

Gladly Would He Teach: Milton Ezra LaZerte, A Biography

John W. Chalmers. Gladly Would He Teach: Milton Ezra LaZerte, A Biography, Edmonton: ATA Educational Trust, 1978, xv, 197 p.p.

Milton E. LaZerte was an extraordinary educator whose career spanned more than sixty years. Raised in Ontario, he graduated from the University of Toronto in mathematics and physics before coming west and attending normal school in Calgary in 1910. He quickly became a high school principal in Medicine Hat before being appointed school inspector in 1913. In 1924 he accepted a post at the University of Alberta where he was influential in establishing a school of education in 1929 and a college of education in 1940. In his long career LaZerte was many persons including — President of the Alberta Teachers' Association, President of the Canadian Teachers' Federation, Chairman of the Canadian Council for Educational Research, Director of the School of Education at the University of Alberta, Dean of the Faculty of Education at Alberta, Dean of the Faculty of Education at Manitoba, Edmonton City Alderman, and Commissioner of a Prince Edward Island report on education.

In tracing this varied career John Chalmers offers several insights concerning the development of Albertan education. We learn that LaZerte studied under Charles Judd in Chicago in 1920 and so began to emphasize the role of testing in his inspectorate and later at the university. Though Chalmers does not say this, LaZerte appeared to be a Thorndyikian rather than a Deweyan progressive. He also seemed to be an elitist. Throughout the thirties, for example, he proclaimed that the purpose of his school of education, with an enrolment of twenty to forty pupils, was to prepare large-school principals, inspectors, superintendents, and other educational professionals. Interestingly, nothing much seems to have come of LaZerte's penchant for testing, at least insofar as it affected the province's children. Before the enterprise in the late thirties, Alberta's activity education, a brand of progressivism, there had been an emphasis on intelligence testing. "But the testing was done," LaZerte said, "and the results piled up in the central office and were not used." Enough testing was done, however, to undermine the significance of the enterprise. After the activity curriculum had been used about four years LaZerte conducted tests which indicated that "Alberta students were exactly at the Canadian average in the field in which they were touting and praising themselves and patting themselves on the back." When these results were combined with LaZerte's personal distaste for the activity programme, one glimpses not only the subversion of official policy by an eminent figure, but also the limitations of that figure's power to implement his views at the outset.

Chalmers is at his best when he talks about administrative and institutional developments. One interesting anecdote of how the university refused Premier Aberhart an LL.D. reveals how small things can lead to important changes. After the resignation of University President W.A.R. Kerr, a committee was appointed to survey the entire institution. Its recommendations resulted in the replacement of the Senate, the body responsible for the slight, by the General Faculty Council, as the ultimate university authority.

Unfortunately, the book has many inadequacies. There is a strong aversion for this kind of educational history amongst the newer breed of educational historians who have shunned the big man theory of history. At one point Chalmers speaks of Ontario "where everything educational had been decided by Egerton Ryerson half a century before" — a statement no self respecting expert on the Ryerson period would make today. Chalmers also tends to romanticize unduly. While he is occasionally critical, his story is basically eulogistic. Accordingly, one teacher speaks of LaZerte, the Medicine Hat principal, as "an inspiration to all with whom he came in contact." The twenties are generally viewed as a time of prosperity. And the time before World War II is called "the halcyon pre-war days." As important as this characteristic of Chalmers' writing is the lack of analysis. Much of what is crucial we never find out. Chalmers never delves deeply and many controversies are skimmed over. Since the ATA Educational Trust funded the publication it would have been difficult for him to unearth embarrassing controversies concerning that organization. But he might have gone into the reaction to LaZerte's report in PEI, or into what happened to the Better Education Association in Edmonton in the sixties, or why, despite LaZerte's interest and participation, the Canadian College of Teachers, established in 1958, never became popular in Alberta.

The basic problem with this book is that it ignores social history, the kind of history which helps to explain why Alberta led in the large districts in this country, why progressive education occurred when it did, and why certification requirements for teachers moved ahead faster in Alberta than in the rest of the country. Clearly many of these so-called advances were facilitated by matters entirely beyond LaZerte's control, matters which Chalmers never mentions.

What is beginning to come clear is that the rural problem in Alberta, from 1917 to 1940 at least, was much more severe than in any other province. This problem involved transient and incompetent teachers, irrational school boards and the utter failure of rural school finance — issues which had always afflicted Canadian rural schools but which were intensified over a long period in the huge southeastern segment of the province known as the dry belt. Beginning in 1917 this immense area suffered unremitting disaster until large tracts became utterly uninhabited. In this milieu the need for the larger school divisions, improved teacher certification, teacher permanency, and even, down the line, the perceived need to take the normal schools to the universities were all accentuated. Chalmers mentions quite correctly that some school trustees opposed ATA pressure for greater certification requirements since they believed "second class" teachers were enough for farmers' sons. With the dissolution of school boards across the dry belt this kind of opposition receded. Moreover, teacher preparation in the region was hopelessly inadequate, a fact underscored dramatically when ill-prepared school marms were pressured in the twenties and thirties to provide high school education in their one-room schools. Likewise, the professional goals of the ATA were made more compelling by the terrible conditions under which teachers lived and were employed, especially in this region. Hundreds of teachers were never paid; those who were, got less than the government legislated minimum; many more lived in deprived and straitened circumstances. These were the conditions which gave strength to calls for reform and which made the Alliance's case so cogent. It was not just people like ATA General Secretary Barnett, Deputy Minister of Education McNally, and LaZerte pontificating.

Similarly the integration of elementary and secondary teacher education was likely less a matter of the western democratic *modus operandi* than of an horrendous rural problem which required teachers to be both elementary and secondary teachers at the same time. It is difficult, after all, to develop a prejudice against oneself.

Furthermore, what appeared as the overarching solution to the rural problem — the large administrative unit — was also seen as the basis upon which the enterprise programme could best be implemented. Significantly the large districts were to provide more funds, materials, equipment, libraries, and specialization — advantages which greatly facilitated enterprise teaching.

In sum, leaders like LaZerte worked amid important social conditions which continually shaped their accomplishments and failures. Chalmers unfortunately never gives these qualifying elements their due. The result is that we are never quite sure who or what LaZerte was struggling against — and the essence of any innovator's life *is* struggle. Equally important, we have no real foundation upon which to assess LaZerte's impact.

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