

**the  
Passionate  
Educators**

voluntary associations  
and the struggle for control  
of adult educational  
broadcasting in Canada  
1919-1952

Ron Faris

# The Passionate Educators

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in Canada 1919-52*

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January, 1975

Victoria, B.C.

## Foreword

In 1943, about the middle of the period Ron Faris surveys, I became involved in adult education and the radio forums, first in university extension and then in CBC public affairs. Although I became well acquainted with most of those who figure in this book, I am not sure that at the time I would have recognized the "passionate educators" of the book's title. Most of them appeared to me as sober, moderate, temperate and tolerant Canadians, deeply concerned about social injustices and inequalities, it is true, but without the firm belief in their own solutions that usually marks the man with a passion for social reform. Indeed, among the persons who figure in this narrative, I can identify perhaps two who had such firm beliefs in their own social convictions—as it happens, two Scots, Watson Thomson and James Muir, who were at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum.

Nevertheless, Faris is right to convey the idea that these were no ordinary men and women who launched and kept in motion the Canadian Association for Adult Education, a frail vessel that always seemed about to founder on the shoals of financial deficiency, but which somehow or other was kept afloat. The author is right, also, to single out Ned Corbett as the most remarkable personality among that group, a man who had a genius for maintaining his friendships among the pillars of Canadian society, while at the same time recruiting gifted young movers and shakers to initiate and carry out the programs that Corbett as Director would later have to defend.

It is possible that Faris exaggerates the differences between the "liberal" educators who accepted and worked through the more traditional voluntary associations, and the social activists, only a minority of whom wished to bring about any very revolutionary change. Nevertheless, his perspective is a fresh

one, and his analysis may be worth extending to other social movements and leadership groups in order to further test its validity.

As one who became a student of broadcasting policy in Canada, I am especially interested in the emphasis Faris gives to the radio forums arranged in cooperation with the CBC during the years of Corbett's leadership in the adult education movement. "Farm Forum" and "Citizens' Forum" represented an effort to give substance to an ideal that we might now describe as participatory democracy, and I can only regret that the next generation did not build upon and improve the foundation which Corbett, Avison, Shugg, Sim and the Morrisons laid. The reasons that this did not happen are more than accidents of character and personality. Much more, I am sure, they are to be found in the nature of the society for which we Canadians have settled, and the goals and leaders we have espoused. Faris's book may well make us ponder whether a man of social conscience, such as Corbett, is doomed to live his life in frustration under modern conditions, or is even an anachronism. But such gloomy reflections are not the author's. His book is a well-researched contribution to the social history of Canada, and deserves the attention of all present-day educators and social activists.

Frank W. Peers, Department of Political Economy,  
University of Toronto,  
June, 1975.

**To My Family**

# Introduction

This is the story of a relatively small group of Canadians who shared a belief in the power of adult education, and of one in particular, E. A. (Ned) Corbett, who was the first Director of the Canadian Association for Adult Education (CAAE) from 1936 until his retirement in 1950. In this fifteen-year period the Association promoted a variety of adult educational activities; however in only one field, educational broadcasting, did it sustain relatively successful ventures. In fact, its "National Farm Radio Forum" and "Citizens' Forum" radio series gained international recognition and emulation. These broadcasting enterprises led to a number of critical incidents, several of which began during the final year of Corbett's leadership and were concluded only by 1952.

The CAAE and its forums must be viewed within the context of their time. The historic roots of the Association are found chiefly in the traditional voluntary associations and rural social movements which grew in the decade following the First World War, for it was from these organizations that many of the CAAE's leaders and concerns were to come.

While all social movements use voluntary associations as the vehicle of their organization, not all voluntary associations are manifestations of social movements. Traditional voluntary associations are organizations which strive to preserve or extend the existing way of life and conventional values.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, social movements are organizations which systematically attempt to "inaugurate changes in thought, behaviour, and social relationships".<sup>2</sup> Some associations contain members who view their organization as an expression of a social movement as well as those who see it merely as a traditional voluntary association to promote specifically limited goals. Such was the case with the CAAE from its inception to 1952.

