

# Supporting Learning Readers in Post-Confederation Newfoundland A Collective and Distributed Enterprise

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## Supporting Learning Readers in Post-Confederation Newfoundland: A Collective and Distributed Enterprise

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*Margaret Mackey*

Most children learn to read in school, but their developing literacy is supported and reinforced elsewhere in their society. In the 1950s, as Newfoundland adjusted to changed governance within Canada, the task of supporting the literacy development of the new province's children was distributed across many different institutions. In this article, I explore some of the organizations and people whose work, professional and voluntary, laid the groundwork for young readers to develop and flourish. The young reader who serves as the focus for my exploration is myself, aged between one and 13 in the years between 1950 and 1962 during which my literacy developed. But this story is not about me; rather, it involves the named and nameless individuals whose labour buttressed my earnest efforts to join the world of readers.

In this article, I explore the role of the “helpers” who contributed their part to fostering literacy development in the city of St. John's in the 1950s and early 1960s. I draw from a larger study of my own literacy growth (Mackey, 2016), but here I look in more depth at the role of other individuals, particularly as they can be seen in the school system, the church, and the library. All education in Newfoundland during this era was framed by religion; my own denomination was the United Church of Canada. My particular examples are the K–11 system of Prince of Wales College (PWC), Gower Street United Church, and the Gosling Memorial Library. I look briefly at out-of-school literacy opportunities represented and promoted by the Canadian Girl

Guides, and conclude with a brief glance at media institutions in the city that, inherently, promoted literacy: newspapers, magazines, movie theatres, and radio and television stations.

## **Background**

### *Learning to Read in a Particular Context*

William Barker, discussing the history of the book in Newfoundland, comments on the changes after 1949: “From Confederation onwards, there was expansion of other media and at the same time a rapidly and vastly developed book-based school system including the university, now extended to all social groups” (Barker, 2010: 22). Barker’s account of post-Confederation development swiftly moves past the 1950s: “The real liftoff occurred around 1967, anniversary of Canadian Confederation” (2010: 43). Doug Saunders questions whether 1967 marked quite such an uncomplicated watershed in Canada more generally, observing:

the explosions of official novelty that were launched in and around 1967 weren’t a cause; they were an effect of profound changes that had taken place in Canadians themselves during the two decades after the war, in their thinking and their composition and their attitude toward their country. (Saunders, 2017)

As they adjusted to new arrangements in Canada, Newfoundlanders certainly participated in some of the “profound changes” that Saunders describes — and they also joined in the “explosions” of creative change that followed the 1967 celebrations. Much of the groundwork for these incipient changes was humble, daily, and largely invisible. By focusing on the structures that supported child readers in the 1950s I explore an unheralded element of civic society.

The story of a learning reader has many universal features, but every Western reader masters the challenge of learning to interpret

the abstract shapes of letters assembled in written words. That learning takes place in a specific local context, with specific local support structures. I learned to read in St. John's in the 1950s. To what extent was this achievement a local activity? What specific components of life in St. John's enabled and/or restricted my reading? What institutional decisions, made by professionals in some cases and by amateur volunteers in other cases, affected how the patterns of my literate life were shaped? To what degree is everybody's reading local?

### *Recreating a Reading World: A Developing Methodology*

As I explored my early reading environment, my initial ambition was to collect as many as possible of the materials with which I became literate in my youth, to develop at least a partial replication of the world of specialist children's books and magazines, school and church texts, and mundane household reading that surrounded me. With help from libraries, second-hand bookstores, and family members, I acquired a collection that currently fills eleven 30-inch bookshelves. It comprises picture books, novels, school textbooks, adult and children's magazines, Sunday school leaflets, Brownie documents, television programs, films, audio recordings, sheet music, knitting patterns, recipes, scrapbooks, diaries, family newsletters, and much, much more. This personal collection is augmented by relevant library holdings in St. John's and Edmonton.

