Introduction to the
Transaction Edition

Since the original publication of *The Literary Myth* in 1979, the history of literacy, as a regular, significant, and sometimes central concern of historians–and other social scientists and humanists–of a wide range of topical, chronological, and methodological inclinations, has become well established. In this, *The Literacy Myth* played an active part, the record of citations, translations, critical commentaries, and other influences shows. The republication of this book, amidst the continuing flow of special journal issues, anthologies, and monographs, reinforces the point. It also raises key questions about the state of historical literacy studies, their relationships to allied scholarship in other fields and disciplines, and, equally important, the future of the field. The active thrust and exceptional growth in historical literacy studies over the past two decades have propelled the subject to new prominence; yet, basic linkages among and between necessarily related subjects and students, by discipline and interdisciplines, have a great distance to travel.

The maturation of the historical study of literacy in the 1980s has been enormously beneficial, inside the academy and on occasion beyond its walls. Nevertheless, this significant body of scholarship demands attention more broadly, both in terms of what it may contribute to other researchers, planners, and thinkers, and in terms of its own needs for interdisciplinary cooperation and constructive criticism. For example, historical literary studies have been marked by their attention to the exploitation of quantitative data and to issues of quantity and measurement. As important as that has been to initial advances, that

emphasis has also been, or begins to become, a limitation toward new conceptualizations and, especially, interpretations.

My principal concern in this introduction is the present state of historical literacy studies and their possible redirection. For literacy studies, this is an "awkward age" or stage of development. That I should sense this at the present moment is perhaps not surprising, for historical studies in general after two decades of proliferating "new histories" are themselves in something of an awkward age. The recent appearance of a hefty number of books and articles surveying the state of the craft, searching for trends, and sometimes proposing new emphases and directions underscores this condition.[1] As the history of literacy joins the historiographical mainstream, it suffers from similar challenges and questions. Virtually all other disciplines among the "human sciences" share this late twentieth-century sense of (epistemological and other) crisis, sometimes constituting a stimulus toward interdisciplinary development, sometimes precisely the opposite. Literacy studies, though, may be an exceptional case. For example, the distinctions between quantities and qualities, to use one dichotomy, exacerbate all questions of interpretation and meaning. In this case, the quantitative record, no matter how essential to literacy's complete study and no matter how cleverly exploited, may have inherent limits at least as severe as those in other areas of historical or communications analysis.

I referred to "an awkward age" for the historical study of literacy. I am tempted to conceive of the field's development in terms of life courses or cycles, at least metaphorically, and to posit the present situation as one of late adolescence or youthfulness. I do think, however, that perhaps a generational perspective is more accurate than a life cycle one. In these terms, for the purposes of discussion and assessment, we might conceive of three modern generations of historical literacy studies.

A first generation includes principally the late-1960s work of Stone, Cipolla, and Schofield, and was foreshadowed by the 1950s studies by Fleury and Valmary in France and Webb in England. The contributions of these scholars here were several: to advance a "strong" case for the historical study of literacy– its direct study, that is, and for its import and significance as a historical factor; review the general course of literacy's chronological trends and principal transitions and passages; identify sources for fuller, systematic exploitation– primarily but not exclusively, numerical sources; advance the case(s) for the utility of routinely generated, systematic, and sometimes comparable and "direct" measures; and posit, sometimes speculatively, the factors most closely tied to and responsible for changes in the course of literacy over time, its dynamics, distributions, impacts, and consequences.

A second generation grew directly from and was clearly stimulated by the first, more sweeping and speculative students. Major studies of the second generation include Schofield's later work, Egil Johansson's studies, and book-

length reports by Lockridge, Furet and Ozouf, Cressy, Stevens and Soltow, Rab Houston, and myself. This is the historical location of *The Literacy Myth*. In addition, there exist numerous articles, monographs, local and regional studies, and theses and dissertations, mostly unpublished, especially in Great Britain and France.[2]

The emphasis became a larger, more detailed erection and exploitation of the quantitative record, usually but not always from signatory or census sources; greater concern for a more evidentially and sometimes also more contextually grounded historical interpretation of changing patterns—especially of distributions and differentiations in levels of literacy; relating literacy's trends to social and economic developments, institutional interventions and state activities (especially factors such as the availability of formal schooling and public school systems, political transformations and events such as the French Revolution, ideological aspects of the subject, among such factors); concern with class formation; attention to uses of literacy in terms both of patterns of reading and individual and group attitudinal and psychological changes; and increased awareness of the contradictory nature of the subject and alertness to the difficulties in building historical interpretations upon a quantitative analysis of secular trendlines and patterns of distribution and differentiation (among many other aspects). The value of comparative frameworks was also recognized, if only occasionally formally attempted or practiced.

As a result of this second generation of research, we know much more about literacy's social patterns over time and the fairly systematic and patterned variations in its distributions over time and place. We are perhaps also more hesitant and cautious in explanation and attribution of meaning (Graff, 1987a, Houston, 1988).

At the same time as the maturing of this second generation, literacy also was "discovered" by an increasing number of historians, especially those employing quantitative methods and numerical sources that included some information on literacy (either on an aggregative, ecological, or an individual level), or which were fairly easily linked to information sources on literacy. Thus, literacy increasingly featured in studies of economic change, demographic behavior, cultural development and conflict, class formation and stratification, collective actions of all kinds, family formation and structures, and the like, as the literature on all these key subjects now reflects. Interestingly, in this sphere of studies, literacy tended to be conceptualized most often as an independent variable, presumably useful in the explanation of another dependent variable, which was itself the object of more direct and sustained study.

