

People's School on the Antigonish Movement 2009

In the autumn of 2009, a series of six "People's Schools" was held in Antigonish, Nova Scotia to reflect on the history of the Antigonish Movement. The year 2009 marked the fiftieth anniversary of one of the Movement's most significant texts, Moses Coady's inspiring book *Masters of Their Own Destiny*.

The six principles of the Antigonish Movement outline a program of adult education and economic cooperation by which people can shape their own – and their communities' – futures.

On September 29, 2009 the People's School considered the theme *Social Reform Must Come Through Education*. The first part of the evening was a socio-drama highlighting the role of libraries in adult education, particularly the work of Nora Bateson and Father Jimmy Tompkins.

Facilitator:

- Good evening and welcome everyone. This is the 2nd People's School in this series, considering the 2nd Principle of Antigonish Movement – Social Reform Must Come Through Education.
- Tonight we're going to have the opportunity to think about how this principle applied in the early days of the Antigonish Movement, and how it applies today.
- When we consider Education, we may think first of formal education – schooling or university. Education in the Antigonish Movement was mostly **adult** education – providing new opportunities for learning to those who often had no access to formal schooling.
- This adult education took several forms: there were mass meetings where people were introduced to new ideas, followed by study clubs that brought together local people to discuss topics of vital importance to their lives and their communities, and to take action. There were also annual "Rural and Industrial Conferences" where local and national experts spoke on topics relevant to the day. In later days, radio and then

television were used to broadcast new ideas to study clubs and to listeners in general.

- One part of this adult education process that we may not have heard much about was the important role played by libraries. To honour this tradition, and perhaps to get us thinking about new aspects of adult education, we're going to step back in time to the 1930s. Father Jimmy Tompkins and a woman named Nora Bateson were trying to get Nova Scotia's first regional library under way. Both Miss Bateson and Father Tompkins saw libraries as "the people's universities," vital to social reform through education.
- So now, try to imagine it's Tuesday, August 21st, 1934 – you're taking part in the twelfth annual Rural and Industrial Conference right here in Antigonish. Let's welcome Father Tompkins and Miss Bateson.

<Father Tompkins and Miss Bateson enter, accompanied by an M.C. >

M.C.'s Introduction

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen,

I'm sure you'll all agree that the 1934 Rural and Industrial conference has been very stimulating so far. We've heard exciting reports on the year's community achievements, as well as presentations on study clubs, food in relation to health, the money question, exploitation, and the importance of solidarity among different groups.

Now I have the pleasure of introducing to you Miss Nora Bateson, whose work in organizing a regional library system on Prince Edward Island has impressed us all. Our own Mary MacMaster of Antigonish has been working as Miss Bateson's assistant for the last year, and has conveyed to us the excitement of bringing books to the people of the Island, and especially to the new study clubs. Miss Bateson~

Nora Bateson

First of all I'd like to say how delighted I was to receive an invitation from Dr. Coady to address this conference on the topic "Library Services for the People." The work of the Antigonish Movement is now famous on Prince Edward Island, where I am based. In fact just last month I made a presentation to the American Library Association highlighting the example of the Antigonish Movement and the intellectual ferment it has stimulated amongst the people.

Today I'll speak to you about the Prince Edward Island library demonstration, and how it ties in with the aims and ideas of the Antigonish Movement. This three year project began just over a year ago, and already we have established 10 branches of the library in centres around the Island. By the summer of 1936 we will have another 12 in place. The library demonstration is funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, which has also taken a most encouraging interest in your Extension Department here in Antigonish. In Prince Edward Island there is no organization specially concerned with adult education or extension work, but we in the library have emphasized from the beginning the value of group study and discussion, based on your fine example. By joining forces with a number of community organizations 37 study groups are now working in conjunction with the library.

Let me give you an example. Last winter, one group met bi-weekly in a small community not far from Summerside. Reverend Nicholson, who organized the group, conveyed the topics the group wished to discuss and the library provided a selection of books. At each meeting, two or three people would lead the discussion. In some cases a single book had been read aloud to a family of five. Over the winter, Canadian social affairs, psychology, travel, co-operative economics and contemporary Russia were among the topics. Biographies of Roosevelt, Thomas Aquinas and Mahatma Gandhi were also popular. This group was such a success that the United Church is setting up similar study groups throughout the Island to look at the topic Social Reconstruction. To quote Rev Nicholson, "I am convinced that we have here an instrument for the

intellectual awakening and the mental development of the people which is necessary to carry on any forward movement for the social betterment of the province.”

Some will say – and sadly, some of these are politicians, who should know better – that libraries are a “frill” that can’t be afforded in these hard times. It’s true that grinding poverty has the country in its grip, and the challenges are many. But the ideas for change are everywhere! Just three years ago Pope Pius XI issued the encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* – On Reconstruction of the Social Order. A year later progressive Canadian scholars founded the League for Social Reconstruction, dedicating themselves to research. The first national survey of adult education is under way, and in Ontario, the New Canada Movement is helping young farmers become activists for better rural conditions. And we have a new political party that just last year issued its manifesto for social, economic and political reform. They are calling for “the establishment in Canada of a Co-operative Commonwealth in which the principle regulating production, distribution and exchange will be the supplying of human needs and not the making of profits.”

