

INTRODUCTIONS

by Eric Willis

As I reflect on the Living Literacies experience and the papers from that conference reproduced in this book, I am reminded of a trip to Crete where among other things I had the opportunity to see the Phaistos Disc in Herakleion's Archaeological Museum. This small clay disc from the Minoan civilization is probably 3500 years old and inscribed on both sides with forty-five different pictures in a distinct and fascinating spiral pattern. To this day it is the only one of its kind ever discovered among all the archaeological relics of the Mediterranean and still fascinates scholars, who haven't yet been able to decipher and agree on its meaning. One is left to only imagine what the author of the disc was attempting to communicate and when or if we will ever be able to understand its message.

The tragedy of this lost literacy is a reminder of the timeliness of the Living Literacies project and conference held at York University, Toronto from November 14 to 15, 2002. Intended from the beginning to explore the how, what, and why of literacy, the conference was a huge success at stimulating discussion and debate about the potential meanings of literacy in Canada's advanced technological society of the twenty-first century. What follows here are the presentations from that conference. As captivated and excited as I was by the idea and intent of this conference during the planning stages, I am even more impressed by the range and quality of the presentations included in this book.

As the Master of Stong College here at York, I take pride in telling you that this conference and book are products of a committee of Fellows of the college that include Rob Bishop, Lara Ubaldi, B. W. Powe, and myself. As the prime mover for both, however, a special thanks goes out to B. W. Powe for the genesis and genius of the idea, the conviction to stay the course through the inevitable bumps and bruises that accompany an undertaking of this magnitude, and for the foresight to promote the significance of this issue.

As intriguing and mysterious as the Phaistos Disc might well be to scholars, its story also informs us of the importance of seeking to understand and illuminate literacy in its many forms. It is our hope that this publication will help in this process for the reader.

Light Onwords / Light Onwards

LIVING LITERACIES TEXT OF THE
NOVEMBER 14-16, 2002 CONFERENCE AT YORK UNIVERSITY



The Literacy Movement in Canada

by Senator Joyce Fairbairn

Taken from:

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**Living Literacies Text of the
November 14-16, 2002 Conference**

PART ONE: ORIGINS AND FUTURITY

The Literacy Movement in Canada

by Senator Joyce Fairbairn

The promotion of literacy has become the cause of my life for nearly two decades. I was driven to it by my own ignorance of a fundamental social and economic fault line that had prevented millions and millions of Canadians from achieving their full potential or even dreaming about doing that.

When I finally saw the light, I decided to launch a debate in the Senate on Literacy in Canada. That was back in 1987. And it is revealing to the state of the issue at that time that this was the first time it had been discussed in a formal way in either House of Parliament. My frustration with myself caused me to describe the literacy situation in our country, then, as Canada's "hidden shame." And then I set out to try and see, even as one person, if I could do anything about it.

Now, my story is not unique among those marvellous activists who have brought so many into a state of concern and understanding on this issue over the years. For me it began when I was sworn in as a senator in 1984. While committing myself fully to the work in the Senate – and you may be relieved to know that the Senate does work – I had a strong commitment to active service in my province and, especially, my beloved home territory in the deep south of Alberta. With my appointment, I was also looking directly for a "cause" on which to focus. That is one of the good things about the Senate. If you want to invest the time and you have the energy, you can pick out issues that have fallen through the cracks or have been completely ignored. In my case I did not find literacy, it found me.

My very first assignment in the Senate was a Special Committee on Youth. It was chaired by Senator Jacques Hébert who created Katimavik to send young Canadians across the country, learning in their free time what it was like to live on the ground away from home in this country. Everywhere I go in Canada, and if I say I'm a senator, I find some person – now with a family of their own saying, "Do you know Jacques Hébert?" He is a wonderful advocate. And he was the chair of this committee.

Those were very tough times for youth in the mid-80s – high unemployment, disillusionment and even anger around the country. And so the group of us, including my dear friend, your president and my former Senate colleague, Dr. Lorna Marsden, set out across the country holding public hearings. Anyone could come. Parents, teachers, social workers, business, labour, people in all parts of public life at all levels and, of course, the young people themselves.