In the growing number of studies that took literacy itself as the central object of study and discussion, literacy could be and was conceptualized as either or both dependent or independent variable. At once a source of analytic and conceptual flexibility, this could also be a problem and a source of interpretive

confusion and weakness: the nature of literacy as a (historical) variable rarely is examined critically.

Finally, another group of historians, most interested in cultural, publishing, and/or literary topics, also tended increasingly to consider literacy within their purview. They represented new concerns with "the history of the book" and the history of reading. Although they rarely studied literacy's levels and patterns directly, they took it as a central factor or parameter for their own work. Here one thinks of press and newspaper histories, *l'histoire du livre*, studies of popular culture, which include new interest in oral culture and its interaction with literacy, and histories of print and publishing. Some of this work, such as that of Robert Darnton (1983, 1984) and Elizabeth Eisenstein (1979), has stimulated important responses. We have learned much from such work, too much to summarize. Most of it, unfortunately, often remains unconnected to work focused directly on literacy itself. (for important new efforts, see Chartier, 1987, 1989; Davidson, 1989; Gilmore, 1989; Ginzberg, 1980; Martin, 1968-70, 1975, 1977; Burke, 1978, 1987; Febvre and Martin, 1958; Eisenstein, 1979; Carpenter, 1983; Feather, 1985; Brooks, 1985; Darnton, 1972, 1983, 1984; Davidson, 1986; Spufford, 1981; Hall and Hench, 1987; Joyce et al, 1983; Kaestle, 1985, 1988, 1991; Isaac, 1976, 1982; the journals *Revue français d'histoire du livre* and *Publishing History*; and critiques by Davis, 1975; Darnton, 1972, 1982, 1983, 1984.)

Virtually all such work has labored under the specter and shadows of modernization theories with their strong assumptions of literacy's role, powers, and provenance–an issue that must be confronted critically, as did *The Literacy Myth*. Some students have chosen to challenge the assumptions of modernization's links to and impacts upon literacy (or vice versa). Others have assimilated their work within the traditions of modernization theories, suffering conceptual and interpretive difficulties (which the empirical record alone seldom meets squarely and which remain to be examined). In some cases, the assumption of modernization actually substitutes for empirical, as well as critical research. Problems also include the persisting presence of obstructive dichotomies such as literate versus illiterate, print versus oral, and the like, none of which are interpretively rich or complex enough to advance our understanding.

The third generation now awaits us. It has barely raised its head, although I shall relate my thoughts about its agendas and emphases. Discussion must now focus upon the "needs and opportunities"–questions, sources, methods–of the third generation. In fact, the most recent studies begin to point the way.[3] Ground-breaking work in contemporary studies usefully demonstrates basic areas and aspects of interdisciplinary collaboration.

Two new and original directions in the social-scientific study of literacy offer intriguing and tantalizing leads to historians (as well as to contemporary

students). In particular, I think of the social-psychological work–sometimes brilliant and often path-breaking in its implications–of the experimental, ethnographic, and comparative cognitive psychologists, Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole, especially in their *The Psychology of Literacy* (1981) and in Scribner's continuing studies of the skills, including reading and writing, required and utilized in different kinds of work settings and demands. This is part of a virtual revolution in cognitive studies, which has much to offer students of literacy. I also refer to the community-based ethnographies of literacy and education brought together by anthropologist and linguist Shirley Heath in *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms* (1983). Together, they underscore the import for literacy of context of learning and use, nature of acquisition, culture and tradition, and the like. Especially striking is their focus on literacy among the modes of human communication, in theory and in practice, and on ethnography. These pioneering works now stimulate others. They offer much to historians by example, analogy, and conceptualization, and indicate one major part of an agenda for the third generation.

Several other recent studies also lead us into wider terrains. Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (1984; see also Radway, 1986) proposes, and with a contemporary group of romance novel readers illustrates, that reading can be usefully and critically (and as her work evidences, sympathetically) studies in social, cultural, and political-economic contexts. Her imaginative practice is jointly informed by anthropological and literary critical perspectives; Radway also hints at the possibilities for historical efforts in this direction. In fact, creative research by David Vincent (1981) and Sally Mitchell (1981) shows potential for historical applications, via autobiographical and literary sources, for working-class and middle-class women. In this respect, the pioneering and idiosyncratic, if not always persuasive, writings of Carlo Ginzburg (1980) and Robert Darnton (1984) suggest the depths and insights that close study of reading practices set in socioculturally informed communicative contexts may yield. In these examples, I add, the limits of the work are as rich as are the real achievements. (See also Scribner, 1981, 1984; Burke, 1978, 1987; Davidson, 1986, 1990; Gilmore, 1989; Isaac, 1976a, 1976b, 1982; Stout, 1977; Kaplan, 1984; Muchembled, 1986; Goody, 1968, 1986, 1987; Thomas, 1986.)

The occasion for these reflections, happily, coincides with a highly significant moment for historical studies of literacy. If my "readings" are at least partially accurate, the field of inquiry is now at a crossroads. We must ask, not at all frivolously or lightly: Whither historians of literacy? If the second generation–having firmly established the field of the history of literacy–has wound down, and if my sensing a diminution of new researchers and research projects focused directly on literacy is also an accurate reading, and if we

assume that literacy deserves and demands further study and consideration, we also recognize that (1) many gaps in the record remain to be completed; (2) many questions—some only relatively recently posed—remain to be answered; and (3) problems in conceptualization, interpretation, and explanation mark these efforts. Consideration of the outlines and agendas of a perhaps currently, only hypothetically viewed, third generation is of more than academic interest.

