

While radical revisionism in Canadian educational historiography has greatly broadened our understanding of Canada's educational past, it has generally been obsessed with the notion of social control. Since Alison Prentice's *The School Promoters* (1977) is the first major Canadian monograph emerging from the "social control school," it is an important model epitomizing what many radical historians, Canadian and American, have been thinking for some time. Unfortunately, its assumptions about the nature of social control tend to be ill-conceived, ambiguous, and unduly negative.

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### The Maleficent Obsession: Social Control and the Schools

Recently Neil Sutherland has divided educational historians into three groups—conventional whigs, moderate revisionists, and radical revisionists.<sup>1</sup> In Canada, many of the radicals, he noted, were operating under the influence of Michael Katz, whose *The Irony of Early School Reform* (1968) and *Class Bureaucracy and Schools* (1971) helped to set the more sombre scene of the new educational history.<sup>2</sup> Katz and many of his students, including Alison Prentice, Susan Houston, Haley Bamman, Harvey Graff, and others, participated in a special 1972 issue of the *History of Education Quarterly* devoted to recent work in Canadian educational history. Published later as the book *Education and Social Change* (1975), this collection highlighted a number of concerns of the radicals.<sup>3</sup> It revealed their obsession with the malignant influences of social class, racism, sexism, and bureaucracy which they felt subverted the cause of equal opportunity. Part of what Patricia Rooke calls the shift "from Pollyanna to Jeremiah," these concerns reflected the about-face in an historiography sickened by the sweetness of the rise of the munificent, all-bestowing and enlightening school.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Neil Sutherland, "Introduction: Towards a History of English Canadian Youngsters," in Paul H. Mattingly and Michael B. Katz, eds., *Education and Social Change: Themes from Ontario's Past* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), pp. xi-xxxi.

<sup>2</sup>Other influential studies included: Marvin Lazerson, *Origins of the Urban School: Public Education in Massachusetts, 1870-1915* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971); Joel H. Spring, *Education and the Rise of the Corporate State* (Boston: Beacon, 1972); Clarence Karier, Paul C. Violas, Joel Spring, *Roots of Crisis: American Education in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1973); Carl Kaestle, *The Evolution of an Urban School System: New York City, 1750-1850* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973); David Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974).

<sup>3</sup>Not all the articles were radical in tone. See Sutherland's introduction, above. See also J. Donald Wilson and David C. Jones, "The 'New' History of Canadian Education," *History of Education Quarterly* 16 (Fall, 1976): 367-376; and J. Donald Wilson, "Historiographical Perspectives on Canadian Educational History," *Journal of Educational Thought* 11 (April, 1977): 49-63.

At the heart of the radical case were an explicit belief and an assumption, the first, that the purpose of schooling was social control, and the second, that voluntarism was a clear and acceptable alternative. This implicit acceptance of voluntarism stemmed from a typical 1960s fixation upon restraint which was viewed as inimical to personal and social development, and from the logic of the radical argument which suggested that if control were bad then perhaps its opposite was good. The failure to explore the virtues and vices of voluntarism, combined with the radicals' feeling that schools could not change since they reflected rather than directed society, fed the bitterness and cynicism often associated with radical historiography.

The most productive of Katz's former students has been Alison Prentice. Recently she co-edited a book of readings with Susan Houston entitled *Family, School and Society* (1975). Now she has written *The School Promoters: Education and Social Class in Mid-Nineteenth Century Upper Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977), an important synthesis of Ontario schooling up to 1876.<sup>5</sup> Since *The Promoters* is the first major monograph emerging from the control school in Canadian educational historiography, it deserves considerable attention for it epitomizes what a group of closely knit scholars have been thinking for some time.

Basically Prentice seeks to dispell the "myths" surrounding the history of education in Upper Canada and Ontario. Disparaging the conventional tendency to focus on Ryerson, the politico/religious wrangles of the nineteenth century, and the heroism of educational reformers, she feels that historians have not examined the causes of the rise of schools. The old assumption that schools were democratic and humanitarian responses to the evils of illiteracy and mass ignorance, she hotly contests. Historians, she states, have heretofore failed to examine properly what school promoters wanted or achieved. Her central concerns thus are "the economic and social implications of educational reform in mid-nineteenth century Ontario." (p. 15)

An overview of the book reveals many themes—wrenching education from family control, isolating children from a dangerous community, suppressing physical and sensual propensities, institutionalizing a public purpose, the search for respectability, the unfairness of schools, and the class bias in the system. All were related to the quest for social control.