The CAAE during this period can be understood best by viewing it as an organization which contained both traditional voluntary association and social movement elements. It was composed of a majority who viewed it as a traditional voluntary association, the purpose of which was to promote individual enlightenment of adults within the existing society. The Association also contained a minority who wanted it to become a vehicle for social change—a social movement.<sup>3</sup> They saw the CAAE's chief task as that of promoting education for social action and change. It is an understanding of the interplay of these two elements within the Association which explains the nature of its development and that of its radio forums. Critical incidents in the growth of the radio forums reveal particularly clearly the tensions between traditional voluntary association and social movement elements within the CAAE.

In contrast to the rural social movements, traditional voluntary associations after World War I were of an elitist nature.<sup>4</sup> A relatively small group of notables was found on the executives of many of the organizations which developed during this period. Aside from the interlocking nature of voluntary association directorships, the elitist character was apparent in that many voluntary association leaders held influential positions in the corporate, political, or educational institutions of that period.<sup>5</sup>

Despite an apparent bias against elite analysis in the United States, social scientists have shown how profitable such a perspective can be in viewing events in Canada.<sup>6</sup> Elite analysis is not based upon a conspiracy theory but rather on the recognition of the natural intercourse of like-minded people in top leadership positions. In Porter's seminal work the educational elite in Canada was identified by its membership in the Royal Society. A more functional definition can be arrived at by studying membership in the traditional voluntary associations which evinced educational concerns. It was in such self-selected gatherings that many of the educational elite, in concert with others from the corporate and political worlds, worked out their ideas and sought the means to express them.

Canada in the first half of the twentieth century appears to have operated in the fashion of a country club. Members of this elite national assemblage were often leaders of such traditional voluntary associations as the Association of Canadian Clubs, the Canadian Institute for International Affairs or the National Council of Education. We will only be able to catch glimpses of those members who became embroiled in the development of Canadian broadcasting or an even smaller set who became involved in adult education. Aspects of their lives and actions in other fields are, in the main, omitted. What intrigues the observer is not, however, isolated individual behaviour but rather how relatively small, intimate, and manageable the Canada of that period was. Indeed, it was the relatively small, closely-knit nature of the elites at that time which made it possible for the itinerant E. A. Corbett to become ac-

quainted with many traditional voluntary association leaders across the nation.

Corbett also met many rural social movement leaders and fostered their commitment to the cause of adult education. Many of the traditional voluntary association and social movement leaders who took part in the CAAE became involved in the wider public issues of their day. These men carried their social values with them as they confronted educational issues. Thus the same social assumptions and values which divided them on public matters separated them as they assumed leadership roles in the CAAE or its forums. As many of them recognized, their conflicts were based essentially on differing views of the nature of their nation and its future.

Both groups saw the use of radio for adult education as the means of attaining their educational objectives. One saw the chief purpose as the promotion of enlightenment within an existing social order. The other saw the main purpose as the promotion of social action for social change. Small wonder they pursued their purposes with a fervour seldom associated with educators. This is the story of those passionate educators and their struggle to influence the development of adult educational broadcasting in Canada.

## *frequently used abbreviations*

AAAE	American Association for Adult Education
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BIIA	British Institute of International Affairs
CAAE	Canadian Association for Adult Education
CAB	Canadian Association of Broadcasters
CBC	Canadian Broadcasting Corporation
CCC	Canadian Citizenship Council
CCEC	Canadian Council of Education for Citizenship
CCF	Co-operative Commonwealth Federation
CEA	Canadian Education Association
CFA	Canadian Federation of Agriculture
CHR	Canadian Historical Review
CIIA	Canadian Institute of International Affairs
CLAT	Civil Liberties Association of Toronto
CLES	Canadian Legion Educational Services
CNEA	Canada and Newfoundland Education Association
CNR	Canadian National Railways
CPR	Canadian Pacific Railways
CRBC	Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission
CUC	Co-operative Union of Canada
CYC	Canadian Youth Commission
DBS	Dominion Bureau of Statistics
DPI	Department of Public Information
IPR	Institute of Pacific Relations
JPC	Joint Planning Commission of the CAAE
NCCU	National Conference of Canadian Universities
NCM	New Canada Movement
NFB	National Film Board
OISE	Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
PWC	Psychological Warfare Committee
UFA	United Farmers of Alberta
UFO	United Farmers of Ontario
WAAE	World Association of Adult Education
WEA	Workers' Educational Association
WIB	Wartime Information Board
WPTB	Wartime Prices and Trade Board
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association