THE ORIGINS OF CONTINUING EDUCATION FOR WOMEN:

THE ONTARIO WOMEN'S INSTITUTES[1]

Terry Crowley

Terry Crowley soutient que les origines de l'éducation permanente pour les femmes canadiennes remontent au mouvement pour les instituts des femmes (Women's Institutes) qui traversa le pays pendant la première moitié de ce siècle. Aucune autre organisation (à part les églises chrétiennes) n'a joué un tel rôle formateur dans l'histoire des femmes de milieu rural. Crowley examine les origines, les activités, et les premières travailleuses de ces instituts.

One of the most enduring legacies of the nineteenth century to the late twentieth has been the idea of compulsory, state financed education for the young. Compulsory state education, however, applied only to children and failed to reach those generations which had not been in a position to avail themselves of this new governmental munificence. Consequently it was not long before professional educators began the assault on the notion that education was something akin to Christian baptism whereby an individual is sprinkled or immersed only once during the course of an entire lifetime.

Continuing education arose in response to what was quickly perceived as the inadequacy of restricting education to children in a society where people needed to be equipped to respond to continuous change in all realms of life. As it slowly emerged from diverse origins early in the twentieth century, continuing education came to represent a host of programs aimed at reaching the adult population. A wide fissure divided those activities conducted within the host institution and those designed to reach out to people in their own milieu. That major divorce remains today with current adventures in distance education attempting to bridge the gap through the use of television and satellite communications.

As the history of continuing education has largely been recorded by men intimately associated with its development, writing on the subject has been not only presentist but also male-dominated. Secondary authorities regard educational departures for men – such as the establishment of Frontier College early in the century and the appointment of A.L. Ottewell at the University of Alberta in 1912 – as the real beginnings of continuing education.[2] Some passing nod is accorded to the Mechanics' Institutes which flourished during the last half of the nineteenth century, but as these institutions had no formal university connection and ultimately failed, they are viewed as the last of a long line of voluntary associations stretching back to the eighteenth century rather than as the precursor of twentieth-century developments.

What of women, largely ignored in these accounts? During the latter half of the nineteenth century, girls were accepted into the elementary and secondary state school system on an equal basis with boys, while women achieved some notable successes in breaking down barriers that barred them from higher education. The admission of women to university has rightly been hailed as a major victory, but it has obscured less formal developments in women's education. Women evinced great interest in self-improvement and availed themselves of new opportunities as they were slowly unfolded. They attended the early meetings of the Mechanics' Institutes and participated in the precursors of the School of Practical Science (engineering) in Toronto during the 1860s. Soon after the School of Art had been established in that city in 1882, women formed nearly half the student body.[3] During the 1890s cooking and sewing classes, often referred to as courses in "domestic science," became immensely popular, whether they were established in conjunction with a local school or independently.

Although continuing education has always been loosely defined by its practitioners, the term has increasingly come to be associated with post-secondary educational institutions, the adult population and community outreach. Using these three criteria, it is possible to argue that the origins of continuing education for Canadian women are in the Women's Institutes which swept the country, and indeed the world, during the first half of the twentieth century. As Canadian society has become increasingly urbanized and rural society eclipsed, the Women's Institutes no longer hold the significant position in the lives of the many women that they once did. However, the decline and near demise of the Women's Institute movement should not obscure its importance for the history of Canadian women.

The Women's Institutes were the single most important idea developed in Canadian continuing education and exported to the rest of the world. In the history of rural women no other organization, apart from the Christian churches, has played such a formative role. Originating in Ontario around 1900, they swept the country before World War I. By 1915 every Canadian province boasted such organizations for a total of 892 branches with a membership of 29,045. During the war the Institutes spread throughout England, Wales and Scotland, largely due to the organizing efforts of two former Ontarians, Mrs. Alfred Watt and Miss Emily Guest. By 1918 there were some 1,200 institutes in England. Word of Canadian activities in this area also interested the Belgian government whose Ministry of Agriculture sent a commission to Canada in 1908 to explore this departure in rural women's extension education. After Belgium adopted the idea and provided government support, it became the first European country to establish Women's Institutes.[4]