I can tell you, it was a riveting experience. We heard what we expected to hear about the lack of jobs, drug and alcohol abuse, teen pregnancies, family break-up, and all of that. But we also heard something that we had not expected. In every region of Canada witnesses of all ages spoke out about literacy and learning disabilities and the devastating impact that all this had on human lives. And we were shocked.

In our report released in February of 1986, among many other things, we called for a national campaign to tackle the problem of literacy. And then we went back to our regular work on other issues.

However, I was haunted by what I had heard. I began my career as a journalist. I have spent the rest of this part of my life, working always, with words. I could not imagine getting through a day without understanding words – their meanings and their contexts, in the most basic circumstances of human living.

So I was angry with myself because, for fourteen years, I had been working side by side with Pierre Elliott Trudeau, our most education-oriented prime minister, and the issue had never come up; not once – not for him, not for me. How could that be?

So I set out to find out where literacy was hiding in Ottawa and on Parliament Hill. I discovered we had not missed it, simply because it was not there. It had been deemed at some point to be an education issue and therefore, within that marvellous, compelling, and often totally confusing document we call our "Constitution," it was within the jurisdiction of the provinces. Now, there is no question, education is and should be a provincial responsibility. But in responding to the young woman who asked a question up here on the right, I believe that literacy moves well beyond all of those boundaries. It is a national and a human imperative. So it became my cause then, and now and forever.

Now, while reflecting on all of this, that great scholar, philosopher, teacher, hero in this community, Northrop Frye, riveted my attention many years ago when he said that if we were not alert and committed enough to battle this issue, it would become entrenched in our society as a generational reality, passed on from parent to child. And another cycle would begin.

Literacy is the foundation for everything we learn and do, and therefore we cannot and we must not ignore the fact that some eight million Canadians, over forty percent of our adult citizens, currently find themselves in one way or another marginalized because of varying degrees of difficulty in learning, numeracy, reading, writing, communication skills – unable to meaningfully contribute to and fully participate in our society.

John O'Leary hit the nail on its head today as he showed the pictures of the tremendous history of Frontier College, and then he talked about the new frontiers for the literacy movement in Canada. I might go even further to suggest to you that our very perception of literacy needs to be revised to take into account the new pressures and the expectations of this twenty-first century.

For me, one of our saddest statistics finds that some 1.6 million Canadians over the age of sixty-five are rated at the lowest level of literacy. Simply stated, that means that these seniors have difficulty reading at all. Now, how will they come to grips with the increased use of self-medication? Or with health and social services where communications are increasingly impersonal and automated? And, if you are looking for Home Care in a phonebook, it is rarely under "H." It's off in the purple section under something like "community services." Many seniors can't cope with that.

Mobility restrictions and sight problems can also lead to a loss of friends, personal contacts, plain old conversation. Their communication links are cut off. A lot of them are women, often isolated. Many cannot read or write letters. They cannot even enjoy a book as a friend.

Today, we in our society may think that literacy is somehow less important to our older citizens. After all, they are generally retired, their productive days behind them – I have heard that mentioned occasionally about myself! Well, this attitude totally ignores the fact

that seniors prize independence almost above anything other than health. And independence demands literacy.

I flew in here last night from the deep south of Alberta where I have been meeting with my friends in the Blood and Peigan Nations of the Blackfoot Confederacy, an historic group of aboriginal tribes in that area. They have problems with which none of us in this room could cope.

I cannot stand before you today and discuss this issue without offering a fervent plea for the importance Canadians must place on the inclusion of aboriginal people in this lifelong process that we are talking about here at York University.

Let there be no doubt that literacy and lifelong learning is at the heart of opportunity for our first citizens in every part of the country. It opens the doors to allow all these people to have equal access to the benefits of this wonderful land – a land that they cared for and protected, long before any of our ancestors ever came to the shores of what we now call Canada. And while this is a stated priority for all governments, we must hold them accountable, truly accountable, for a far greater effort, particularly with the children who must lead the future for their people.