At first, I was content to conduct a textual study, re-reading and reflecting on the kinds of invitations these materials offered to a learning child. In the early stages of the project, I thought it merely incidental background information that I lived on Pennywell Road in St. John's during the time span that saw my emergence as an increasingly confident reader. But, as I pored over the retrieved texts of my youth, I found that Pennywell Road had seeped irrevocably into my interpretation of these materials. Today, neither can I fully access my childhood readings of these books and documents nor can I subtract my childhood interpretation from my adult awareness. The physical, emotional, and institutional settings of my childhood

are wired into the recognition I felt when I reopened books I had not looked at for half a century and more. Some elements of that childhood experience were accidents of geography. Many more were the consequence of deliberate decisions by many different people.

### *Documentation*

What follows is a sampler of the work of agencies supporting child literacy in St. John's in the 1950s, rather than a continuous account of any particular operation. Like a quilt pieced together out of different fabrics, this article presents an overall pattern of support structures through a series of snapshots, rather than an in-depth probing of any single institution. Its utility lies more in how it points to the complexity of the local setting in which a child learned to read, rather than as a guide to the history of any one organization or as any kind of exhaustive history of literacy support structures in St. John's.

My documentation highlights the mid-1950s and, necessarily, is contingent on available records. For example, the 1956 PWC yearbook, the *Collegian*, provides the full text of the principal's report for 1955, offering a wealth of detail about school organization. Provincial figures from 1949 and 1955 provide a context for the report.

The church data set is a random selection; for some unknown reason, my parents saved a church bulletin from 30 December 1956. Its resemblance to every other church bulletin of my time in Gower Street United Church is sufficient to use it confidently as a template to outline the church structures in some detail. I supplement the information from this document with references to materials from the Gower Street United Church archives.

Some of the best data I could find about the Gosling Library came from a twenty-first anniversary report (Public Libraries Board, 1957), but information from the founding of the library in 1936 also is relevant. In each case, I attempt to draw on the fullest and liveliest data I could locate for any institution. My report is partial, but it offers some sense of patterns of local intervention in children's literacy development.

## School Systems and Educational Ethos

### *School*

My school, Prince of Wales College (the umbrella name for the K–11 system), was founded in 1860 as the Wesleyan Academy, and its Methodist history was an essential element in the school's proud identity. It was not the only K–11 United Church system in St. John's; Curtis Academy and Macpherson School had their own structure. However, PWC board members and alumni considered it the elite United Church institution in the province, fully comparable to the city's top schools in the other denominations. At that time, there was no secular or state educational alternative in the province (see Stanbridge, 2007, and Kim, 1995, for further discussion of the role of denominational education in Newfoundland's history).

The Methodists and their United Church successors always were a minority in Newfoundland. Census figures of denominational breakdown show the Methodists peaking as a percentage of the total population in 1921, when they represented 28.2 per cent of the whole. By 1951, that ratio had dropped to 23.7 per cent and it fell a bit further by 1961 to 21.4 per cent (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 1988: Table A-5).

United Church priorities affected much of my life and my learning. To take one obvious example, United Church schools were coeducational. Most other education systems in the city separated males and females. The Methodist heritage fostered relatively rigorous expectations about girls' scholarly achievement. As early as the 1890s, the school's principal, Robert Edwards Holloway (for whom my elementary school later was named), promoted equal opportunities for girls:

At a time when education for girls was not considered to be as important as for boys, Holloway was very proud of the performance of the girls in his class. . . . He defended girls against those who perceived some subjects as

“girls’ subjects” and others as “boys’ subjects,” and against the differential requirements for female and male teaching certificates. (Gough, 2005: 121)

My education was affected directly by contemporary decisions, but echoes of such past priorities also inflected aspects of my schooling. It was not a completely straightforward form of equal opportunity. Marilyn Porter, in an excellent study of girls’ schooling in St. John’s just before Confederation, presents a set of contradictions that I certainly recognize as lasting into the 1950s and beyond:

[T]he competing and conflicting agendas of these schools — to educate fully competent women, able to participate in the world, but also to ensure that the next generation of mothers would perpetuate the social and gender orders — did not change. (Porter, 2014: 148)

The denominational school system was a large element of Newfoundland’s cultural and educational framework, but many smaller details of organization and many local decisions by boards and committees also helped to shape the world of an emergent reader. For example, one or more authoritative bodies selected the *Dick and Jane* whole-word reading series as the textbooks for learning to read. Children’s education was directly affected by decisions reached by the provincial education department and the school board, and also by the church governance bodies, as well as by the provision of books in library and bookstore.