We need to shift our dialogue from quantitative methods to critical questions. We do well to ponder the links in terms of both continuities and changes between the second generation (represented so strongly in the literature, and in this book) and my proposed third generation. I propose that we take stock and assess recent studies with an aim toward future research conceived and designed in novel ways.

The achievements of historical literacy studies are many and clear. No simply summary of that richness is possible here. (See References and Bibliography.) Persisting patterns of limitations also mark the field. Increasingly, we recognize limits of quantitative analysis alone and of aggregative and ecological methods and research designs. In some ways, we are only now coming to the most important questions and issues. That achievements, perhaps, along with statistical time series and patterns of variation, will be seen as one of the major contributions of generations one and, especially, two. There has been a shattering of "received wisdom" (as in "literacy myths"), expectations, assumptions—that is no small accomplishment. The obverse, however, is the question of what will replace it—in part, a theoretical issue. This is reflected in the "great debates" about literacy's relationships to economic (i.e., commercial and/or industrial) and social development, political mobilization, religion, social mobility, social class formation, work and leisure pattern, and social change more generally. Questions about method, such as those of dependent versus independent variables, levels of aggregation, problems of correlational analysis, follow.

Historian Rab Houston (1983, p. 279) captures the spirit of this moment when he usefully notes that,

> If attempts to explain structures and trends in illiteracy have been less satisfactory than simple expositions of them, analysis of the meaning of literacy is even more rudimentary. The field has seen a proliferation of merely statistical analyses of which it seems trite to say that the well-established structural measures such as regional or male-female difference must be seen in the context of social and political institutions, attitudes surrounding class and gender, but above all of the ways in which power is ordered an preserved. . . . The study of education and literacy has become less anecdotal and

parochial but the lack of a proper context prevents us from understanding its place in social development. Education is dealt with too much in its own terms. Even those studies which purport to analyze the interaction of education, literacy and society tend to select only a few simple aspects such as the way educational provision reflected the demands of different groups or how wealth, status and literacy overlap. Literacy can certainly be used as a valuable indicator of social divisions, but in what way did it help to preserve and perpetuate them?

In one way, the path lies in moving beyond literacy as a dichotomous variable, perceived either as conservative and controlling or as liberating. This could constitute moving toward a cultural politics and a political economy of literacy in history. There are a number of possible avenues. I suggest some now, with an eye toward setting an agenda for the third generation and toward bridging historians to other students of literacy.

Historical literacy studies must build upon their own past while also breaking away from it. The work of scholars such as Furet and Ozouf, Cressy, or Soltow and Stevens, delineates parameters, baselines, and key interrelationships that offer opportunities to investigate more precisely the linkages and to seek refinements in the specifications of factors and their interactions. These range from literacy's relations with class, gender, age, and culture to larger themes of economic development, social order, mobility and stratification, education and schooling, the actual uses of literacy, language and culture, and so one. One demand falls upon much sharper contextual grounding, often in clearly delineated localities. Others encompass the completion of time series, among other quantitative analyses.

Next is the advancement of comparative study. This requires a greater appreciation and emphasis on source criticism and recognition of the different meanings of different measures of literacy among different populations as evidenced from varying sources. In this case, contextualization is also critical for comparisons, as Johansson's and Houston's work in particular illustrates. Also critical is the further search for indicators of the levels and the quality of literacy, allowing us to advance beyond the limiting dichotomy of literate versus illiterate. Novel approaches to the combination of records and to record linkage stand out on the agenda. In this *The Literacy Myth* was a pioneer.

This is followed by a major need for new conceptualizations of context in the historical study of literacy. Recognizing that literacy only acquires meaning and significance within specified historical contexts does not in itself reduce the risks of abstracted analysis. Novel work in anthropology and psychology, like that of Heath, Scribner, and Cole, previously mentioned, provides important

suggestions and guidelines for historians. The tasks lie not only in defining and specifying contexts for study and interpretation, but also in delineating the varying levels of context–vertically or horizontally, for example–and in experimenting with ways to operationalize them. Stevens' (1985, 1988) focus on illiterates in judicial settings and Johansson's (1985) perspective on church and community suggest two opportunities to prove more intensively. Carlo Ginzburg's (1980) writings may provide another; so too may those of Radway (1984), Darnton (1982, 1984), Vincent (1981, 1989), Burke (1978, 1987), Eklof (1986), Grendler (1989), and Mitchell (1981). Gilmore's (1989) regional case study reiterates the richness of the records. For the recent past, oral histories, library use records, and participant observation, or ethnographies of communications, offer other possibilities.

Contexts for analysis are many and diverse. They range from those of acquisition, use, and action, to those of individual, family, group or community, gender, or social class. The scope for defined study is itself variable, but should include material conditions, motivations, opportunities, needs and demands, traditions, and transformations. In this way, linguistic forms, dialects, communication channels and networks, "pushes" and "pulls" from religion, culture, politics, the economy, and so forth, may be incorporated. Literacy's relationships to personal and/or collective efficacy and activism–a source of much debate–may also be further explored, in part in analysis of specific events and processes, and in part in terms of patterns of communications and mobilization within defined contexts. Class formation and vital behavior are just two of the many key topics calling for examination.

Are "historical ethnographies"–conceptualized fully in terms of literacy among the modes and relations of communications–of literacy possible? Recent work, such as that noted in this introduction, contains fascinating hints in that direction, which merit fuller examination. A number of recent studies in popular culture–for example, those of Carlo Ginzburg, Peter Burke, Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie, Bob Scribner, Keith Wrightson and David Levine, Harry Stout, and Rhys Isaac–may prove stimulating beginning models. Clearly, the subject and its significance stimulate a fair test. The current interests in anthropologies of communications and ethnographies of reading and writing at varying levels of context and generality are guides to follow. (See Heath, 1983; Whiteman, 1981, among the literature.)

