed out, Anglican worthies such as Robert Gray and John Donne also quoted Scripture in the cause of colonization. Indeed, any ordinary Englishman seeking his own justification for migrating could find it among the numerous so-called emigration texts sprinkled through Genesis, Joshua, Samuel, Joel, and Matthew. Needless to say, the feeling of being part of God's grand design proved enormously energizing. It suffused colonial politics and commerce with a zealous sense of righteousness, and it bound together the institutions of colonial education with a heady sense of purpose, as the colonists went about the work of creating and sustaining Zion. That such millennial aspirations were utterly utopian seems to have added to their power rather than detracting from it—at least in the beginning. Later on, when reality made itself felt with a vengeance, millennialism reappeared in variant forms, gaining new vigor from the very bleakness of the colonial environment.[3]

[3] Bridenbaugh, *Vexed and Troubled Englishmen*, p. 402. The scriptural passage is from II Sam. 7:10.