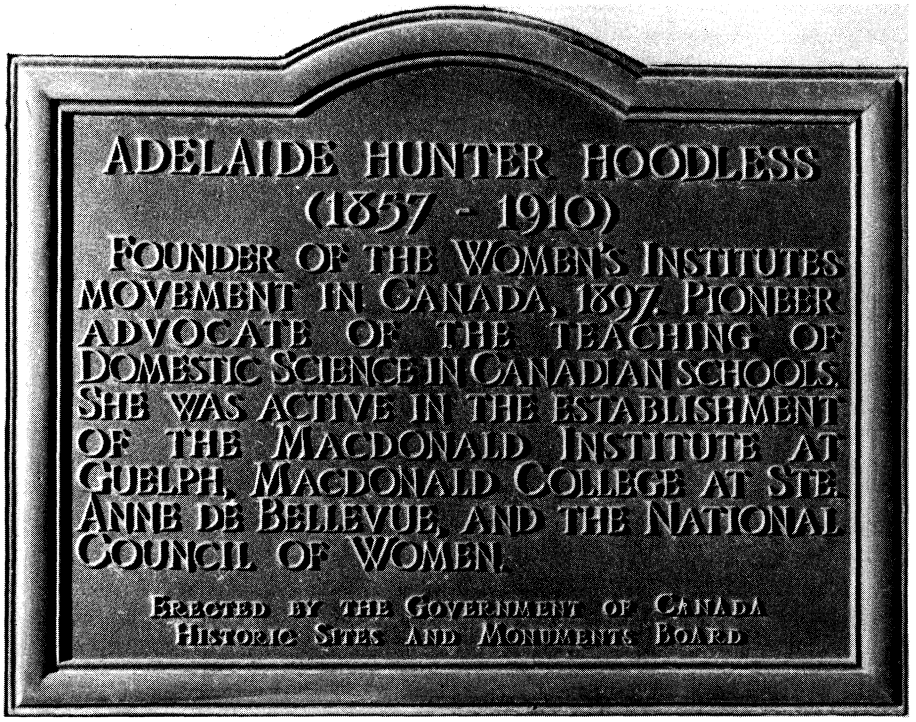
There were sound reasons why the origins of continuing education for women lay within rural rather than urban society. Canada in 1900 was still a predominantly rural society in which women were key partners in the family farm, not merely within the home but in the larger family economy. Women were responsible not

only for the three "C's" – cooking, cleaning, and childrearing – but also for farm production in areas such as dairying, poultry raising, bee-keeping, stock raising and market gardening.[5] In both home and farm the late nineteenth century witnessed a whirlwind of change which began to radically alter social and economic realities for women and men.

The agricultural revolution which transformed central Canadian farming into an industry fully geared to urban markets and foreign exports was waged in the late nineteenth century for the profit of men and at the expense of women. The agricultural press and the new farm organizations that developed were male dominated. So, too, were agricultural institutions such as the Ontario Agriculture College, founded in 1874. A market-oriented agriculture necessitated not only formal educational institutions but also rural adult education which the O.A.C. attempted to provide through its Agricultural and Experimental Union, the government subsidized Farmers' Institutes begun in 1885, and the travelling dairies which were shipped around the province for local demonstrations.

It was observed at the time, and has been argued recently, that these male-initiated and government-subsidized activities undermined women's endeavours, especially in dairying where women's role was seriously eroded as production for butter-making and cheese manufacture shifted to local factories where women might work, but men were the bosses.[6] Fruit-growing became a major industry governed by men who formed powerful growers' associations. Additional anxieties for women resulted from the movement of surplus rural population to the cities. There was a clearly articulated feeling that rural women lacked the institutional supports to restore their role in agriculture or to improve their work in the home in the same way as their urban sisters.[7] As a result of discoveries in bacteriology and the application of chemistry to foods beginning in the 1880s (the origins of the the science of nutrition), new forms of knowledge were created for human betterment. There was no mechanism for the transmission of this information to women in the countryside.