On one hand, literacy may be viewed as one among other "media" and its roles and impacts evaluated. On the other hand, ethnographic and communicative approaches have the potential to expand perspectives while simultaneously grounding them more precisely for meaningful interpretation. Novel contextualization can also be a boost to the renewal and refinement of quantitative studies. Context, in sum, offers both new and better cases for study,

opportunities for explanation, and approaches to literacy's changing and variable historical meanings and contributions.

An added consideration follows. This is the difficult and necessary demand for critical examination of the conceptualization of literacy itself. The second generation has taught us about the contradictions central to literacy's history, while also revealing the problems in treating literacy as an independent variable and the confusions that inhere in treating literacy as either or both dependent and independent. In this respect, *The Literacy Myth* is an important work. Questions of contextualization may well limit analysis of literacy as independent; they will also, stimulate new formulations of the nature of literacy as a dependent factor. In the process, new considerations about levels and quality of literacy must transcend the related limits of the tradition of conceptualizing literacy as a dichotomous variable. The psychological and anthropological studies promise to contribute here too. The body of work of the second generation collectively underscores the special complications whose resolution ranks high on any agenda. To transcend it requires excavation of other relevant aspects of communicative or transmitted culture–always including the oral and visual–among which literacy, in shifting degrees and mediations, takes its place. (For example, Scribner, 1981, 1984.)

Then there is the question of literacy and what might well be termed the "creation of meaning." Historical study of literacy has been little influenced by recent debates in intellectual and cultural history, literary criticism, cognitive psychology, cultural anthropology and ethnography, or critical theories of culture and communication. In some manner, the origins of these current emphases stem from dissatisfaction with traditional approaches to "texts," their understanding, and their diffusion. More recently, the entire enterprise of grasping the "creation," maintenance, and communication of "meaning" has changed in major respects potentially relevant to issues central to literacy. Cultural and intellectual history are themselves, along with major aspects of the humanities and the social sciences–together, the human sciences–in a significant time of ferment and wider exploration of their parameters; so too, importantly, are literary criticism, cognitive and cultural psychology, and some areas of philosophy. Concerns about interactions between readers and texts, responses to writing and print, shaping of individual and collective processes of cognition, and the ways in which "meaning" is created, influenced, transmitted, and changed are common, if not always clarified.[4] Possibly to its detriment, the history of literacy stands in isolation from these trends. Now perhaps is the moment to at least consider the grounds for disciplinary and interdisciplinary rapprochement. Questions about literacy's contribution to individual, class and collective awareness, patterns of cognition (and also noncognitive attitudinal formation), and cultural behavior more generally all underscore this need. The

nagging issue of the uses of literacy and their consequences, deserves new exploration.

The need for a sharper theoretical awareness of the relevance of the history of literacy for many important aspects of social, economic, and psychological theory, constitutes a sixth point. This is implied in the foregoing. Historical studies of literacy do provide significant opportunities for testing theories, and in so far as their results continue to raise criticisms of "normative" theoretical expectations and assumptions, there can be prospects for essaying new formulations.

A consideration, raised as a question of methodology, indeed of epistemology, links all of the above mentioned. Has the tradition, from two generations of studies, of taking literacy as primary object of analysis--"the history of literacy" per se--approached an end point? Should a "third generation," rooted at least in part in the foregoing, refocus itself in terms of literacy as a significant--indeed a necessary--aspect of other relevant investigations? The question, simply put, is that of shifting from "historical studies of literacy" to "histories that encompass literacy within their context and conceptualization," from "the history of literacy" to "literacy in history." There is reason to argue, that the limits of the second generation's conceptualization encourage the exploration of what that transformation would entail. To move in this direction, is no simple task.

Finally, I call attention to the relevance of the history of literacy for a number of policy areas in societies "developed" and "underdeveloped" today, and to the additional contributions that reconceptualization might bring., Historical analysis can contribute to understanding and fashioning responses to deal with those problems that are sometimes deemed "literacy crises." In grasping that there are many paths to literacy, that literacy's relations to social and economic development are complex, that the quantity and the quality of literacy (and literacy's possession and its use) are not linearly related, that the consequences of literacy are neither direct not simple, and that literacy is never neutral, historians have much to share with their fellow students and to offer those who formulate social policies. That, in itself, is no small contribution.

Consider, for example, the concept of multiple paths to the making of literate societies and states. The historical study of literacy shows clearly that there is no one route to universal literacy, and there is no one path destined to succeed in the achievement of mass literacy. In the history of the Western world, we may distinguish the roles of private and public schooling in various configurations in the attainment of high rates of popular literacy, as well as the operation of informal and formal, voluntary and compulsory schooling. For example, mass literacy was achieved in Sweden without formal schooling or instruction in writing (Johansson, 1981). High rates of literacy have followed from all of these

approaches in different cases and contexts. The developmental consequences are equally varied. The importance of this discovery lies precisely in that:

> perhaps the most striking feature of UNESCO discussions on literacy, since 1965 when a campaign to wipe out illiteracy got going, is that it is little based on either experiment or historical precedents. Rather, in spite of Adam Curle's careful warnings in 1964, action seems as much based on self-evident axioms and hopes as on anything else. UNESCO assumes that literacy is a good thing--more latterly, functional literacy. Furthermore, in no clearly believed or understood way poverty, disease, and general backwardness are believed connected with illiteracy; progress, health, and economic well-being are equally self-evidently connected with literacy. UNESCO is committed to what amounts to a modernization theory to the effect that economic progress follows upon a change in many from illiterate to literate, preferably in one generation, and, even better, in the very same man. It is presupposed that such a change will lead, if not immediately then inevitably, to such changes and values in a society that economic progress--and in its train good health, longevity, and, perhaps, peace--is possible. (Winchester, 1978, 1980, 1. See also Arnove and Graff, 1987.)

