

Reviews / Recensions

Ron Faris, *The Passionate Educators: voluntary associations and the struggle for control of adult educational broadcasting in Canada 1919-52*. Toronto: Peter Martin Associates Limited, 1975. 202 pp.

This is a good book. Let me state at once its considerable merits.

As an analysis of critical events in the life of a principal Canadian adult education organization during its formative years, it represents a solid, scholarly contribution to the literature of that field which is not distinguished by its volume in this country. It ably witnesses aspects of the transformation of Canada through depression, war-time, and post-war recovery, characterizing significant forces at work. Especially, it offers a well-documented account of the little-known origins of educational broadcasting in Canada. As a bonus, it portrays the very real problems faced by a national organization of volunteers in its struggle on the one hand to be usefully reflective of its members' sentiments and, on the other, to survive. Finally, this book is well written and carefully structured with a refreshing lack of either jargon or tortuous academese.

The main thread of Faris' story is the effort of a small group of Canadians who shared a belief in the power of adult education to apply the relatively new medium of radio to its delivery. The *mise-en-scène* is the Toronto-Ottawa-Kingston triangle and the Canadian Association for Adult Education plays the lead role.

The C.A.A.E. was formed in 1936 (interestingly, with the persuasion of Americans) and headed by that remarkable Canadian, Edward Annand Corbett. The Association brought together in a never very stable amalgam two principal groups: the traditional voluntary associations and the rural social movements. The former strove to preserve and to extend an existing way of life and conventional values; the latter, more ephemeral in their structure, concerned themselves with pressures aimed at changing Canadian society. The first saw their chief purpose as the promotion of enlightenment within the existing social order; the goal of the second was social change produced through social action. The plot of this book revolves around, if not the clash, the jostling for influence within and through the Association of these two principal groups.

In its formative years, the C.A.A.E., imbued with a vision of a better rural life, jointly with the Canadian Federation of Agriculture sponsored the National Farm Radio Forum, produced by the C.B.C. That radio program, which examined rural and agricultural problems, became an almost immediate success. To capitalize on its winning approach, Citizens' Forum was organized by the C.A.A.E., again with C.B.C. partnership, to promote public discussion of a wide range of Canadian social and economic problems. (In fact, during the fifteen years of Corbett's directorship, educational broadcasting was the Association's sole sustained activity.)

An understanding of the technique involved in the presentation of the programs is necessary to an appreciation of the controversy which they generated. Prior to each weekly broadcast – panel discussions of a selected topic – listening groups across Canada were mailed a pamphlet which offered an analysis of the central issues to be explored. At the conclusion of the broadcast debate, study groups, as many as 1200 in Citizens' Forum and 1600 in Farm Forum, discussed the issues among themselves. Summaries of their opinions were broadcast weekly. The discussion groups aside, general listenership was broad and the influence of both programs was clearly large. It was inevitable that the objectivity of the points of view presented in these programs, differences among those jointly responsible for their presentation, and the antagonistic political and social philosophies of the personalities involved should culminate in a struggle for influence which reverberated in the corridors of power in and out of Ottawa. The climax of Faris' story is the confrontation of representatives of Canadian corporate might with the frail but dedicated C.A.A.E.

Woven into Faris' account is a revealing study of the struggle for survival of the C.A.A.E., an umbrella organization whose counterparts are legion in eastern Canada. Conceived by enthusiasts with a burning vision, these organizations, once created, are plunged immediately into the practical problems of sustaining themselves. Divergent views within the membership must be bridged, internecine struggle quelled and rifts papered over. Acceptable organizational goals must be struck and an image created which can command support – or at least placate opposition. The fervour of the original founders must be nourished; vigorous young successors to them must be recruited. The search for new members to replace those whose initial enthusiasm has languished and, above all, the quest for financial support, are never ending and often frenzied. Moreover, this juggling act must be performed on a national stage of disparate regional views and language differences.

That the C.A.A.E. survived and made as significant a contribution as it did in its first decade and a half of life is a tribute to Corbett, whose nervous energy, political sense and wit gained the confidence of leaders in both the social movements and the traditional voluntary associations. Faris' account is an insightful record of the realities of leadership in such an organization.

There are some elements in this book with which one might quibble. The character and the role played by the two principal organizational protagonists, the voluntary organizations and the social movements, will appear to some to be too sharply drawn for accuracy. Many Canadians, indeed, were members of each. One's eyebrow may rise just a fraction, as mine did, at the description of the central characters (many of whom I knew) as "passionate educators." But perhaps that term is more a product of the publisher's zeal than the author's intent. The younger reader, in particular, may be dismayed by the nearly forty abbreviations used to distinguish the maze of organizations involved in this account, many long defunct, whose role and record may be unfamiliar.

But this is a good book. It commands the interest of the reader. It thoroughly documents an important and little-known achievement. It offers an engrossing analysis of the operational frailties of a national organization organized to coalesce Canadian opinion. As such, it deserves the attention of educators, social analysts and a great host of volunteer workers.

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