



Literacy in America: Historic Journey and Contemporary Solutions. Edward Gordon and Elaine H. Gordon. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003. 330 pp.

KATHERINE A. TINSLEY

Manchester College

KATinsley@manchester.edu

Edward and Elaine Gordon's book offers much stronger coverage of the historical aspects of literacy than of the contemporary issues. Over three-quarters of the work deals with the period before 1900. This arrangement suits the Gordons' major argument. Their primary focus is on exploring the variety of ways in which people have attained literacy. The bulk of the book describes the pre-20th century acquisition of literacy, for in this period-before the wide spread establishment of compulsory, publicly-funded schools-the methods for learning to read and write varied most. The authors persuasively demonstrate that formal and particularly publicly funded schools played a minor role developing literacy before the 20th century.

The Gordons define literacy in a functional way "as the degree of interaction with written text that enables a person to be a functioning, contributing member of the society in which that person lives and works" (p. xv). This definition does not establish a consistent standard of literacy, but rather leaves the level of skill to be determined by the circumstances of the individual and the demands of his/her society. The Gordons stress throughout their work that literacy is best understood and studied, not as a fixed capacity, but as a quality defined by its social, religious, economic, and cultural context.

In order to focus on the process of literacy acquisition and the context of its use, the Gordons have employed a wide array of primary source materials dealing with the concrete experiences of particular learners and teachers. The use of these vivid, often dramatic stories, drawn mostly from diaries, letter collections, and memoirs, is the book's greatest strength. Little of the general history recounted by the Gordons is new, and as an overview, contains some curious omissions and emphases; however, their purpose is to focus on personal experiences of those acquiring or imparting literacy, rather than on the development of schools and teaching methodologies.

The chapters covering the colonial and 19th century periods offer many examples of the responsibilities placed on parents and employers to initiate and supervise children's pursuit of literacy. Religious demands for "Bible literacy" prompted the efforts of church groups to organize and support various types of schools. In the 19th century, the Gordons emphasize the contributions of subscription schools and private academies, the role of family and peer tutors both within and outside of the school settings, and the virtues of



the one-room school with its self-paced study and individualized attention from a dedicated teacher.

The most unique facet of this work is the section on literacy "outside the mainstream" with one chapter devoted to Native Americans, and another to the African American experience. Although this section provides some new insights, it falls short of its promise. The Gordons point out that in most cases literacy education was a negative experience for Native Americans. It was a mechanism for imposing white culture upon them, usually at the expense of their own cultures. Yet the chapter deals more with the methods and motives of the white providers of literacy training than with the effects that this instruction had on the minds and lives of their students. The chapter on African American literacy experiences fits more closely with the book's general emphases on varied methods of learning, and it points out the symbolic as well as practical importance of literacy skills in that community. Literacy "signified . . . the establishment of the black person's human identity"(p. 236). This chapter is filled with heroic examples of the struggle for literacy during times of slavery and in the years after emancipation. Unfortunately the Gordons stop at the end of the 19th century, leaving the story of the pursuit of equal education in the 20th century unexplored.

After a brief description of 20th century literacy education that stresses the expansion of compulsory, age-graded schools and the increasing demand for higher-level literacy skills, the authors proceed to their concluding chapter, which assesses the lessons of history for contemporary literacy challenges. In a very brief discussion the Gordons suggest that the patterns of individualized instruction and the wider involvement of family, church, and workplace in literacy education-which has characterized the historical experience-should be exploited to address modern demands for ever higher levels of literacy skills. These ideas suggest interesting possibilities for future action, and deserve a more thorough treatment than they are given.

In general, *Literacy in America* provides a well-documented account of the variety of ways people learned to read and write throughout America's history. The book's episodic approach fails to offer a measure of the literacy levels of various communities, and makes comparisons among regions and across time difficult. By emphasizing the particular experiences of readers and teachers over more comprehensive discussions of literacy levels, the Gordons stress the various "journeys" to literacy traversed in different periods of American history and the ways in which these were reinforced by the support of family, religious groups, and the workplace, as well as in the schoolroom. The models they find in the historical patterns of individualized instruction and the responsibility for literacy education shared by many social groups offer intriguing models for addressing the pressing need for more sophisticated and wide-spread literacy in today's population.

©2004 American Anthropological Association. This review is cited in the March 2004 issue (35:1) of *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*. It is indexed in the December 2004 issue (35:4).



Anthropology & Education

QUARTERLY