The Women's Institutes developed to address these concerns. Their beginnings are generally associated with Adelaide Sophia Hunter Hoodless, although her influence has been exaggerated by followers who yearned for a "founder."[8]



Unveiling plaque erected on 2 October 1937 *Credit: Public Archives Canada*

Hoodless was a country girl who had married well and became deeply involved with two nascent women's organizations, the Y.W.C.A. and the National Council of Women of Canada. Home economics was her great cause, and a permanent training school for home economists was her most fervent hope. More than anything she wanted to see home economics become part of the school curriculum for girls. To her, home economics became the means to restore women to the place they had lost in the process of industrialization. The teaching of the subject to girls and young women would also bring a restoration of the sexual division of labour that she had known when growing up in rural Brant County.

Hoodless began a home economics school at the Hamilton Y.W.C.A in 1894 while she was serving as its president, but she never succeeded in securing sufficient funds to ensure its continued existence. Her graduates would have no place to go unless a need for their services was perceived: Hoodless launched a publicity campaign which was later solidified through a contract with the provincial Department of Education, whereby she was paid to promote the acceptance of the subject by local school boards. As part of this initiative, the Hamilton socialite gave a talk to the Ontario Agricultural and Experimental Union at Guelph in 1896. This speech was geared to her rural audience and led to her being invited to talk to women in Wentworth County. This she did the following February, enjoining her audience to form a "Women's Department of Domestic Economy in affiliation with the Farmers' Institute of South Wentworth." The women responded, but not exactly in the manner suggested by Hoodless. The following week they met again, adopted a constitution, and chose a name that did not smack of subordination: "The Women's Institute of Saltfleet" (Stoney Creek).[9] Christina Smith, wife of prominent fruit-grower and nursery-man Earnest D'Israeli Smith, served as the first and third president of this new, local organization. E.D. Smith supported his wife in her endeavors. In 1900 he was elected Conservative M.P. for Wentworth County.

Hoodless had emitted a spark, but she had not started a fire. The organization did not grow much at first and Hoodless displayed no particular interest in it. She did keep in touch with the Saltfleet W.I., but she was too pre-occupied with other concerns to shepherd the growth of a new association. That task fell to others, notably George Creelman, Laura Rose and Blanche Maddock. When Creelman came to succeed F.W. Hodson as superintendent of Farmers' Institutes in 1899, there was no Women's Institute movement. The Farmers' Institutes were thriving with the assistance of lecturers/demonstrators employed largely at

Women's Institute, Kemble, Ontario (c. 1900) *Credit: Archives of Ontario (Toronto)*

government expense. Maddock and Rose, both graduates of the Dairy School associated with the O.A.C. were among those speakers.[10] They believed in the value of W.I.'s but, without official encouragement, only two more branches were formed by 1900 and one had slumped into inactivity.

All were agreed that rural women needed the means to learn modern, scientific practice in order that women's work could be both more rewarding and more productive, but emphasis varied. As Creelman had studied at Michigan Agricultural College and the University of Wisconsin, both of which had developed departments of home economics for women, he was aware of changes taking place in the United States. He saw the institutes as the way to make the female sector of the rural economy more efficient, just as the male sector had become.[11] Maddock and Rose tended more to stress the social and economic value of women meeting together, learning together, and improving their minds. They also concentrated more on the home and the need to make it a cleaner and healthier environment. This would provide new dignity to farm women and make their daughters happier to emulate them, rather than drifting off to the city.[12]

Creelman initiated the movement while Rose and Maddock implemented it. In 1900 Creelman used the Farmers' Institutes to secure names of women in the rural districts who might be interested in forming a Women's Institute. He also provided a cash subsidy on a par with the male organization and offered the services of Rose and Maddock to assist in their organizational meeting. The response was overwhelming. In 1903, when Creelman was about to leave the position of superintendent to become O.A.C. president, there were 52 branches with paid-up membership of 4,151.[13] More women organizers were hired. By 1905 fifteen other women joined Maddock and Rose as "Lady Speakers." That same year work was extended in the northern Ontario districts of Rainy River, Lake of the Woods and Temiscamingue.

