

Misinterpreting Historical Literacy — A Reply

by Allan GREER*

It is very kind of Dr. Graff to draw my attention to the considerable body of writing on literacy and on historical methods in general. My own inclination has always been to pay readers of rather specialized articles the courtesy of assuming that they were familiar with the general scholarly context of the particular problem, preferring like the author of *Historians' Fallacies* (p. 286) — which Dr. Graff claims to have read — to avoid the reproach of using that pedantic device, the padded footnote. The innocent who has wandered into this frontier zone of research without his survival kit may well profit from this publication of selections from Dr. Graff's overflowing card index. No doubt such a reader will particularly appreciate being told (in Dr. Graff's ninth footnote) that "Among a large and growing literature" he should "see... the unpublished research of Lionel Rothkrug", presumably by ESP, a new but as yet little-tried technique of historical investigation.

Except for exhorting readers of this journal to further scholarly, if not preternatural, effort, it is difficult to see what Dr. Graff is actually trying to do, and perhaps he does not know himself. Dr. Graff intends, he says, to "transcend" my "essay", and so it is hard to see whether his objection to unwarranted "claims made for the significance of literacy" (p. 446) is directed against my work or that of some other dim obscurantists, more backward than myself. Since so many of his pronouncements are given *ex cathedra*, and appear to deal with problems ranging from Reformation Germany to Elgin County, Ontario, it is difficult to know where to begin. Assuming that he meant to conduct a serious critique of my text, I shall try to take up some of the more salient points on which he is patently wrong.

On what he calls the "conceptual level" to begin with, Dr. Graff's second paragraph condemns my "profusion of categories," and then argues that literacy can be practical or useless, liberating or conservative, and finally states that literacy is a complex phenomenon that should not be oversimplified. The first and third points seem to be contradictory; the second is certainly irrelevant. Precisely because the word "literacy" is applied to a number of distinct, though often related skills, I deliberately explored a variety of sources that provided data on reading, writing and signing. "At best," Dr. Graff writes, "their information can only be compared loosely and flexibly, *but only* if the nature and meaning of their

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data are explicitly interpreted, the varying measures compared and assessed, the biases and distortions admitted and controlled as well as possible." It seems to me this is exactly what I did. The reader will also note that few of my conclusions are based on the evidence of more than one source.

Dr. Graff is also unhappy with my treatment of literacy and religion, partly, it seems, because I "crudely dichotomize Catholicism and Protestantism" (p. 447) — whatever that means. He accuses me of failing to consider material factors as a cause of different literacy patterns and yet quotes me to the effect that social and economic structures were constant between the religiously different groups under examination. I may indeed be wrong on this second point but the question is empirical and not conceptual as Dr. Graff argues. Since I do not treat religious denominations as "universal, independent causal factors" (p. 449), Dr. Graff's extended discussion of the obvious fact that, in some times and places, Catholic literacy was relatively high and Protestant literacy low, is completely beside the point. Similarly, the information on education in France and Germany (p. 450), bears no relation to my claim that, in Lower Canada, Catholics and Protestants, subject to the same system of school finance and indeed living in the same school districts, had different rates of attendance (Greer, pp. 321-22). Worse than irrelevant are Dr. Graff's speculations about my motives in arguing for a correlation between Protestantism and literacy (p. 447), as though there were a connection between the origins of my hypothesis on the one hand, and its truth or falsity on the other.

Dr. Graff seems to think that my arguments are based on the belief that the wealth and occupational structures of the English and French populations of Lower Canada were the same. This is of course preposterous, as anyone familiar with the works of Fernand Ouellet would realize (are these the "necessary data" Dr. Graff is unable to "muster"?). The English, for example, were disproportionately represented in the cities and in the commercial bourgeoisie. My point was simply that the predominantly francophone communities and the predominantly anglophone communities included in the Buller sample were all rural and probably similar in their social structures. In many places where more than 90 per cent of the population spoke French, most or all of the handful of local shopkeepers may well have been English, but, if the latter could read and write, their literacy would still bolster the "francophone" totals.¹

¹ It remains true that this point of mine, which was somehow lost in Dr. Graff's rendering, is not supported by solid statistics. This is for the very good reason that there are no sources of aggregate data on occupations or wealth for this period. Some indirect evidence from the censuses of 1831 and 1844 suggests that the sixteen "English" communities, many of which were still at the pioneer stage when the Buller data were collected in 1838-39, may actually have been in some senses more rural and less wealthy than the thirty-two "French" communities. The figures on horses (see table below) were used here in preference to those concerning other domestic animals or harvests since the latter are more likely to reflect regional differences in agricultural practices. See Fernand OUELLET, *Histoire économique et sociale du Québec 1760-1850: Structures et conjoncture* (Montreal, 1966), p. 359. Moreover, horses were kept by farmers and non-farmers alike, insofar as they could afford them. The

Dr. Graff has doubts about my sources and his most severe criticisms are directed against my use of the Buller Commission data. "The data," he observes, "apparently were not considered satisfactory by those who sought them." True, but because only a fraction of the questionnaires were returned. The commissioners could not therefore assemble the provincial aggregate statistics they sought. The complete returns give what I consider useable information on 55 communities. Before rates could be calculated from these "very raw data," I had to estimate the local population within certain age categories. This was a long and tedious process, the non-essential details of which I have spared my readers.² Dr. Graff attempts to discredit my procedure in this area by objecting to the strange age structure of 27 percent under five years and 19 percent five to fifteen years (p. 454). These are indeed odd figures, but they can be explained without reference to the effects of age-heaping: Dr. Graff simply misread my text, reversing the order of these two percentages.