The past provides, importantly, a different set of experiences than those behind these common expectations. Although neither all the research nor the balance sheet of historical interpretation is in, we may argue that historical experiences provide a better guide to such crucial questions as how and to what extent basic literacy contributes to the economic and individual well being of persons in different socioeconomic and cultural contexts, and under what circumstances universal literacy can be achieved. The costs and benefits of alternative paths can be discerned and estimated, too. Thus, the connections and disconnections between literacy and commercial development, a generally positive relationships, and literacy and industrial development, often an unfavorable linkage at least in the short run of decades and half-centuries, offer important case studies and analogs for analysis. The data of the past strongly suggest that a simple, linear, modernization model of literacy as prerequisite for development, and development as stimulant to increased levels of schooling will not suffice. Too many periods of lags, backward linkages, setbacks, and contradictions exist to permit such cavalier theorizing to continue without serious challenge and criticism.

The example of Sweden is especially significant in this regard. This case provides the most richly documented illustration of a transition to mass literacy in the Western world, and thus has much to teach us. As shown by the pioneering researches of Egil Johansson, near-universal levels of literacy were achieved rapidly and permanently in Sweden in the wake of the Lutheran Reformation. Under the joint efforts of Church and State, from the seventeenth century on, reading literacy was required under law for all persons. Within a century or so, remarkably high levels of literacy among the population existed–without any concomitant development of formal schooling or economic or cultural change that demanded functional or practical employment of literacy skills. Moreover, literacy grew in a manner that led to its being defined by reading and not by writing. Urbanization, commercialization, and industrialization had virtually nothing to do with the process of making the Swedish people perhaps the most literate in the West before the eighteenth century. Contrary to paths to literacy taken elsewhere, this campaign, begun by King Charles IX, was sponsored by the State Church. By legal requirement and vigilant supervision that included regular personal examinations by parish clergy, the church supervised a system rooted in home education. The rationale for the literacy campaign, one of the most successful in history before the nineteenth century, was conservative: piety, civility, orderliness, and military preparedness.

Significantly, the home and church education model fashioned by the Swedes not only succeeded in training a literate population, but it also placed a special priority on the literacy of women and mothers. This led to Sweden's anomalous achievement of female literacy rates as high as male rates or higher, a rare pattern in the Western history of transitions to mass literacy. Sweden also marched to its impressive levels of reading diffusion without mass achievement of writing–alerting us to the variable roles and mixes of different media, literate and others. It was not until the mid-nineteenth century erection of a state-supported public school system that writing, in addition to reading, became a regular part of popular literacy and a concern of educators and teachers. The context differed greatly from that of the two previous centuries. Finally, note that the only other areas that so fully and quickly achieved near-universal levels of literacy before the end of the eighteenth century were places of intensely pious religion, usually, but not always, Protestant: New England, Huguenot French centers, places within Germany, Switzerland, and parts of Scotland. There are lessons in these histories. (Johansson, 1977, 1981; Lockridge, 1974; Strauss, 1978, 1984; Strauss and Fawthrop, 1984; Scribner, 1981, 1984; Arnove and Graff, 1987.)

Literacy's relationships to paths of economic development, previously mentioned, are another case in point. So, too, are the connections of literacy with social development. In this case, we discover again a history of continuities

and contradictions, and of variable paths to societal change and development. From the classical era forward, leaders of polities and churches, reformers as well as conservers, have recognized the uses of literacy and schooling. Often they have perceived unbridled, untempered literacy as potentially dangerous, a threat to social order, political integration, economic productivity, and patterns of authority. Increasingly, however, they came to conclude that literacy, if provided in carefully controlled, structured, formal institutions created expressly for the purposes of education and transmission of literacy and supervised closely, could be a powerful and useful force in achieving a variety of important end. For example, in Rome, and in the visionary proposals of the fifteenth-and sixteenth-century Christian humanists, precedents long predated the first systematic mass efforts to put this conception of literacy into practice. For our purposes, the Reformations of the sixteenth century represented the first great literacy campaigns. They were hardly homogeneous efforts, as Sweden reminds us, in either design or degree of success. Nonetheless, they were precedent-setting and epochal in their significance for the future of social and educational development throughout the world.

With the Enlightenment and its heritage came the final ideological underpinnings for the "modern" and "liberal" reforms of popular schooling and institutional building that established the network of educational-social-political-cultural-and-economic relationships central to the dominant ideologies and their theoretical and practical expressions for the past two centuries. Prussia, revealingly, took the lead, and provided a laboratory that American, Canadian, English, French, and Scandinavian school promoters and reformers regularly came to study. North Americans and Swedes followed in Prussia's wake, and, in time and in their own ways, so did the English, French, Italians—and more recently vast areas of the underdeveloped world.