### *The Provincial Department of Education*

Statistics from the year of Confederation demonstrate the scale of the challenge the new province faced in educating its children. The 1949 report on examination results (Table 1) delineates an impoverished system. There was no Grade 12 at this time or for many years thereafter. At the Grade 11 matriculation examinations 1,393 students

sat for testing. Of them, 896 passed. The results were broken down according to school size, presenting a portrait that illuminates the educational landscape of the time. Only in the schools with eight or more classrooms did the number passing with honours exceed the number who failed. In the one-room schools, the 117 failures come very close to matching the 120 who succeeded in gaining a simple pass. The achievement of the 19 from one-room schools who earned honours is all the more striking in that setting.

<b>Schools</b>	<b>Honours</b>	<b>Passed</b>	<b>Failed</b>
8 or more classrooms	165	228	123
4 to 7 classrooms	43	107	91
2 and 3 classrooms	57	157	166
1 classroom	19	120	117
Source: Council of Higher Education (1950:9).			

I later present the Grade 11 results of one urban school in 1955, so the 1955 provincial figures shown in Table 2 provide useful background information. Unfortunately, there appears to be an error in the headings of the columns in the summary report. Drawing on the more detailed evidence laid out in the report, I have corrected these headings in square brackets.

<b>Schools</b>	<b>[Honours]</b>	<b>[Passed]</b>	<b>Failed</b>
8 or more classrooms	199	549	201
4 to 7 classrooms	53	253	100
2 and 3 classrooms	39	242	193
1 classroom and private students	3	27	71
Source: Department of Education (1955:5).			

More than twice as many students sat for the exam in 1955 (3,010 as compared to 1,393 in 1949). That tally represents a huge jump in numbers and, undoubtedly, a corresponding doubling of hard work in a very short time span.



A note sent from the Deputy Minister of Education to the schools in August 1949 sheds a different kind of light on the challenges facing the education system. He reports on a benefit of Confederation:

This year for the first time Newfoundland is to have a full opportunity to participate in the regular series of school broadcasts sponsored by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in collaboration with the various provincial Departments of Education. (Freckler, 1949: I)

Such progress was not completely straightforward, as the following advice shows:

Unfortunately, our schools are not as yet equipped with radios. It is earnestly urged that Boards of Education throughout the Province endeavour to have a radio in the classrooms in time for the opening of the Autumn series. If funds are not available for the purchase of radios it should be possible to borrow a radio from the community for the quarter hour school programme in the morning, 11.15-11.30, and again for the quarter hour programme in the afternoon, 3.30-3.45. . . . at the present time no special funds are available for the purpose. (Freckler, 1949: II)

A 1958 recruitment leaflet aimed at attracting teachers from Great Britain updates the provincial profile as follows: the province had a total of approximately 1,200 schools, of which 500 were one-room rural schools, with more than 3,250 classrooms serving over 112,000 pupils, a total that was increasing by about 5,000 pupils per year (Department of Education, 1958: 5). Approximately 300 school boards administered these institutions (Department of Education, 1958: 4). Even nine years after Confederation, one-room schools made up 40 per cent of the total.

The Department of Education selected textbook options, sometimes recommending books on the basis of school size, sometimes on

religious grounds. A full history of school textbook selection before and after Confederation would be fascinating. Memorial University has an extensive historical collection of such texts as well as provincial curriculum documents. To explore such issues as the prevalence of American, British, and Canadian titles, the percentage of text choices based on sectarian options, the pace of change in implementing recommendations, and the degree to which adopted Canadian books were updated to include reference to the entry of Newfoundland to the country would be illuminating.

