



“Nothing Comes From Nothing, Nothing Ever Could”

A Review of

Life Stories: Exploring Issues in Educational History Through Biography

by Linda C. Morice and Laurel Puchner (Eds.)

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Reviewed by

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Julie Andrews’s famous line in *Sound of Music* comes to mind when I reflect on the dearth of historical thinking in educational research today. This concept of continuity within change dates back to the Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius and his book *On the Nature of Things* in which he argues that nature cannot be self-authoring because present givens are intricately tied to what has been and what will be. This seems to echo Bakhtin’s (1986) and Volosinov’s (1986/1929) ideas about the ideological nature of all utterances that only come to have meaning within historically and culturally situated social moments. In *Life Stories: Exploring Issues in Educational History Through Biography*, an edited collection of 13 essays originally appearing in the journal *Vitae Scholasticae*, four key questions are placed into historical relief through storied interpretive narratives: What should schools teach? Who gets to decide? How should educators adapt to a changing world to provide opportunity for all students? And finally, how should educators’ experiences be interpreted for future audiences?

What unfolds in the varied narratives of *Life Stories* is a challenge to interpret meanings, beliefs, and actions of educators from previous eras. These accounts, on the whole, present a balanced picture of possibilities and constraints in selective historical moments, acknowledging the cultural forces that shape educators’ worldviews through biographical detail, honoring the “voices” that interanimate their thinking in polyphonic ways (Bakhtin, 1986). Biography as a research genre allows one to dig deeply into nuanced understandings of context, behaviors, and one’s deepest hopes and fears as shaped by cultural caveats. Examining the shifting values, attitudes, and possibilities of educational systems through analysis of individual actors on the educational stage allows the reader a microscopic glance into the origins, or at least critical moments, behind today’s many pressing issues in education.

Waves of reform and opposition to reform over decades attest to the persistent political, social, and economic components that drive educational decisions in any age. There are lessons to be learned from revisiting the stories of educational pioneers who strike out to make a difference but who have to negotiate with competing visions of what to teach and who should teach it and for what purpose. With our postmodern consciousness and a keen sense of the persistent socially unjust nature of educational systems, we, too, persist in working to make lives better yet are limited by our own socially situated understandings, much like those educators we learn about in these chapters. The four book divisions each have a stated theme, although alternative groupings come to mind, depending on how one focuses on a specific historical inquiry approach versus intrinsic interest in the person, politics, or context, and so forth. I will comment briefly on the themes of each section with a few illustrative examples, and then conclude with summary remarks.

The three chapters in Part I, *The Scope and Nature of Education*, highlight the enduring struggles around schooling options in the north and south. In her chapter “Racially Integrated Education,” Carol Conway puts in tension two journalists’ competing ideas about how to educate Blacks in the antebellum period between 1852 and 1857. Canadian Mary Ann Shadd Cary from a privileged background and freed slave Frederick Douglas experienced radically different formation into their roles as editors of abolitionist newspapers and advocates for Black education. Both believed in integration and assimilation of Blacks into mainstream culture, but Douglas, experiencing the depth of racist attitudes and the cruelty of deprivation, emphasized the need for practical survival skills as well as literacy skills, whereas Shadd Cary advocated for a more elite humanities curriculum to create middle class Blacks. By illuminating the ways class and gender differences shaped beliefs and actions for these two activists, who operated in specific U.S. and Canadian contexts, Conway shows why historical detail is crucial to possible interpretations and meanings.

Part II, *Advancing an Educational Agenda*, includes a riveting tale of how educational opportunity came to inmates in jail through the serendipitous relationship between two inmates and a correspondence school administrator who supported their right to an education. Pittman does not gloss the horror of “the crime of the century” committed by Nathan Leopold and his confederate Richard Loeb, but rather opens up a window into the lives and possibilities for incarcerated persons. The portrayal of Helen Williams, who befriended Leopold in her role in a correspondence school, is sympathetic and gives insight into the commitment of educators to educating—no matter who is thirsting for the knowledge. Leopold eventually became a teacher within the prison schooling enterprise, even when a new warden eliminated the perks associated with the work. It was somewhat surprising to learn that some two million people were enrolled in correspondence courses in the 1920s, when distance education with today’s technology is often thought to be so innovative.