Of course, other important uses of literacy—for personal advancement, entertainment, study, collective action, and the like—must not be slighted. The significance and potential of literacy to individuals and to groups throughout history, even if sometimes taken out of context and exaggerated, is undoubted. The role of social class and group—specific demands for literacy's skills, the impact of motivation, and the growing perceptions of its value and benefits are among the major factors that explain the historical contours of changing rates of popular literacy. In other words, "demand" must be appreciated, as well as "supply," stimuli from "below" as well as force and compulsion from "above," in intricately reciprocal and dialectical relationships. Literacy's limits, history underscores, and its roles in promoting and maintaining hegemony, merit emphasis too. And their deeper exploration and understanding may depend on the new approaches suggested in this introduction.

Especially with the transitions from preindustrial social orders based on rank and deference to the class societies of commercial and then factory capitalism,

the integrating and hegemony–creating purposes of literacy provision through formal schooling only increased. Schooling, with its transmission of morally leavened and often qualitatively low levels of skills, became more and more a vital aspect of the maintenance of social stability–particularly during times of massive if confusing social and economic transformations–and a regular feature of the life course of the young. Many persons, most prominently social and economic leaders and social reformers, grasped the uses of schooling and the vehicle of literacy for promoting the values, attitudes, and habits deemed essential to order, integration, cohesion, and certain forms of progress. The people's acceptance of literacy's import–not a simple process–forms the other dimension of this historical equation. This, in fact, is the story told in *The Literacy Myth*, whose power holds still.

The issue of quality, as opposed to quantities, of literacy merits comment in conclusion. Because of the nature of the evidence, virtually all historical studies of literacy have concentrated on measuring the extent and distribution of reading and writing; issues concerning the qualitative levels, utilities, and actual uses of the skills have attracted less attention. What research has been conducted, however, does point to a common conclusion that qualitative abilities cannot be deduced simply or directly from quantitative assessments of literacy's distribution. Studies of early modern England, eighteenth– and nineteenth-century Sweden, and urban areas throughout the West in the nineteenth century all indicate that there has long been a significant disparity between the popular levels of possession of literacy and the quality and usefulness of those skills. In Sweden, for example, a great many persons who had attained high levels of oral reading ability did not have comparable skills in comprehending what they read. North American, English, and French data allow the wider generalization of this point, as the final chapter of this book demonstrates.

The implications of these findings are many. First, the measurement of the distribution of literacy in a given population may reveal relatively little about the uses to which such skills could be utilized and the degrees to which different demands on personal literacy could be satisfied with the skills commonly held. Second, it is also possible that with increasing rates of popular literacy did not come ever-rising capabilities or qualitative abilities–or ever-declining levels, as some would have it, either. Third–and potentially most important today–such evidence places the often-asserted contemporary decline of literacy in new and distinctive contexts and encourages a fresher, historically rooted perspective. That is: the possibility that mass levels of abilities to use literacy may have, over the long term, lagged behind the increases in literacy rates themselves. For some, like black Americans, great progress has occurred. This recognition also forces us to consider the impacts of changing communications modes and media, of which literacy in its alphabetic elements is just one. That is a task

barely begun. Our understanding of our own culture and polity suffer in its absence.

The recent decline, so often proclaimed, but so ineffectually measured and poorly understood, may be less a major change than we are told incessantly. We need to pay more attention to longer term trends, changes in popular communicative abilities and channels, compositional factors within populations—in and outside of schools, cultural changes in relation to media and technologies, than to "functional" or "competency" test results or "back to basics" movements. Those elements were never basic!

This does not imply that real problems do not exist. Rather, it underscores the import of historical perspectives and understanding, actively and publicly joined to other disciplines and major contemporary problems and policies. In this respect, recognition of the emergence of the history of literacy's "third generation" and of its relevance to nonhistorians is at once a first step and a paradigmatic one. It is my hope that *The Literacy Myth* will continue to play its part in this.

Harvey J. Graff

Notes

*   These reflections on the state of research in the historical study of literacy originated with my comments presented at the session on literacy at the May 1984 Bellagio Conference of the International Commission for the Application of Quantitative Methods to History on "The Transformation of Europe." For reasons of economy and space, I shall not present complete bibliographic citations for the text; interested readers may refer to my *Literacy in History: An Interdisciplinary Research Bibliography* (New York: Garland, 1981); *The Legacies of Literacy: Continuities and Contradictions in Western Society and Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); and *The Labyrinths of Literacy* (Sussex: Falmer Press, 1987). Some of the major examples of historical scholarship are collected in my *Literacy and Social Development in the West: A Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). The references and bibliography list that follow this introduction is designed to highlight significant (especially book-length) historical scholarship since the original publication of *The Literacy Myth* in 1979. The listing is selective.

[1]For example, see Stone's calls for retreat from social scientific and quantitative studies and hopes for "new narratives," attacks on social history, among many others. Stone (1979), and responses by Abrams (1980) and Hobsbawm (1980). See also Kammen (1980); Rabb and Rotberg (1982).

[2]See Graff (1981a); references in Graff (1987a); Houston (1983, 1988).

[3]See Chartier (1987, 1989), Gilmore (1989), Ginzburg (1980), Heath (983); Kaestle (1988, 1991); Radway (1984); Scribner (1984). The work in progress by Egil Johansson for Sweden and Edward Stevens for nineteenth-century United States underscores this point.

[4]This literature–actually several different bodies of it–is too vast to cite here. See for introductions, LaCapra and Kaplan (1982); Higham and Conkin (1979); Rabb and Rotberg (1982); and such journals as *Critical Inquiry; New Literary History; Representations; History and Theory.* See also, Kaplan (1984).

References and Bibliography

Abrams, Philip. (1980). "History, Sociology, Historical Sociology," *Past & Present* 87: 3-16.