Another issue that struck me as I was watching John's slides was a prison cell. As we hold this important meeting in the heart of our largest metropolitan area, we should note with alarm the link between literacy problems and crime. The statistics are appalling. Up to 50% of adult inmates can neither read nor write. That can rise to well over 80% in institutions with a high aboriginal population, particularly in western Canada. Over 75% of juvenile offenders have learning disabilities, and in some areas that figure rises to around 90%. And up to 90% of adult inmates are school dropouts.

So, the vast majority of offenders will eventually be released from prison and return to our communities. Is there any doubt that concentrated literacy programs during and after incarceration must be available to help them become better neighbours and contributing members of society? This is possible. It is being done – but not enough.

None of these issues are peculiar to Canada. Access to lifelong learning and literacy is a global deficit of proportions that we cannot even imagine.

We are at a point now where I believe we can achieve a comprehensive strategy to deal with this issue across the country. We call it lifelong learning. We call it a learning culture. Other countries have it, why don't we? Certainly we are capable of having it. But we have to be careful how we define that phrase, "lifelong learning." It is not just something that happens in that transition period between school and work, or when someone is coming back into the labour force, or when you have to acquire a response to technology.

For me, lifelong learning means exactly what it says. It starts when the smallest child can touch a book, can turn a page, recognize a picture, and can hear the sounds of reading from a friendly voice with a pair of arms securely wrapped around them. That is where it starts. It does not start in the middle, it starts at the beginning. Dr. Fraser Mustard has told us that here in Toronto in spades. By eighteen months of age, our children are ready to engage in the learning process. And then it keeps on going, through school, through work, through family, right until the very end.

Clearly, without that continuum, we isolate a huge segment of Canadian society and we undervalue our greatest national asset. Our host stated in the pre-conference materials that literacy must mean more than the mechanics of reading and writing, and I agree completely. And great strides have been made in research and innovation and through the partnerships evident in this conference and across the country. We are on the march. And in terms of human decency and compassion, with our small population, we simply cannot afford to leave anyone behind.

Each of us has a role to play. For what it's worth, I am not going away anytime soon either. In fact, I am more fired up than usual by a fierce determination that literacy, as the foundation skill, must and will prevail in this country. I have moved from earlier days of fighting for this cause on the basis of social justice or economic necessity, to a very stubborn insistence that literacy is a right and a responsibility of citizenship in this country for every individual wherever they live, whatever their age or circumstance.

I have talked, in every corner of Canada, in other countries as well, about the necessity of giving each and every individual a fair chance. A chance to fulfill their utmost potential. A chance to help others reach the same goals and the same dream. My friends, our country, our world, is far too precious a place to become somewhere where people simply cope. It must become a place where people have that fair chance to contribute and participate, and have a job and a decent wage to provide a vigorous future for themselves and their families.

This is not about special treatment. It is not about privilege. It is about glorying in acquiring knowledge that not only puts bread on the table, but entertains and comforts and enhances the soul.

I am telling you today, with all the heart and soul that I can muster, that however long or frustrating this journey will be, however rough the challenges, our spirits must not fail, because together, hand in hand, across this country, we will overcome and we will succeed. And this is one volunteer who'll be marching along with all of you and all of those who will learn from this conference, every step of the way. Thank you very much for inviting me. Thank you for being here. And thank you to all of you who are helping to provide that fair chance.

Joyce Fairbairn

Senator Joyce Fairbairn has been a strong advocate for literacy action in Canada over the past eighteen years. She works closely with many national literacy partners such as Frontier College, Laubach Literacy, Movement for Canadian Literacy, National Adult Literacy Database (NALD), La Fédération Canadienne pour l'alphabétisation en Français (FCAF), and ABC Canada, as well as provincial coalitions and numerous community literacy groups. She is also a key participant in the annual Literacy Action Day on Parliament Hill, International Literacy Day, and Family Literacy Day.