There is no denying that these are hard times, but creative solutions are being put forward from so many sectors: from our religious leaders, scholars, adult educators and rural youth – from the people themselves. If we are to come through to a new vision for a more just society, people must have access to all these exciting ideas that are fomenting change. And that’s where the library has its role. Our business is the sharing of ideas. Someone recently called free public libraries “the most potent agency amongst all educational institutions.” I invite you all to seize this power – the power of the public library.

Thank you

M.C.

The ideas didn't stop with the conference. In the years that followed there was a lively correspondence between Miss Bateson and Father Tompkins.

Letters 1934-1938 – Read by **Father Tompkins** and **Nora Bateson**, seated at writing tables on opposite sides of the stage

Reserve Mines
May 7, 1935

Dear Miss Bateson:

I am real glad to have your letter and delighted to know that you are coming to Cape Breton.

We have a very promising little library in sight here at Reserve Mines – just a start. This whole area should have a central library at a place like Glace Bay. Ours will be a start and a sample to work on. The appetite must be worked up.

Wonderful things are going on down this way and the common people are going ahead by strides taken with seven league boots.

Sincerely,
JJ Tompkins

Charlottetown
May 29, 1935
Dear Dr. Tompkins:

I look forward very much to this visit to Cape Breton. I gathered from New Waterford that behind the library movement there are all

the various cooperatives in the town and I cannot think of any more solid foundation on which to build.

Sincerely yours,
Nora Bateson

Reserve Mines
June 14, 1935

Dear Dr. Coady:

Miss Bateson arrived here on Tuesday morning and will leave on the train this evening, Friday, from Sydney Mines after having talked at Sydney Mines up to the moment of the train's departure. We had meetings at Reserve, at Glace Bay (to all the Sisters of around about), at New Waterford and twice at Sydney Mines.

Now we have excogitated things revolutionary, and she is wild and she has set me wild. What she wants is a library for all Cape Breton on the P.E.I. plan – why not ask Carnegie for \$75000 for Extension and the library proposition. The two movements would fit in like a glove & a hand. The time is ripe. Miss B. says that Extension is the darling of the Carnegie people and that we are all powerful there.

Believe me the ground is tremendously ready. Our little venture here at Reserve is a little beauty. It has knocked out people's eyes & is the match that has set the prairie on fire. Miss Bateson is trying to get them standing on their hind legs for reading. I have to confess that I had no idea of the manner in which they rise to this idea.

I must send this letter in to Sydney to catch the night train so must stop.

J.J. Tompkins

Charlottetown
June 15, 1935

Dear Dr. Tompkins:

Mr MacIntyre will no doubt tell you about the Sydney meeting, but I wanted to mention that the Mayor seemed particularly interested and not afraid to admit his interest. This is one of the things that strikes me about your Cape Breton towns and I think it is a good sign.

Things seem to be taking shape much more quickly than I had thought possible. I think before long you will be ready, will you not, to send in a sort of monster petition from the whole Island of Cape Breton.

It was a great week and I enjoyed it all enormously.

Sincerely yours,
Nora Bateson

Reserve Mines
Sept 14, 1935

Dear Extension:

Rev. Nickerson of Leitches Creek Station & Rev. Mr. Gordon were in here yesterday to find out how to start study clubs. Robertson & his wife were over on Labor Day and spent several hours in our library. They were greatly "het up" and returned to Waterford on the rampage.

Really it makes me angry when one sees all the good books there are on the go and people cannot have them. The fever is spreading. Miss Bateson put us on the map here with some loans and they are going like hot biscuits.

This library business **must** be solved and that soon. Robertson & wife have a pitiful story about the credit union mounting to a thousand members and nobody learning anything! There is going to be a smash if some effort is not made to get men or books or both on the job. The old stuff will not do. Times are going to be very serious this winter – only 2 shifts some weeks now and hope deferred maketh the heart sick. Get some men on the spot here and start some new study clubs. Let's see if this library idea can be put over. Let the chips fall where they may.

J.J. Tompkins

Charlottetown
March 25, 1936

Dear Dr. Tompkins,

I've just seen an article in the paper about the opening of the new Free Library at Dominion in Cape Breton. Well done!

How wonderful that the library is located in rooms in the credit union office! People will see clearly the hand-in-hand nature of the library and co-operative education.

The PEI Library Act is up for consideration in the legislature next week. We have been lobbying hard for public support, and I can only hope that reason prevails and the politicians will not revoke all that the people have achieved in the last three years.

Sincerely,
Nora Bateson

Reserve Mines
April 9, 1937

Dear Coady:

I was at an amazing rally of study clubs in St. Andrews Hall Sydney last month. I had a very nice crowd, about 50/50 Protestants and Catholics.

Sydney is pretty nearly sure to be on the move at long last. Miss Gilroy is moving the Halifax Herald on Libraries. Antigonish better get busy in The Casket also, otherwise all our movements will be stolen from us.