### *The School Board*

While one-room schools are reported as representing about 40 per cent of the province-wide total as late as 1958, school systems in St. John's were larger and more securely staffed and provisioned. Social differentials undoubtedly applied between school systems; the Board of Governors of PWC represented the professional elite of St. John's, at least in the United Church segment of the city. A photograph in the 1956 *Collegian* (Figure 1) shows the executive committee of the Board: 11 men, whose names and degrees are listed below the picture. Four more are absent, but their names and credentials are provided (PWC, 1956: 5). Among them, these 15 men cite seven bachelor's degrees. There is one medical doctor, one chartered accountant, one minister of religion, two lawyers who had been appointed as Queen's Counsel, and one holder of an Order of the British Empire. The caption highlights values of social status and accrued cultural capital. Little attention is paid to Board members' economic status, but no doubt such information would have been part of the implicit knowledge brought to bear on this image by many contemporary readers of the *Collegian*.

I serve as a historical witness in a small way to some of the school board's activities since my father, Sherburne McCurdy, was the principal of Prince of Wales College (including Holloway and Harrington schools) between 1950 and 1962, the time span of my project. Many faces in this photograph are familiar to me. I recall some of the ways they invested their time and energy into the upkeep of the school

system. We lived in a rented apartment on land owned by the school (the Ayre Athletic Grounds on Pennywell Road), and one Board member in particular, H.N. Burt, checked regularly on the state of the soccer pitches and other sporting facilities. H.D. Roberts, a busy medical man who served as chairman, telephoned our house nearly every evening to discuss how the day had gone in school. The secretary of the Board, J.B. Angel, was the man my father phoned early in the morning on potential snow days to decide together whether the schools should shut or stay open in the face of bad weather. In such mundane ways, as well as through official meetings, these prominent citizens took responsibility for the management of the school system in their purview.

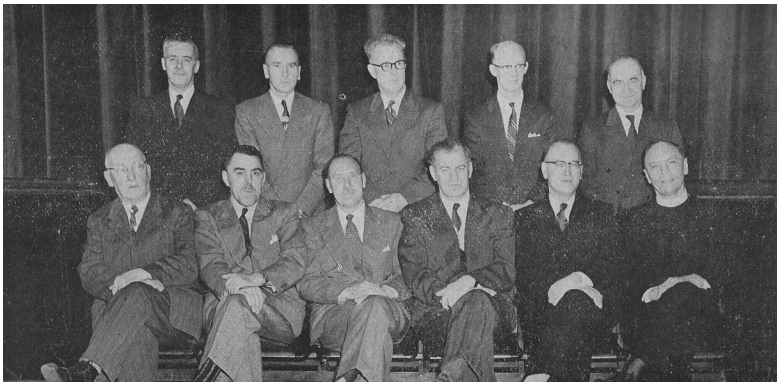


Figure 1: The PWC Board of Governors Executive. (PWC, 1956: 5).

Front: H. N. Burt, O.B.E.; J. B. Angel, B.E., Hon. Secretary; Wm. Watson, B.Sc;  
H. D. Roberts, M.D., C.M.; G. W. D. Allen, C.A.; Rev. F. E. Vipond, B.A., B.D.  
Back: E. F. Peters; F. Penny; H. Cramm, B.A.; B Paed; D. Dawe, Q.C.; E.H. Thomas.  
Absent: L. Ayre; R. Cramm, Q.C.; C. House, B.Sc; G. Winter.

### *Social and Cultural Capital in the School System*

That same 1956 *Collegian* provides the full text of the Principal's Address at Speech Night, the graduation and prize-giving ceremony, held on 2 November 1955 (McCurdy, 1956). The formal welcomes convey the level of civic investment in the school system, at least on these official occasions. Attendees acknowledged in this address

include the Lieutenant-Governor and his wife (Sir Leonard and Lady Outerbridge), the Acting Premier of the province, the Deputy Minister of Education, the head of the United Church Division of the Department of Education, and a representative of the Presbyterian Church in Newfoundland.

A later, undated photograph of a subsequent Speech Night (Figure 2) also manifests a display of social and cultural capital represented by the formal dress of all participants. The furs and the white gloves, the black ties, the academic robes of the vice-principal in the background, and the white frocks and flowers denoting graduating students all make social statements of financial and educational standing unlikely to be replicated in many one-room schools of the province. The stack of prizes and trophies testifies to a complex hierarchy of school successes and rewards. And the microphones of two local radio stations (CJON and VOWR) suggest the local significance of this event.