Early nineteenth century education, Prentice says, was voluntary, various, and informal, and often carried on in the household, workshop or field. "The vast majority of Upper Canadians were satisfied with a minimal schooling for their children," she adds, and the potpourri of public and private, casual and formal, "seems to have produced a basic literacy for the majority of people in the province." (p. 16) The principal changes in mid-century involved the imposition of systematized, compulsory, free, common schools with both public finance and

<sup>4</sup>Patricia T. Rooke, "From Pollyanna to Jeremiah — Recent Interpretations of American Educational History," *Journal of Educational Thought* 9 (April, 1975): 15-28. For other important reviews of recent literature see: Carl Kaestle, "Social Reform and the Urban School," *History of Education Quarterly* 12 (Summer, 1972): 211-228; Marvin Lazerson, "Revisionism and American Educational History," *Harvard Educational Review* 43 (May, 1973): 269-283; Merle L. Borrowman, "Studies in the History of American Education," *Review of Education* 1 (1975): 56-66; Wayne J. Urban, "Some Historiographical Problems in Revisionist Education History," *American Educational Research Journal* 12 (1975): 337-350; Patricia T. Rooke, "The 'Child-Institutionalized' in Canada, Britain and the United States: A Trans-Atlantic Perspective," *The Journal of Educational Thought* 11 (October, 1977): 156-171.

<sup>5</sup>This study will be followed by Robert Stamp's *The Schools of Ontario, volume 2, 1876-1976*. See also Susan Mann Trofimenkoff and Alison Prentice, eds., *The Neglected Majority: Essays in Canadian Women's History* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977).

public goals. Prentice traces the tightening of centralization from the School Act of 1846 which created a chief superintendent, a normal school and a board of education, or council of public instruction, with control over Upper Canadian normal, common, and separate schools. With the Act of 1871 a provincially controlled inspectorate replaced the locally controlled lay superintendency. Significantly, authority over school texts, curricula, regulations, prayers, and attendance was wrenched from parents and local school authorities and placed in the hands of the state.

The dramatic increase in school enrolment from 102,000 in 1846 to 372,000 in 1866, Prentice says, was due to changes in environment and in the perceived "nature and needs of children." (pp. 149, 20) She argues that the community was increasingly seen as a dangerous milieu from which the child should be isolated. Further, the child was increasingly viewed as susceptible to the danger and needing protective encapsulation. The flocking to school was also, of course, a self motivating act which swelled enrolment.

Prentice believes that the prevailing ideology of the times was often dominated by a view of human nature which stressed man's governance by readily understandable laws. Infused with evangelical Christianity, school promoters understood man as part of a triad of physical, intellectual, and moral faculties wherein the physical was ever ready to consume the others. As the *Journal of Educational* wrote in 1860, "Sensuality is the greatest enemy to human progress." (p. 20) Since the child was viewed by promoters as innocent but infinitely malleable, a major goal of education was to suppress his physical and sensual propensities.

If institutionalization was a response to this fear, it was also, as Prentice reminds us, a common mid-nineteenth century solution to all forms of social disorder, including — French/English hostility, labor unrest, the Canadian rebellions, the American Civil War, the dislocative effects of urbanization and the emigration of famine Irish. Understandably schoolmen saw themselves amid rapid social and economic change. Traditional patterns of child care were no longer adequate. As education became a matter of state it assumed a public function—namely, "the social, moral, intellectual and economic elevation of a generation of Upper Canadians who, improved through proper education would be the equals of their neighbours and no longer mere 'hewers of wood and drawers of water' for those better educated than they." (pp. 61-62)

One of the most prominent themes in the writing of the school promoters was the search for "respectability." This entailed "refined manners and taste, respectable religion, proper speech and . . . the ability to read and write proper English." (p. 68) It also entailed the possession of private property. Interestingly, for Prentice the incessant stress on grammar and good pronunciation in the schools taught a sense of social class as much as it taught literacy. She thus bares the social implications of the three Rs.

Changes in the world of work, in the meantime, increased the significance of schools. Occupations shifted as the pre-industrial conditions of self-employment, often in the home and following the father's footsteps, were replaced with the "modern" conditions of factories with bureaucracies and many workers. Additionally, apprenticeships were disappearing as was the old order based on hierarchy of ranks. To the question of how man was to be placed in society, the promoters insistently answered—by formal education.