But were the Women's Institutes a form of continuing education or simply tea parties? It must be admitted that Creelman began with a naive concept: he viewed the women's organization as an adjunct to the men's, something they refused to be. He required them to be formed in affiliation with a Farmers' Institute and suggested that the male meetings would profit from whatever help the women could give. He suggested that women should meet in each other's homes and that a woman with a particular skill should demonstrate it to the others. This could not last for long; hence, the need for women lecturers who were able to give prepared talks and demonstrations. The local branches formed libraries, but even with occasional outside speakers, they frequently found it difficult to generate programs. In 1907 the Macdonald Institute invited correspondence from the branches in order to assist them and found themselves swamped with some 350 letters! Dissatisfaction continued to mount until by 1912 the provincial agriculture department began courses in nutrition and cooking, home nursing, and sewing through the institutes.[14]

The Women's Institutes can be viewed as a genuine attempt at extension education for adult women. They reached the mature population so readily that during their first decade concerted efforts were made to incorporate younger women into their structures. Macdonald Institute provided its expertise in home economics and regularly sent out literature, in addition to that provided by the government. The movement reached the women in their own locales and thereby involved community outreach. Tea parties there were to be sure, but they can hardly be disparaged when one reads accounts of shy isolated women being drawn out of their loneliness and into a congenial social setting.

The Women's Institutes did not – indeed, perhaps, could not – reverse the decline of women in the farm economy. Larger economic forces inextricably transformed the rural sector in a way that education alone could not change. In their innumerable meetings, the Women's Institute branches did help rural women to focus on their roles as mothers, wives and workers. During their early years they concentrated on a wide variety of topics: cooking, sewing, nutrition, dietetics, health, hygiene, sanitation, poultry-raising, butter-making, cream production, gardening, household economics and women's role in the home and on the farm. The focus of their activities narrowed in the decade prior to World War I due to two influences: the direction of a male superintendent of Farmers' Institutes and the growing influence of the women professionals graduating from the province's new post-secondary home economics institutions, who became government lecturers. The W.I.s began to shift away from the larger role of rural women and towards emphasizing their domestic function.

As well, the absence of one major component did not augur well for the future of the Women's Institutes in Canada. While the W.I.s did enhance the self-image of rural women and did make the rural environment both healthier and more productive, little attention was paid to larger questions that might involve politics. Under government tutelage, the

Institutes were steered away from anything that might rock the *status quo* of sexual relations or unite women into a force threatening to political authority. In stark contrast to England, where community service quickly became an essential part of Institute work, in Canada there was little stimulus given in this direction.[15] A few branches pursued improvement in community services, especially in relation to the schools, but they were the exception rather than the rule. In assuming that community leadership was a male responsibility, the early W.I. movement committed a major error. It would allow for an increasing concentration on the inessential and the trivial once knowledge about improved nutrition, health care, childraising and homemaking had been disseminated in rural Ontario. These developments, however, should not obscure either the place or importance of the Women's Institutes in the history of continuing education for women.

[1]I would like to thank Gloria Troyer of the University of Guelph Library, Archival and Special Collections, for her assistance during the research for this paper.

[2]E.A. Corbett, "A Brief History of Adult Education in Canada," J.R. Kidd (ed.), *Adult Education in Canada* (Toronto: 1950), pp. 5-7; Ron Farris, *The Passionate Educators: Voluntary Associations and the Struggle for Control of Adult Educational Broadcasting in Canada, 1919-52* (Toronto: 1975), pp. 1-20.

[3]Foster Vernon, "The Development of Adult Education in Ontario, 1790-1900" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Toronto, 1969), pp. 133, 148-9, 423, 429.

[4]Annie Walker, Edith Collings and M. McIntyre Hood, *Fifty Years of Achievement* (Toronto: 1948), pp. 30, 42-50. Among the other traditional accounts of the development of the Women's Institutes are M. Viola Powell, *Forty Years Agrowing: The History of the Ontario Women's Institutes* (Ottawa: 1941); Federated Women's Institute of Ontario, *Women's Institute's Story* (Toronto: 1972).