Figure 2. Undated photograph of Speech Night at Pitts Memorial Hall in Holloway School. Dignitaries in the front row include Mayor Harry Mews and Lieutenant-Governor Campbell Macpherson (Courtesy Clarence Button Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Memorial University of Newfoundland).

In contrast to those 500 small outpost schools, PWC in 1955 educated a total of 1,365 students in 34 classrooms — a total number not far short of the entire Grade 11 exam-writing cohort in 1949. In June 1955, 39 PWC boys and 35 PWC girls wrote the public examinations; 9 boys and 13 girls took honours; 20 boys and 20 girls passed; 10 boys and 2 girls failed to receive diplomas.

Trinity College of Music Examinations also were taken by 45 PWC students (McCurdy, 1956: 98). In addition, the principal's report makes extensive reference to sports activities and lists co-curricular activities such as the school's Boy Scout and Girl Guide troops and Cub and Brownie packs. There was a newly formed Traffic Patrol, and 16 students (boys only!) signed on for the first-ever driver safety course. The school presented an operetta in April ("Chonita" with music by Franz Liszt).

The principal's report to his stakeholders also includes reference to a "crucial accommodation problem" (McCurdy, 1956: 97) shortly to be solved by completion of a new building (Harrington School) for approximately 240 pupils in Kindergarten and Grade 1. Even in this flagship school system, some makeshift arrangements were necessary. The principal reported:

officials of Gower Street United Church have very kindly made available to us ample classroom space for the Kindergarten and Grade I classes formerly housed in the Prince of Wales building. This transfer occasioned considerable inconvenience to both parents and teachers, but co-operation and good will on all sides have reduced our difficulties to a minimum. (McCurdy, 1956: 97–98)

The report lists and thanks numerous volunteer organizations whose work contributes to the achievements of the school: the Ladies College Aid Society (famous for the November College Sale that raised funds for the school — described on this occasion as "substantial"), the Home and School Association (the parents' organization),

the Old Collegians Association (the alumni society), the Junior College Aid group, and the College Guild. These groups provided such amenities as an intercom system in the Prince of Wales building, new curtains for the stage in the assembly hall, and a party for the graduating class of 1955. The Old Collegians, in particular, were heavily involved in funding and building an arena for the school on the Ayre Athletic Grounds; this facility opened in 1955. Such amenities supported a concept of education that fostered arts and sports as well as academic study.

A lively social and managerial network was required to fund and look after this intricate educational structure. Yet, the ultimate mission was not managerial. The principal's address concludes with these stirring words:

Knowledge sets us free. He who is wise is not buffeted about by the whims and by the propaganda of others. . . .

And finally education should teach us Christian forbearance, tolerance and humility. It should leave no doubt in our minds that an act of Christian charity is of more consequence than material achievement and more worthy than intellectual triumph. It has been our earnest endeavour to instill these principles in the minds and hearts of our pupils. (McCurdy, 1956: 100–01)

The combination of cultural advantages is unmistakable. The noble goals, the managerial complexity, the multiplicity of volunteer organizations, and the intellectual, cultural, moral, and social capital being accrued by those Newfoundland students schooled at the prosperous end of the public education spectrum helped to establish an elite. The more limited educational offerings elsewhere in the province form a contrasting background of disadvantage to these privileged students. Much was expected of students at this end of the system, yet they (we) developed a strong sense of entitlement.

## Church

Reading flourished and was fostered beyond the school. The church was another important supporter of particular aspects of literacy.

The 30 December 1956 Gower Street United Church bulletin provides a wealth of institutional information. It is a single sheet of paper, printed on both sides and folded in half to make a four-page document. Figure 3 presents the outer half of the bulletin. The front never varied unless there was a change of minister; the list on the back page (on the left in this image) was less immutable, but committee members served for at least a year.