Unhappily, the educational system was anything but fair. It excluded girls from classical courses in Grammar schools and from Upper Canada Academy. And it

deliberately sought to prepare a disciplined lower class which would assume the social thought and habits of the rich. Thus, Prentice says, the promoters "felt no qualms ... in describing the school system as 'a branch of the national police' ..." (p. 132) They assumed all along that "it was 'property' that would benefit in the long run . . ." (p. 133)

If schools were designed with more than democracy and humanitarianism in mind, it is easy to see why they failed to become institutions for all classes. Painstakingly Prentice shows the failure to attain equality of opportunity in mid-nineteenth century Ontario. A school district where everyone was poor, she says, could not afford a good school. Moreover, all schools were not open to all scholars. A host of factors prevented attendance, including—fees, necessity of working, the cost of boarding, traditional exclusiveness of grammar schools, lack of clothing, inability to buy books, distance from school, terrible teacher/pupil ratios, examinations, parental apathy, assorted plagues and afflictions such as the "itch," alternative schooling, and the prejudices of school teachers. Then too there was the rural/urban split in educational quality. And significantly the very quest for something beyond the common schools frustrated the quest for equal opportunity.

Clearly state education was less than lily white. Arguments against public schooling stressed opposition to the centralization of power, the unrepresentative nature of the Council of Public Instruction, the hoarding of regulatory powers by Ryerson and the Council, and the usurping of the rights of families. The promoters countered these with claims that parents did not have a "natural" right to direct any action of their children, that they were not entitled to keep their children in ignorance, that a Ryerson said, state "education is essential to the security of government, the supremacy of public law, and the enjoyment of public liberty, as well as to the individual interests of the members of the community . . ." (p. 179)

Prentice concludes by blaming the promoters for looking too much to future generations to solve their social problems and for concentrating too much upon social control. "The response of school reformers in Upper Canada to the social dislocations of their times, was, in sum," she says, "to promote an essentially inegalitarian view of society and an equally inegalitarian approach to schooling." (p. 184)

Much in Prentice's book is helpful, welcome, and constructive in our attempt to understand the history of education in this country. As an historian of a later period, I am particularly grateful for the ways that she has made twentieth century Canadian education more comprehensible. The fear of man's physical nature, of materialism and cities, the lack of public spirit and public interest in matters of the mind and soul, the belief in the gospel of self improvement, the idealization of rural environment, and the emphasis on spiritual and intellectual elevation as a motive amongst reformers—all formed the make-up of early twentieth century educational proponents as well. Further, the hope that normal school graduates would become educational leaders and models of status, the obsession with technology and control of nature, and the first concerted attempt to stem the exodus from the farms by introducing agriculture into the schools—these too help explain the kinds of people who grew up at the end of the Ryerson period and sought, particularly after the Agricultural Instruction Act (1913), to solve the rural problem. Prentice also illuminates the process by which formal education came to be considered part of "social class". Finally, in a period when important educational historians and scholars think that the school has been unable to do most of what was expected of it, that it mirrors the rest of social reality, and that it cannot be

expected to create social change, it is very interesting that the promoters successfully created in the minds of thousands the need for schools. Perhaps the greatest triumph of the school was the moment it came into existence. Whatever failures it later encountered, it surely succeeded in attracting the vast majority of Upper Canadian youths before the advent of compulsion. And if Prentice is right, its very existence was a factor in social change, in that it created a form of respectability and discrimination in Canadian minds which did not exist before.

Serious problems, nonetheless, exist with Prentice's overall interpretation. Her use of the term "social class" is confusing. She makes little reference to occupation. We have thus the curious anomaly of Michael Katz having painstakingly arrived at the structure of social class in Hamilton during the same period by employing exclusively objective occupational data, and Prentice, his former student, having reached a subjective assessment by employing the promoters' writings—and never the twain shall meet.<sup>6</sup> What Katz's entrepreneurs, artisans and labourers have to do with Prentice's "middle" proprietary class is not clear. If the relationship among Prentice's social classes and Katz's is uncertain, so is the relationship among Prentice's own classes. She says that the promoters had essentially a two class view of society, the educated and the noneducated, but when she labels one a "middle" class one suspects that there were three classes. Further, she says that the purpose of schooling was to elevate the middle classes. Presumably this means elevate them to upper class status. There is, however, very little talk about the upper stratum. This is unfortunate since a discussion of class, mobility and control systems presupposes a clear description of social origins and destinations. What did elevation of respectable or middle class mean? What was social class? Can one tell from this skimming kind of intellectual history? How successful were the schoolmen in promoting respectability?