[5]On the traditional roles of women in rural Western society, see the conflicting interpretations presented in Edward P. Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family* (New York: 1975) and Louise A. Tilly and Joan W. Scott, *Women, Work and Family* (New York: 1978). On Canada, see Rosemary Ball, "'A Perfect Farmer's Wife:' Women in 19th Century Rural Ontario," *"Canada: An Historical Magazine* 3, 2 (1975), 2-21.

[6]Adelaide Hoodless developed this theme in a variety of speeches presented between 1895 and 1905. Her ideas will be explored more fully in Terry Crowley, "Madonnas Before Magdalenes: Adelaide Hoodless and the Making of the Canadian Gibson Girl, *Canadian Historical Review* (forthcoming). This idea has found more recent expression in Douglas A. Lawr, "Development of Agricultural Education in Ontario 1870-1910", (Ph. D. dissertation, University of Toronto, 1972), p. 19 and Marjorie Cohen, "The Decline of Women in Dairying", *Social History/ Histoire Sociale*, 17 (1984), 307-334.

[7]See the addresses and reports given by Hoodless, Creelman, Maddock and Rose below.

[8]The best accounts of Hoodless are Ruth Howes, *Adelaide Hoodless, Woman With A Vision* (Ottawa: Federated Women's Institutes of Canada, 1965) and Robert Stamp, "Adelaide Hoodless, Champion of Women's Rights", Robert S. Patterson (ed.), *et al*, (eds.), *Profiles of Canadian Educators* (Canada: 1974), pp. 213-32.

[9]Adelaide Hoodless, "The Relation of Domestic Science to the Agricultural Population," Province of Ontario, *Sessional Papers*, 17 (1897), pp. 245-47; "Constitution and By-Laws of the Women's Institute, Saltfleet," Province of Ontario, *Report of the Superintendent of the Farmers' Institutes of the Province of Ontario 1897-8* (Toronto: 1898), pp. XX-XXI; Ontario, *Sessional Papers*, 29 (1898-99), pp. 16-17; M.E. Nash, "Report of the Saltfleet Women's Institute;" National Council of women of Canada, *Women Workers of Canada 1899* (Toronto: 1900), p. 217, "Women's Institute of Saltfleet".

[10]The Ontario Agricultural College did not admit women in the degree course until 1918. When the college opened its Dairying School where pratical instruction was given during a course of several months duration, the role of women in this aspect of farm management was acknowledged through women's admission. See Alexander M. Ross, *The College on the Hill: A History of the Ontario Agricultural College, 1874-1974* (Toronto 1974), pp. 42, 56.

[11]George Creelman, "The Formation of the Women's Institutes," Province of Ontario, *Women's Institutes* (From the Report of the Superintendent of Farmers' Institutes of the Province of Ontario, 1900), (Toronto 1901), pp. 3-4.

[12]Laura Rose, "Women's Institutes," Province of Ontario, *Report of the Superintendent of Farmers' Institutes 1897-8*, pp. 262-4; "An Afternoon at the Women's Institutes", *Farmers' Advocate* (Eastern edition), 1902, p. 60; "The Womanly Sphere of Woman", *Report of the Women's Institutes of the Province of Ontario 1906*, p. 32; Blanche Maddock, "Why Women's Institutes Should be Organized," *Farmers' Advocate*, 1900, p. 380; "Women's Institutes," *Handbook, Women's Institutes* (Toronto: 1903).

[13]N.C.W.C., *Women Workers of Canada 1903*, pp. 76, 80.

[14]M.U. Watson, "What the Macdonald Institute is prepared to do for the Women's Institutes," *W.I. Report 1910*, pp. 57-8; *W.I. Report 1913*, p. 5.

[15]For Britain, see Simeon Goodenough, *Jam and Jerusalem, A Pictorial History of the Women's Institutes* (London and Glasgow: 1977).

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small, blank
on one side, on
the other, a familiar woman
has looked
straight at
the camera without
expression.

Weathered, middle-aged,
no artifice, no illusions,
no questions,
tried, tired, not faltering.

"Expires end of
November, 1984"
is what the card says and
it gives
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42917, nothing more.

Aquisition number? Catalogue
number? Is the shelf-space
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