Educational Reform is the title for Part III. This section includes four somewhat disparate chapters, including one on well-known educator George S. Counts (1958) who articulated a strong sociocultural insight into education: “There have been as many educations in history as there have been societies. . .The very way education is conceived, whether its purpose is to enslave or free the mind, is an expression of the society which it serves. . .[O]f necessity education is a most intimate expression of a civilization” (cited by Romanish in Chapter 10, p. 200). The stories of educators compiled for this volume force the reader to critically examine how the challenges and strategies of yesterday and today both reflect and shape our own cultural values and actions.

Most of the educators featured are not recognizable names but are individuals who operated in a local context with ripples of outcomes spreading beyond individual lives. As elections loom in the United States, the chapter on Australian reformer Lucy Morice provides a backdrop for the origins of the League of Women Voters as readers learn how she organized women in South Australia to have a voice in politics and voting. The current lack of meaningful political discourse in attack ads and fear mongering seems so remote from the Study and Debating Circles organized by Morice to actually engage in the business of government. Since one of the book editors shares Morice's surname, I wondered about a possible personal ancestral connection to this work in socialist feminist collective action.

In Part IV, *Interpreting Educators' Lives*, Whitehead tells the tale of Lillian de Lissa whose work spanned multiple continents; de Lissa demonstrated her passion for young children as founder and leader of the Gipsy Hill Training College in England that trained early childhood educators. de Lissa's impact spans Australia, England, and the United States, so we also learn about transnational biography and the challenges of writing about people who transcend contexts. Making visible the enlightened and determined journeys of early educators who advocated for those without voice provides inspiration for the many unsung heroes of today, many of them engaged in similar battles with ignorance, prejudice, and stereotypes.

Two chapters of particular interest to me included the account by Angelo of William Barton Rogers, Massachusetts Institute of Technology founder, as a "witness of history" through documenting Barton's insights into the constraints of doing science in the antebellum south. Dealing with arrogant gentlemen who at times bristled and rebelled against professor feedback became the motive for Barton to relocate to Boston in 1853 in order to foster open and critical dialogue as a scientist. According to Angelo, "Roger concluded that the violence, intolerance, and anti-intellectualism of southern culture couldn't be reconciled with his personal goals as a scientist and as an educational reformer" (p. 228).

The other Educational Reform chapter that sparked my feminist self was an account by Walton of Christine Ladd-Franklin's lifelong battle with garnering recognition for her intellectual work by Ivy League institutions. Claims by psychologist G. Stanley Hall and other leading male voices about the deleterious effects of higher education on women are part and parcel of Ladd-Franklin's personal experience as a student and lecturer; Ladd-Franklin's grandmother even told her that she would "seriously diminish her marriage prospects" (p. 160) if she engaged in advanced studies. Although her first love was physics, Ladd-Franklin pragmatically knew that, as a woman, she would not be accepted in the field, so in 1878 she began studies at John Hopkins under the name C. Ladd, sponsored by a math professor who recognized the name from a publication in *Educational Times*. In 1882, Ladd's dissertation "The Algebra of Logic" was well received by her committee, but John Hopkins's board withheld awarding the doctorate for fear of diminishing the institution's competitive standing! Eventually Ladd-Franklin lectured at several Ivy League schools including Columbia University where in 1914 she was given an unsalaried position with access to libraries and classrooms. Her tireless efforts for equal recognition and a place to grow and become who she was meant to be opened the door for many to come. We owe her a debt of thanks as a little known intellectual giant with a moral compass.

In summary, *Life Stories* provides engaging snapshots across slices of time and place through deconstructing the complex relation between historical moments and the biographical back stories of the actors who shaped educational trajectories. Biographical

detail affirms the power of sociocultural forces in shaping historical narratives as we hear echoes in our own discourse and ventriloquate the voices of educators across the ages.

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