Regarding the last question, over the long haul the promoters failed to establish the respectability of agriculture—judging at least from the numbers who stayed in the industry. If the promoters faltered in other areas too, one may be left with talk of social class which is socially meaningless. We would like to know when Prentice is talking about preferences of a small group of school promoters and about preferences of large "classes" or groups of people. Moreover, she seems to confuse social class with every form of discrimination imaginable. "To the extent that the classes did mingle in the same schools or school systems," she writes, "the introduction of competitive grading and of segregation by age and sex were clearly designed to perpetuate concepts of class." (p. 163) In her demolition of the old (half) myth that schools were about democracy and humanitarianism, she has overblowingly called every inequality under the sun, every difference, even in growth or progress, an evidence of social class. One concludes, quite erroneously, that everything that separates people—from wealth to toenail length—is infected with class.

Perhaps more significantly, Prentice appears to distort history in the interest of her social control thesis. Concerning what Ryerson and his fellow promoters meant by power, she stresses the power to dominate (usually the lower classes). Unfortunately this use of power is very restricted. Ryerson sometimes meant personal power which at times had little or nothing to do with social reality, the sort of psychological triumph that knowledge can bring almost as the result of a personal covenant between man and his Maker. He sometimes meant power over nature, another use which has less to do with social classes than Prentice implies. He often

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<sup>6</sup>Michael B. Katz, *The People of Hamilton, Canada West: Family and class in a Mid-Nineteenth Century City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press/Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975).

meant power to help one's fellow man—this surely was the promoters' meaning when they constantly railed at the lack of public service in the interest of community. Another way that Prentice distorts history is by almost completely ignoring the liberating effect of schooling and literacy. There is much more than control to what schools do. Surely, if the promoters really wanted so compulsively to control, the schools would never have taught literacy.<sup>7</sup>

Prentice also misrepresents the meaning and complexity of social control. Obsessed with domination and oppression, she holds an unnatural and unwise bitterness toward the notion of control. She leaves the impression of one class "conning" another and then employing a host of restraints and restrictions which simply ought not to befall any free choosing, self respecting man. She assumes that social control is in the interest of one class over another. She seems to imply that if a plutocrat lost a mansion to marauders and a pauper lost a shack, that the preservation of property is somehow more in the interest of the former. Likewise, she seems to suggest that if some nineteenth century "hitman" murdered an heiress and her servant at the same time, that the injunction not to kill was somehow more in the interest of the rich. Clearly, social control, in some of its most fundamental senses, is in *everyone's* interest. To Prentice's assumption that control is some sort of immoral restraint, my suggestion is that there are various forms of social control and that some are much more reprehensible or *desirable* than others. Generally, control by the educated is better than control by the ignorant, just as ethical guidance by the learned is better than amoral guidance by the unschooled.

To say that the school's main purpose was control is in many respects a tautology. Teaching implies control or restriction. Anytime anyone tries anything, it is a quest for control. Education tends to *mean* control, as does learning how to do things—this is what Ryerson meant when he stressed control over nature. If there are moral principles or spiritual meanings which we wish young people to learn, or if there is growth which we wish them to attain, we are talking of control.

Ryerson was not so much caught up in a quest for control as in a dilemma. His problem visited the second generation school proponents too—the J.W. Gibsons, the L.A. DeWolfes, the J.B. Dandenos, and the A.C. Gorhams—namely, what does a leader do when he "knows" what is good for the people and they will not universally accept it? What happened with both groups of school proponents was that they first tried persuasion, hoping the locals would see the light and actively practise self betterment. When this strategy did not work well, they tried compulsion, believing it no sin to force a man to do what was good for him. Prentice shows little compassion for Ryerson as he wrestled with this great problem, which was as much a missionary's dilemma as a promoter's. Once, to her credit, Prentice notes that Ryerson was concerned enough about the poor that he drafted a bill to provide government subsidies to benevolent and religious societies catering to education for the poor. (p. 157) Just possibly, Ryerson's life, in some important ways, was part of what Dewey called becoming, or growing, a process which, by the way, necessitates that one will be inconsistent over a lifetime. Prentice's fundamental conclusion of Ryerson—that he was inconsistency personified because he favored church education in 1826 and state education fifty years later in vastly changed circumstances—is, to say the least, unfair.

