

## Urban History Review Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW  
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

Graff, Harvey J. *The Literacy Myth: Literacy and Social Structure in the Nineteenth Century City*. Studies in Social Discontinuity Series. New York: Academic Press, 1979. Pp. 354. Tables, figures, illustrations. \$27.50

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Volume 9, Number 3, February 1981

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1019303ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019303ar>

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### Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

### ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this review

Gagan, D. (1981). Review of [Graff, Harvey ]. *The Literacy Myth: Literacy and Social Structure in the Nineteenth Century City*. Studies in Social Discontinuity Series. New York: Academic Press, 1979. Pp. 354. Tables, figures, illustrations. \$27.50]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 9(3), 95–97. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019303ar>

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in business practice? Did the Buchanans help to diffuse new business techniques throughout the Canadian business community?

Above all, the firm's history illustrates the critical role of personality in determining business success or failure, at a time when the sole proprietorship and limited partnership were the organizational norms. Risks were kept to a tolerable level by judicious selection of partners, agents, and employees, often drawn from the merchant's "extended family." Yet the system was fraught with error, as a list of the Buchanans' agents and partners testifies. For the Buchanans, success or failure was undoubtedly decided by the personalities of the two principals: Peter, cautious, responsible, and decidedly risk-averse; and Isaac, "a commercial knight errant" (p. 90) who continually urged expansion and indulged his enthusiasm for "public affairs" at the direct expense of his business responsibilities. This implausible business pairing was likely rendered tolerable to Peter only by their sibling connection (even so, Peter expelled Isaac from the firm on more than one occasion). Peter's death removed the only effective constraint on Isaac's exuberance and dereliction; after 1860, the ruin of the company at Isaac's hand was perhaps inevitable.

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Graff, Harvey J. *The Literacy Myth: Literacy and Social Structure in the Nineteenth Century City*. Studies in Social Discontinuity Series. New York: Academic Press,

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Cluttering a review with personal anecdotes is perhaps self-indulgent, but I will persist because Harvey Graff's *The Literacy Myth* invites such comparisons. My grandfather (1878-1968) was a teamster who married young, raised a large family, owned his own home, a stable, horses, and a variety of vehicles. He was never unemployed and even employed other teamsters from time to time. He was also illiterate. He would never admit it, nor did he need to. My grandmother taught him to write his name, though he did not know what he had written, and he signed it to documents (the decennial census return for example) which she read aloud and completed for him. The advent of radio vastly expanded his conversational abilities, but, apart from the obviously painful exigences of social discourse, he was perfectly at home in his essentially nineteenth-century world and domestic attachments.

My purpose in relating this anecdote is to illustrate two points central to Harvey Graff's analysis of illiteracy in mid-Victorian urban Upper Canada. Graff's objective is to "explode" the "literacy myth," the idea set loose by progressive educators (Egerton Ryerson, for example) that a literate, though not too well educated, population was essential for progress, prosperity, and moral order just as ignorance, conversely, bred poverty, retarded economic development and promoted disorder. After examining the social, economic, demographic, and cultural traits of urban Upper Canada's illiterate population, Graff concludes that the literacy issue was a *red herring*. Like my grandfather, Graff's illiterates

apparently were not hindered by their illiteracy in most aspects of their everyday lives. Graff presents evidence to demonstrate that in such matters as geographical and vocational mobility, household structure, family formation and size, life-cycle, and wealth, illiterates not only shared the characteristics of the literate majority, they were in some ways more inventive in devising strategies to promote economic security and social achievement. Race, ethnicity, sex, age, and religious affiliation, according to Graff, were all more powerful determinants of inequality in urban society than illiteracy. Consequently, he concludes that the "literacy myth" was propagated by social, economic, and moral hegemonists whose purpose in promoting literacy was not to enhance individual happiness but to create a population receptive to their ideas.