Get Miss Gilroy's article into The Casket. Then let H.M. open a column in a corner in The Casket. You will want to start soon because this thing will be grabbed up before long. Get after it right at once. If not you will get left. That will be work enough for you for 1937.

M.C.

1938 R&I Conference

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to the 1938 Rural and Industrial Conference. I should point out that this is our sixteenth annual conference, and I think the excellent attendance demonstrates the value of these educational gatherings. As well as the usual reports on the progress of Extension work in Newfoundland and the Maritimes, we can look forward to discussion of producer-consumer relations, youth and tomorrow, education for social change, and the new role of women in a changing world. But first, let me present our first keynote speaker – someone who really needs no introduction! Dr. James J. Tompkins will address us on the Future of our Adult Education Movement. Father Tompkins ~

JJ Tompkins address to the 1938 Rural and Industrial Conference

The Future of our Adult Education Movement

The Antigonish Movement is adult education.

We all now believe that education is co-extensive and coterminous with life. There are no zones of human activity closed to the human mind. In whatever sphere of human experience, wherein there are unrequited needs of man, there is the ministry of the mind and the spirit.

Adult education is not limited to the multiplication table. It takes into account man as a spiritual being; it seeks to establish just relationships as between man and man in the economic order; it examines the mutual problems of producer and consumer.

We are not so much concerned with setting the yard limits of adult education as we are with throwing the switches which will give the average man unobstructed passage to wider fields of knowledge, self-help and security, and let him find his own way.

If there is one warning, it is this: beware of institutionalizing... When a thing becomes over-institutionalized it tends to become sterile. It seems to me that this is what has happened to formal education. We might well ask ourselves if something similar has not happened to those religious people who sit back at times like these when so many millions have become propertyless, stricken with fear of economic insecurity, homeless waifs of a hit-and-miss industrialism.

It is this kind of thing that enables severe critics of Christianity to say that religion is the opiate of the people. It is not Christianity that is the opiate of the people; it is the inert state of Christians that furnishes some semblance of truth to this libel. It is fossilized education that is the opiate of the people. It keeps them from getting the truth about the condition that they are in.

Means at last exist for bringing home to all classes, by the most direct and effective of methods, the facts of every problem, means for breaking up class or sectional or national prejudice, and for combating and conquering ignorance..

Adult education: it is not for illiterates alone, nor is it to pap-feed social climbers with appreciation of Shakespeare and Beethoven. It should be designed for the best brains we have, to wrestle with the worst problems we have – want and frustrated lives literally crushed under a heritage of plenty which these people cannot get their hands on.

We believe also in the mute, inglorious Miltons. It is the duty of adult education to make the mute vocal, and to make the blind see. But education that is conscious of its mission must be free from the patronizing air, from talking down as from some lofty oracle, from inventing decoys and sops, handy palliatives and barricades to fence injustice off from justice.

Not only must it be prepared to accept truth where it finds it, it must also be prepared to accept talent where it finds it.

Our experience in the Antigonish Movement is that there is more real adult education at the pit-heads, down in the mines, out among the fishermen's shacks, along the wharves, and wherever the farmers gather to sit and talk in the evenings, than you can get from one hundred thousand dollars worth of fossilized formal courses. It springs from the hearts and the pains of the people. It is spontaneous. It is vibrant with motivation. And motivation is the key to learning.

The chief instrument for promoting adult education will be the well-stocked regional library, the people's university of the future, supported as our public schools are. It will not emphasize books alone, but interpreters of books and trained guides in the choice of books and subjects, suitable to the needs and tastes of the reader.

The trained librarian of the regional library ought to be, first and foremost, an adult educator. It is one thing to be active in library service and it may be quite another thing to be a promoter of adult education. Adult education works toward the development of the community. A library might unwittingly become a hindrance rather than a help in the spread of genuine education – adult or otherwise – and become like so much formal education in the past, the opiate of the people.

The American Association of Adult Education feels that one of its chief duties today is to set men “free from the utter drabness of unfulfilled lives.” To do this, our methods must be flexible and informal. Faith in the educability of the average man is one of the chief underlying ideas of the Antigonish Movement.

M.C.

Thank you Dr. Tompkins – you have inspired us and challenged us as always! We will all leave this place with a new sense of possibilities, and new hope for the future. Good evening everyone.

Notes on the presentation:

- Nora Bateson did address the 1934 R&I Conference on the theme “Library Services for the People”, but no record of her actual speech has been found. The speech above was created by combining information drawn from her correspondence and publications at that time.
- The letters between Tompkins and Bateson are excerpts from their correspondence, not the full text of each letter. One letter (Bateson to Tompkins, March 25, 1936) is an invention, based on Nora Bateson’s records in PEI containing a copy of the article she refers to, and records of the PEI Legislative Assembly for 1936.
- Fr. Tompkins’ speech at the 1938 R&I conference was actually much longer than the excerpts presented here. A copy of the full speech can be found at the StFX Archives.