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<sup>7</sup>One must not overemphasize liberation either. It is wise to remember Lawrence Cremin's comments in this regard: "Education never liberates without at the same time limiting. It never empowers without at the same time constraining. Hence, the problem is rarely one of total freedom versus total control but rather what the balance is, and to what end, and in light of what alternatives." ("Notes Toward a Theory of Education", *Notes on Education* 1 (June, 1973): 5.)

To the extent that one can say that there was a dominant purpose of schooling, let me tentatively state that that purpose was not control but character. Character is a better descriptor for it implies both control and love. And there is very little about love in this book. As Timothy Smith has said, there is an inescapable connection between God's laws (restriction and control) and love.<sup>8</sup> The same was true of man's laws which in this religious period under devout men like Ryerson were often fashioned after the Word.

I conclude by offering a miscellany of comments. First, Prentice would have profited by spelling out the alternatives open to the promoters. This would have forced her into a discussion of the pros and cons of voluntarism, and following that she may have revised her rather malign view of social control. Second, she might have mentioned the beneficent aspects of the school's role in helping to segregate school children from the rest of society. As Neil Sutherland has shown in *Children in English-Canadian Society* (1976), the process of providing special care and making children not responsible for their actions led to a softer, less rigorous discipline. Schools were certainly part of the reason for the changing treatment of children. In this way they helped to eliminate child execution for various crimes and to substitute a more humane form of social regulation than that, say, in Puritan New England. Third, the purposes of schooling are likely not constant over time. Prentice, however, gives no impression of the social foundations of changing functions over the many decades she covers. Does literacy, for example, become more important during periods of foreign immigration? Is the theme of restraint more pronounced during a prolonged depression? What happens to social control during buoyant economic expansion? Had she answered these questions, she would have begun to dissect social control, specifying its nature under varying conditions, perhaps justifying it more, and rendering it less the monster it appears in this short but stimulating book.

Finally, *The School Promoters* provides an important example of why a study of teachers is necessary to our understanding of schooling. Very few revisionist histories, Canadian or American, have highlighted teachers, and *The Promoters* is no exception.<sup>9</sup> Yet the matter of assessing the purposes of schooling surely requires an analysis of the attitudes, activities, and expressed goals of classroom educators. When the teacher is recalled to centre stage I suggest that in addition to unfairness, discrimination, and restraint, we will catch the occasional glimpse of students *choosing* to learn or to accept altruistic principles. We will realize that significant outcomes of schooling have been and can still be love, mutual respect between teacher and student, and a sense of obligation to causes beyond the self. And we will recall moments of eager learning, exciting, intensive and fascinating, when students are interested, enthused and industrious, when understanding is a delight and when teacher and student work as one. When that time comes, the wraiths of benevolence and humanitarianism sent scurrying a decade or so ago will reappear, albeit in fainter form, to take their place in our accounts of the origin and development of schooling. Only then will the maleficent obsession with social control fade, becoming more a many-sided concern than a narrow fixation.

<sup>8</sup>Timothy Smith, "Social Control in The History of Education," Paper presented at the University of British Columbia, May 26, 1977.

<sup>9</sup>See John Calam, "A letter from Quesnel: The Teacher in History and Other Fables," *History of Education Quarterly* 15 (Summer, 1975): 131-145; G. J. Clifford, "Saints, Sinners, and People: A Position Paper on the Historiography of American Education," *History of Education Quarterly* 15 (Fall, 1975): 257-272; G.J. Clifford, "Home and School in 19th Century America: Some Qualitative Reports from the United States," Presidential Address to the History of Education Society Annual Meeting, Toronto, 1977.

Bien que, dans le domaine de l'historiographie de l'éducation au Canada, le révisionisme radical ait considérablement élargi notre compréhension du passé, ce courant a généralement été obsédé par la notion de contrôle social.

Etant donné que l'ouvrage de Alison Prentice (*The School Promoters* - 1977) est la première monographie canadienne importante émergeant du "contrôle social de l'école" il constitue un modèle majeur qui résume ce que beaucoup d'historiens radicaux. Canadiens et américains, pensent depuis quelque temps. Malheureusement ses hypothèses au sujet de la nature du contrôle social mal conçues, ambiguës et par trop négatives.