This is an appealing thesis to which I would be more receptive if it were not for the strains that Graff places on his evidence. For example, Katz and other investigators have associated, convincingly I think, high levels of geographical mobility with social and vocational structural inequality and rigidity in the commercial city. The unskilled, the propertyless, and the poor were overrepresented among the transient populations of urban North America. Citing still higher rates of mobility among the illiterate minority, Graff argues that because their illiteracy did not impede their mobility, they were at least as well-equipped as literate transients to pursue material success wherever the search for employment took them. To me, this smacks a bit of silk purses and

sows' ears.

Similarly, in the matter of vocational mobility Graff employs the work experience of persisting illiterate adult males in Hamilton, London, and Kingston to demonstrate that illiteracy did not contribute to downward displacement in the occupational scale. Four-fifths of these men maintained the same vocational rank for ten years. More or less equal proportions moved up or down, no better, no worse, than the experience of their literate compatriots. But in presenting these data Graff fails to point out that nearly 60 percent of the men in his sample were in the lowest (unskilled) cohort to begin with and could not have undergone a further reduction of status. By my count, of those illiterates who potentially might have been displaced from a higher into a lower rank, 33 percent were, in fact, displaced.

A final example may be drawn from Graff's data on home ownership. He presents cross-tabulations to show that illiterates were more likely to own property than literate householders and that the likelihood of owning property increased with age for both groups. Graff concludes that property ownership was therefore a hallmark of the illiterate population for whom real property was a hedge against economic insecurity in a society which increasingly valued and rewarded literacy. But Graff's tables also indicate that illiterates were overrepresented, in any case, among the oldest cohorts of householders. Thus an alternative conclusion is that age, not illiteracy, promoted home ownership among these aging survivors of a population that was once more illiterate than the

population of urban Upper Canada in the 1860s.

These few examples must suffice to convey some nagging reservations about the analytical content of Graff's treatment of illiteracy. My grandfather's case raises a more fundamental methodological dilemma. On none of the historical documents reviewed by Graff as potential tests of literacy (the census, wills, deeds, etc.) would this man ever have surfaced as an illiterate. Graff's test for literacy - individual testimony, under the threat of a fine, to the ability to read and/or write as reported on the manuscript census returns - is carefully defended in an appendix and elsewhere (see, for example, the exchange between Graff, Mays and Manzl in *Histoire sociale*). Graff has confronted his critics who demand an explicit test for literacy. One nevertheless wonders how close the true rate of illiteracy in Upper Canada at mid-century approximated the 10 percent accepted by Graff.

In spite of these reservations, readers will find Harvey Graff's analysis innovative, iconoclastic, rich in its theoretical perceptions, and solidly rooted in the burgeoning corpus of research on the subject. Further studies of this sort, taking the account backward in time, forward, and into other aspects of the literacy "myth," for example the relationship between literacy and power, are clearly required.

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Palmer, Bryan D. *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860-1914*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1979. Pp. xviii, 331. Illustrations. \$23.50 and \$10.95 (paperback).

Before publication of this book, Bryan Palmer had established himself as a resourceful researcher, a skilled writer, and an agent of debate in Canadian social history. Confident and seizing upon methodological issues, he asserted the importance of conventional documentation (newspapers, memoirs, government documents) and the Marxism of Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson at a time when unconventional sources (the manuscript census, assessment rolls, other routinely generated material), quantification, and social science theory had made their bid as the basis for social history in North America. What made Palmer's perspective interesting, aside from his expression of some broadly shared concerns about the lack of human interest in the writings of "numbersmiths," was that his writing assumed a literary character both in prose and in topic selection. He took memorable characters and colourful incidents and wove these into generalized statements. Of course, the significance of his articles and reviews depended upon more than a skilled pen, for he practiced "empirical Marxism" and delineated where this school stood in relation to traditional labour history, the social sciences, and other branches of Marxist analysis. The result was commendable controversy. *Culture in Conflict* follows these achievements.