### Church Calendar

**SUNDAY:**  
Public Worship, 11 a.m., and 7 p.m.  
Nursery, 11 a.m. in Congreg. Room, children 2 and 3 years.  
Sunday School and Bible Classes, 2:30 p.m.  
Mission Band, third Sunday of each month at morning service.

**MONDAY:**  
Youth Boys at 7:15 p.m. (weekly).  
Junior Choir at 5:15 p.m. (weekly).  
Young People's Union at 8 p.m. (weekly).

**TUESDAY:**  
Youth Boys at 7:15 p.m. (weekly).  
Evening Auxiliary of the W.M.S. (first Tuesday in each month) 8 p.m.  
Senior Auxiliary of the W.M.S. 8:15 p.m. (1st Tuesday each month).  
Mothers' Auxiliary (first Tuesday in the Calendar Month) 8 p.m.  
Mission Circle (second Tuesday of the month) 8 p.m.  
Men's Service Club (first Tuesday in each month—October to April).

**WEDNESDAY:**  
Sunday School at 7:15 p.m. (weekly).  
Choir Rehearsal, 8 p.m.

**FRIDAY:**  
Women's Association (once monthly, October to April).  
Episcopians, 7:30 p.m., weekly.  
C.G.I.T., 8:45 p.m., weekly.

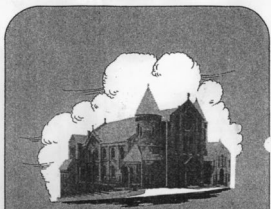
#### CHURCH OFFICERS

Rev. I. A. D. Curtis, B.A., B.D. . . . . . Clerk of Session  
Mr. D. W. E. Dawe, M.C. . . . . . Secretary Official Board  
Mr. Charles L. Roberts . . . . . Treasurer  
Hon. Harold Havelerson . . . . . Honorary Chairman, Board of Stewards  
Dr. H. Roberts . . . . . Chairman, Board of Stewards  
Mr. Roy Knight . . . . . Envelope Secretary  
Mr. H. E. Wyatt . . . . . Secretary, Board of Stewards  
Mr. Isaac Estenne . . . . . Captain Steward  
Mr. Walter Grouchy . . . . . Treasurer M. and M. Fund  
Mr. Charles Burke . . . . . Sexton

#### HEADS OF SOCIETIES

Honorary Superintendent Sunday School . . . . . Mr. W. H. Peters  
Superintendent of Sunday School . . . . . Mr. Isaac Davies  
Senior Auxiliary of W.M.S. . . . . . Mrs. Lewis Harriet  
Evening Auxiliary of W.M.S. . . . . . Mrs. D. W. E. Dawe  
Mothers' Auxiliary . . . . . Mrs. Bob. Henson  
Mission Circle . . . . . Miss Joyce Hinson  
Mission Band Superintendent . . . . . Mrs. H. J. Feet  
Baby Band Superintendent . . . . . Mrs. H. J. Feet  
Women's Association . . . . . Mrs. E. M. French  
Men's Service Club . . . . . Mr. S. Short  
Young Peoples Union . . . . . Mrs. Cecil Stubb  
Convener Flower Committee . . . . . Mrs. Douglas  
Chapel Congregation . . . . . Mr. E. Norman  
I.S.A. . . . . . Mrs. E. Norman  
Sigma C . . . . . Mr. Graham Snow  
Youth Boys . . . . . Miss M. Blake  
C.G.I.T. . . . . Miss V. Bourne  
Episcopians . . . . . Miss V. Bourne

Change Of	Newsletters	Deeds To Units	Deeds	Special Ch.	Public Pur.
With Address			Services	Services	Church Jour.
Name .....					
Address .....					



Gower Street  
United Church

St. John's, Newfoundland

Minister:  
REV. FRANCIS E. VIPOND, B.A., B.D.

Director of Christian Education:  
MR. ALLAN E. HESSELWOOD.

Organist and Choir Director:  
MR. DOUGLAS OSMOND, L.R.A.M.

Figure 3. Gower Street United Church bulletin for Sunday, 30 December 1956.