Arnove, Robert F. and Graff, Harvey J., eds. *National Literacy Campaigns: Historical and Comparative Perspectives.* New York: Plenum.

Brooks, Jeffrey. (1985). *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Culture,* 1861-1917. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Burke, Peter. (1978). *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe.* New York: Harper and Row.

___. (1987). *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

___ and Porter, Roy, eds. (1987). *The Social History of Language.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Carpenter, Kenneth E., ed. (1983). *Books and Society in History.* New York: R.R. Bowker, 1983.

Chartier, Roger. (1987). *The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

___, ed. (1989). *The Culture of Print.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.

Cipolla, Carlo. (1969). *Literacy and Development in the West.* Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Clanchy, Michael. (1979). *From Memory to Written Record.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Cressy, David. (1980). *Literacy and the Social Order.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Darnton, Robert. (1972). "Reading, Writing, and Publishing in Eighteenth-Century France," in *Historical Studies Today*, ed. Felix Gilbert and Stephen R. Graubard. New York: Norton, pp. 238-250.

___. (1982). *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

___. (1983). "What is the History of Books?" In *Books and Society in History*, ed. Kenneth E. Carpenter. New York: R.R. Bowker, 1983, pp. 3-28.

___. (1984). "Readers Respond to Rousseau: The Fabrication of Romantic Sensitivity," In his *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*. New York: Basic Books. pp. 215-256.

Davidson, Cathy N. (1986). *Revolution in the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

___, ed. (1989). *Reading in America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Davis, Natalie Z. (19975). "Printing and the People," In her *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 189-226.

Eisenstein, Elizabeth. (1979). *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*. 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Eklof, Ben. (1986). *Russian Peasant Schools*. Berkeley. University of California Press.

Feather, John. (1985). *The Provincial Book Trade in Eighteenth-Century England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Febvre, Lucien and Martin, Henri-Jean. (1958). *L'apparition du livre*. Paris: Editions Albin Michel.

___. (1976). *The Coming of the Book*. London: New Left Books.

Finnegan, Ruth. (1988). *Literacy and Orality*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Fleury, M. and Valmary, P. (1957). "Les progrès de l'instruction élèmentaire de Louis XIV à Napoleon III," *Population,* 12: 71-92.

Furet, F. and Ozouf, J. (1977). *Lire et écrire*. 2 vols. Paris: Editions de Minuit.

___. (1983). *Reading and Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Garcia, Hazel Dicken. (1977). "Communications in the Migration to Kentucky, 1769-1792," unpub. Ph.D. *Dissertation*, University of Wisconsin-madison.

Gilmore, William J. (1989). *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.

Ginzburg, Carlo. (1980). *The Cheese and the Worms*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Goody, Jack, ed. (1968). *Literacy in Traditional societies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

___. (1986). *The Logic of Writing and the Organisation of Society*. Cambridge University Press.

___. (1987). *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Graff, Harvey J. (1979). *The Literacy Myth: Literacy and Social Structure in the Nineteenth-Century City*. New York and London: Academic Press.

___. (1981a). *Literacy in History: An Interdisciplinary Research Bibliography*. New York: Garland.

___, ed. (1981b). *Literacy and Social Development in the West*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

___. (1981c). "Reflections on the History of Literacy: Overview, Critique, and Proposals," *Humanities in Society*, 4: 303-333.

___. (1987a). *The Legacies of Literacy: Continuities and Contradictions in Western Culture and Society*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

___. (1987b). *The Labyrinths of Literacy: Reflections on Past and Present*. Sussex: Falmer Press.

Grendler, Paul. (1989). *Schooling in Renaissance Italy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Hall, David D. and Hench, John B., eds. (1987). *Needs and Opportunities in the History of the Book: America, 1639-1876*. Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society.

Harris, William V. (1989). *Ancient Literacy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Havelock, Eric A. (1963). *Preface to Plato*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

___. (1976). *Origins of Western Literacy*. Toronto: OISE Press.

___. (1982). *The Literate Revolution in Greece and Its Cultural Consequences*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

___. (1986). *The Muse Learns to Write*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Heath, Shirley Brice. (1983). *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Higham, John and Conkin, Paul, eds. (1979). *New Directions in American Intellectual History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Hobsbawm, E.J. (1980). "The Revival of Narrative: Some Comments," *Past & Present*, 86: 3-8.

Houston, R. (1982). "The Literacy Myth? Illiteracy in Scotland, 1630-1760." *Past & Present*, 96: 81-102.

___. (1983). "Literacy and Society in the West, 1500-1800," *Social History*, 8: 269-293.

___. (1985). *Scottish Literacy and the Scottish Identity: Illiteracy and Society in Scotland and Northern England, 1600-1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

___. (1988). *Literacy in Early Modern Europe*. London: Longman.

Illich, Ivan and Sanders, Barry. (1988). *The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind*. San Francisco: North Point.

Isaac, Rhys. (1976a). "Dramatizing the Ideology of Revolution: Popular Mobilization in Virginia, 1774 to 1776," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 33: 357-385.

____. (1976b). "Preachers and Patriots: Popular Culture and the Revolution in Virginia," In *The American Revolution*, ed. Alfred F. Young. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, pp. 125-156.

____. (1982). *The Transformation of Virginia*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Johansson, Egil. (1977). *The History of Literacy in Sweden*. Educational Reports, Umea, no. 12. Umea, Sweden: Umea University and School of Education.

____. (1981). "The History of Literacy in Sweden," In *Literacy and Social Development in the West*, ed. Harvey J. Graff. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 151-182.