Certainly there are good reasons for a certain scepticism about the Buller data because of the way they were collected; and on this and a number of other points, Dr. Graff insists on beating me over the head with my own reservations, bending them in the process. The figures, like those provided by censuses, are based on the testimony of contemporaries. In studies based on censuses, one is asked to believe each individual's statement that he is or is not literate. In the present case, the classification was performed by a third party, a local committee which, in the French-Canadian parishes, almost always included the priest and notary, men who, in the routine exercise of their duties, would have had occasion to observe their co-parishioners' knowledge of reading and writing. Although Dr. Graff is right to point out that the absolute validity of the resulting statistics has not been proven beyond a shadow of a doubt, he dismisses far too lightly the circumstances supporting my claim that they constitute valuable estimates of local literacy. First of all, the returns that were not discarded contain plausible figures on total population and age breakdown, suggesting that the local committees actually counted noses. If they could gather information about age, sex and religion, why not about literacy and school attendance? Secondly, the literacy percentages are consistent, for

figures from the census of 1831 on the number of families subsisting by agriculture are offered with the warning that the census takers may have collected them according to different criteria. They suggest that, as one might expect, there were proportionately fewer farmers and more artisans, as well as labourers, in the generally long-established French parishes.

	<i>French communities</i>		<i>English communities</i>	
	<i>1831</i>	<i>1844</i>	<i>1831</i>	<i>1844</i>
households	8107	9486	1731	3300
horses per household	1.7	1.4	1.0	1.1
households subsisting by agriculture	71.4%		94.6%	

² For example, the 1831 census does not provide the kind of age breakdown that would allow interpolation.

communities in each of the linguistic categories had literacy levels that tend to bunch within a relatively narrow range.

The Buller figures are upheld, thirdly, by a comparison with roughly corresponding signature rates which reveals the kind of relationships that one might expect, given the nature of the different indices. (p. 454; cf. GREER, p. 312). In Rivière-du-Loup higher percentages of men and women signed their marriage acts than the Buller statistics indicated were able to read and write. The discrepancy results from the fact that the Buller figures concern the entire adult population, while the other source relates only to newlyweds who, because they were generally young, would, in this case, have been somewhat better educated than the average. In many cases signature rates from contemporary petitions also exceeded the proportion of males able to read and write and even able to read alone. These were generally petitions with low rates of coverage whose signature rates were therefore inflated. What seems interesting is the way the signature rates and reading and writing rates tend to approach one another as one rises through Figure 2 from the less to the more reliable petitions. Let me repeat that I do not wish to insist strongly on this demonstration but only to add its testimony to the indications of plausibility and consistency mentioned above.

Generally Dr. Graff's remarks betray a fundamental failure to grasp the aims and scope of my essay. At one point I admit to a desire "to provide the raw material that will make it possible to explore the relations among education, society and economy" (Greer, p. 297). Yet only the second half of this phrase is presented in the critique (p. 446), as though I were claiming to settle this problem rather than contribute a few examples that might help others to do so. This misunderstanding leads Dr. Graff to accuse me of "retreating" into description, my primary aim from the beginning. Surely Dr. Graff would not expect anyone to be foolish enough to attempt to deal at a general level with a problem of this magnitude in a forty-page article? Apparently not, since his repeated complaints that I did not gather enough data, synthesize enough from the international literature or explore related topics sufficiently suggest that he would only be satisfied with a book, and a long one at that.

The first sentence of my article makes it clear that my primary interest is in the history of Quebec. This is a matter of policy as much as taste for I am convinced that literacy cannot be studied properly without reference to the particulars of time and place. Though my study may have empirical deficiencies in some areas, Dr. Graff is in no position to correct them. He does not even seem to believe that a knowledge of Quebec's society, economy or school system is required to comment on my findings. Instead he opposes my claims about the social structure of the rural communities covered by the Buller sample with the sweeping assertion that recent research "has suggested that dramatic economic inequalities exist in rural areas [when? where?] which sometimes parallel those found in the cities." (p. 450). Graff relies heavily on studies conducted in quite different societies and he makes use of them in a curious way. They are trotted out when their findings run parallel to mine in order to show I am unoriginal (on sex

differentials) and, when they do not, to suggest I am wrong (on religion and on the relationship between reading, writing and signing).

I attempted to demonstrate earlier that Dr. Graff's specific objections are, on the whole, groundless. Nevertheless, it is quite true that my sources are by no means perfect nor my arguments ironclad (How many historians' are in this field?) and I was therefore careful to phrase my conclusions accordingly. Dr. Graff is not prepared to permit such cowardice. Instead he suppresses qualifying words when quoting my conclusions (eg. pp. 450, 454) and portrays my claims as much more extravagant than they really were. Thus, to take one example, the innocent observation that brides signed more frequently than grooms in some parish registers (Greer, p. 300) is erected into a general rule that supposedly "contradicts" later findings of a quite different sort (p. 452). For a specialist on literacy, Dr. Graff's reading methods are strange.

Although my evidence contained a measure of approximation, and my conclusions accordingly were more modest and tentative than Dr. Graff in his "big picture" mood might prefer, I would like to think that findings of this sort can be of some use in a study that pretends to be the first, and not the last, word on the history of literacy in Quebec. Previously historians had virtually no quantitative information on this subject, except perhaps where the seventeenth century was concerned. An extensive rather than intensive approach therefore seemed most likely to yield fruitful results. Specialists in other fields of Quebec history now at least have estimates of overall literacy up to the end of the nineteenth century, as well as indications of some of the factors related to literacy in certain contexts. Future students of literacy will have points of comparison and of reference with which to orient their efforts. Their work will likely take the form of more intensive analyses of particular localities, particular sources or particular problems. As a result of their findings, many, or all, of my conclusions may eventually be discarded. In the meantime, Dr. Graff's comments make no contribution to progress in this area.