This bulletin presents a snapshot of a very busy calendar. At this time, there was one minister at Gower Street, Rev. Francis Vipond; a director of Christian education, Allen Heselwood; and an organist and choir director, Douglas Osmond. All are cited on the front page of the bulletin. The back sheet gives a broader sense of the volunteer work sustaining a lively network of activity. The regular weekly church timetable is outlined on the back page:

SUNDAY:

- Public Worship, 11 a.m. and 7 p.m.
- Nursery, 11 a.m. in Common Room. Children 2 and 3 years.
- Sunday School and Bible Classes, 2.30 p.m.
- Mission Band, third Sunday of each month at morning service.

MONDAY:

- Tyro Boys at 7.15 p.m. (weekly).
- Junior Choir at 7.15 p.m. (weekly).
- Young People's Union at 8 p.m. (weekly).

TUESDAY:

- Tuxis Boys at 7.15 p.m. (weekly).
- Evening Auxiliary of W.M.S. [Women's Missionary Society] (first Tuesday in each month) 8 p.m.
- Senior Auxiliary of the W.M.S., 3.15 p.m. (1st Tuesday each month)
- Mothers' Auxiliary (3rd Tuesday in the Common Room) 8 p.m.
- Mission Circle (second Tuesday of the month) 8 p.m.
- Men's Service Club (2nd Tuesday in each month — October to April)

THURSDAY:

- Sigma-C Boys at 7.15 p.m. (weekly).
- Choir Rehearsal, 8 p.m.

FRIDAY:

- Women's Association (once monthly, October to April).
- Explorers, 7.00 p.m., weekly.
- C.G.I.T. [Canadian Girls in Training], 6.45 p.m. (weekly).

Thus, some 16 organizations needed participation from the congregation in order to function. The particular news for this week at the end of December, listed on an inside page of the bulletin, adds the Official Board, the Executive of the Christian Education Committee, and the Annual Congregational meeting. Furthermore, five people (all men) served as ushers for that Sunday.

The back page lists 28 people (17 of them men) involved in one organization or another. Some single-line entries (such as Sunday school) represent a large number of volunteers. The work of these



contributors was not finished when the meetings ended; on page 3 of the bulletin, a note asks all these organizers to submit their annual reports to the Clerk of Session as early as possible in the new year, “so that he may prepare a unified report for the Annual Congregational meeting.” This lengthy list of volunteers and their responsibilities is far from unique; most Protestant churches in the 1950s expected similar lay dedication to running the organization.

I invariably attended church on Sunday mornings and Sunday school after dinner. The church service itself presented a very large range of literate discourses: hymns, scripture, announcements, prayers, invocation, and benediction — even the relatively non-ritualistic United Church supplied a variety of liturgical conventions. The church bulletin and the Sunday school leaflet provided each Sunday were fixtures in my reading life and I took completely for granted the human network and the work those people represented.

Documents in the church archives include those committee reports solicited in the bulletin. For the most part they are relatively dry accounts of numbers and names, but one intimation of humans at work, making the best decisions they can, lies in this paragraph from the unsigned Sunday school report of 1956:

This department for the 9–11-year-old age group has been meeting in the Lecture Hall, using the Junior Workbook as its course of study. There was a feeling by the teachers that the students were not paying attention in class as much as they should. Quiz periods were introduced and held most Sundays during the year. At the end of the class period each class would send a representative to the platform where there would be oral competition on the day’s lesson with the boys competing against the girls. The result was increased interest in class period. (“Sunday School Report,” 1956)

The United Church was a national organization, and further input into church and Sunday school decisions came from Toronto.

In addition, there were international connections with Methodist and Presbyterian churches elsewhere. No doubt children in other denominations likewise operated within a context of national and international frameworks. In each case, the actions and judgments of local men and women also affected their literate lives.

### **The Library System**

Ruby Gough's excellent biography of Robert Edwards Holloway, long-time principal of the Methodist College that later became the Prince of Wales complex, includes a succinct summary of "literary and scientific institutes" in nineteenth-century St. John's.