____. (1985). "Popular Literacy in Scandinavia about 1600-1900," *Historical Social Research* No. 34: 60-64.

Joyce, William L.; Hall, David D.; Brown, Richard D.; and Hench, John B., eds. (1983). *Printing and Society in Early America*. Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, 1983.

Kaestle, Carl F. (1985). "The History of Literacy and the History of Readers," *Review of Educational Research*, 12: 11-53.

____. (1988). "Literacy and Diversity: Themes from a Social History of the American Reading Public," *History of Education Quarterly* 28: 523-550.

____. (1991). *A Social History of the American Reading Public*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Kammen, Michael, ed. (1980). *The Past Before Us*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Kaplan, Steven L., ed. (1984). *Understanding Popular Culture: Europe from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century*. Berlin: Mouton.

LaCapra, Dominic and Kaplan, Steven L., eds. (1982). *Modern European Intellectual History*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

LeRoy Ladurie, Emmanuel. (1978). *Montaillou: Promised Land of Error*. New York: Braziller.

Levine, David. (1979). "Education and Family Life in Early Industrial England," *Journal of Family History*, 4: 368-380.

____. (1980). "Illiteracy and Family Life during the First Industrial Revolution," *Journal of Social History*, 14: 25-44.

Lockridge, Kenneth A. (1974). *Literacy in Colonial New England*. New York: Norton.

Martin, Henri-Jean. (1975). "Culture écrite et culture orale, culture savante et culture populaire dans la France d'Ancient Régime," *Journal des Savants*: 225-282.

___. (1977). "Pour une histoire de la lecture," *Revue Française d'histoire du livre*, 16: 583-609.

___. (1968-70). *Le Livre et la civilisation écrite*. 3 vols. Paris: Ecole nationale supérièure des bibliotèques.

McKitterick, Rosamond. (1989). *The Carolinians and the Written Word*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mitchell, Sally. (1981). *The Fallen Angel: Chastity, Class and Women's Reading, 1835-1880*. Bowling Green, OH: Popular Press.

Muchembled, Robert. (1985). *Popular Culture and Elite Culture in France, 1400-1750*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press (1978).

Ong, Walter J. (1967). *The Presence of the Word*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

___.(1977). *Interfaces of the Word*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

___. (1982). *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*.

Rabb, Theodore K. and Rotberg, Robert I., eds. (1982). *The New History: 1980s and Beyond*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Radway, Janice A. (1984). *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

___. (1986). "Identifying Ideological Seams: Mass Culture, Analytic Method, and Political Practice," *Communication* 9: 93-123.

Schofield, Roger S. (1968). "The Measurement of Literacy in Pre-industrial England," In *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, ed. Jack Goody. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 311-325.

___. (1973). "The Dimensions of Illiteracy in England, 1750-1850," *Explorations in Economic History*, 10: 437-454.

Scribner, R.W. (1981). *For the Sake of Simple Folk: Popular Propaganda for the German Reformation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

___. (1984). "Oral Culture and the Diffusion of Reformation Ideas," *History of European Ideas* 5: 237-256.

Scribner, Sylvia and Cole, Michael. (1981). *The Psychology of Literacy*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press.

Soltow, Lee and Stevens, Edward. (1981). *The Rise of Literacy and the Common School in the United States*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Spufford, Margaret. (1979). "First Steps in Literacy: The Reading and Writing Experiences of the Humblest Seventeenth Century Autobiographers," *Social History*, 4: 407-435.

___. (1981). *Small Books and Pleasant Histories*. London: Methuen.

Stephens, W.B. (1987). *Education, Literacy and Society, 1830-70*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Stevens, Edward. (1985). "Literacy and the Worth of Liberty," *Historical Social Research* No. 34: 65-81.

___. (1988). *Literacy, Law, and Social Order*. DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press.

Stevens, John D. and Garcia, Hazel Dicken. *Communication History*. Beverly Hills: Sage, 1980.

Stock, Brian. (1981). *The Implications of Literacy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

___. (1990). *Listening for the Text*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Stone, Lawrence. (1969). "Literacy and Education in England, 1640-1900," *Past & Present*, 42: 69-139.

___. (1979). "The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History," *Past & Present*, 85: 3-24.

Stout, Harry S. (1977). "Religion, Communications, and the Ideological Origins of the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly* 34:519-541.

Strauss, Gerald (1978). *Luther's House of Learning*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

___. (1984). "Lutheranism and Literacy: A Reassessment," In *Religion and Society in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Kaspar von Greyerz. London: Allen and Unwin, pp. 109-123.

___ and Gawthrop, Richard. (1984). "Protestantism and Literacy in Early Modern Germany," *Past & Present*, 104: 31-55.

Thomas, Rosalind. (1989). *Oral Tradition and Written Record in Classical Athens*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Thompson, Paul. (1975). *The Edwardians*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

___. (1978). *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Vincent, David. *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Working Class Autobiography*. London, Europä, 1981.

___. (1989). *Literacy and Popular Culture: England, 1750-1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Webb, Robert K. (1955). *The British Working Class Reader*. London: Allen and Unwin.

Whiteman, Marcia Farr, ed. (1981). *Writing: The Nature, Development and Teaching of Written composition*. Vol. 1: *Variation in Writing*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Winchester, Ian. (1978, 1980). "How Many Ways to Universal Literacy?" Paper presented to the Ninth World Congress of Sociology, Upsala, 1978, and Seminar on the History of Literacy in Post-Reformation Europe, University of Leicester, 1980.

Wrightson, Keith and Levine, David. (1979). *Poverty and Piety*. New York and London: Academic Press.