The movement towards such institutes had begun in St. John's with the establishment of a library and reading room in 1823, followed by a Mechanics Society in 1827. The Mechanics Institute of 1849 included a museum and apparatus and featured an annual course of lectures. Lectures were also an important part of the activities of the Young Men's Literary and Scientific Society, set up by the Rev. Moses Harvey in 1858. In common with literary and scientific institutes in the neighbouring provinces of Canada, which also merged for the promotion of learning and shared a central building, the three societies and the library in St. John's joined in 1861 to form an Athenaeum or "temple of learning." Its officers were drawn from a growing intelligentsia that included clergymen, lawyers, historians, educators, booksellers, publishers, and heads of mercantile firms, as well as members of the House of Assembly and Legislative Council. However, plans to build an Athenaeum Hall to house the library, institute, and reading room had to be postponed because of the depressed state of the economy. . . . It would be completed early in 1878. (Gough, 2005: 54–55)

In short, the city invested in a lively cultural life with an assortment of supportive institutions. But the Athenaeum was destroyed in the Great Fire of 1892 and was not replaced with a civic library in St. John's until 1936.

In the interim, "the only free book-lending service that existed was one that served not St. John's but the outports, mainly through the schools. Known as the Travelling Library, it was managed by the bureau of Education and largely financed by the Carnegie Corporation of New York" (Public Libraries Board, 1957: 1). Jessie Miffen, a committed librarian over many of the lean years in Newfoundland, describes the Travelling Library in more detail: "Established in 1924 . . . this service provided an exchange collection of about one hundred books to the communities requesting them, and was of necessity confined to schools, although it was also used by some adult groups and organizations" (Miffen, 2008: 66).

In 1933, the British government established a Royal Commission under the auspices of Lord Amulree to report on the state of the Newfoundland government and the failing economy. Its members commented on the lack of a library in St. John's:

We were much surprised on our arrival at St. John's, to find that there was no public library in the capital. . . . The provision of a public library is wholly beyond the immediate resources of the Government, nor could we expect that an appeal for subscriptions for this purpose could be launched with success at the present time. (Newfoundland Royal Commission, 1933: para. 628)

In the face of such official rejection of any kind of government commitment, the development of the Gosling Memorial Library, which opened in 1936 on Duckworth Street, not far from the site of the Athenaeum, clearly took a collective effort by many people. Lorne Bruce describes a ferment of civic activity, led by citizens who may or may not have been stung by the tone of the Amulree Report:

The Amulree Report’s comments spurred immediate action in St. John’s. A few citizens, headed by the Commissioner for Public Utilities, Thomas Lodge, formed a committee to begin planning for the establishment of a city public library. By January 1935, a Public Libraries Act was passed to allow a Public Libraries Board to establish libraries and services. (Bruce, 2015)

The list of sources for the initial collection bears traces of the efforts needed to assemble it: the private library of a former mayor, donated by his widow; part of the collection of the Legislative Library; 2,000 volumes given by Lord Rothermere; books to the value of \$2,000, donated by Sir Edgar Bowring; the 7,000 books of the Travelling Library; and some purchases by the Public Libraries Board (Public Libraries Board, 1957: 2). The Boys and Girls Library seems to have been separate from the outset. Twenty-one years later, the 1957 report on library service in Newfoundland provides some very interesting comparative figures (Table 3).

**Table 3: Public Libraries in Newfoundland, 1936 and 1957**

Year	Volumes	Annual Budget	Circulation	Children’s Books	Reach
1936	17,000	\$11,000	53,000 books	1,000 books	1 service in St. John’s
1957	230,000	\$125,000	+ 500,000 books	+ 100,000 books	26 Regional Central Libraries

Source: Public Libraries Board (1957:2–3).

Even with the library’s small collection in 1936, take-up was prompt and substantial when the library opened on 9 January of that year. Paul Sparkes quotes Harold Newell on activities at the new library between January and the end of June 1936. In just under six months, “no fewer than 53,000 ‘borrowings’ had been recorded. And the tally of registered borrowers went over 6,000 in that brief six months” (Sparkes, 2016). The 1936 population of St. John’s stood around 40,000.

A library, of course, is more than its books. During the period of my study, the Gosling Library staff kept meticulous records of their

daily transactions. A sample record from November 1961 captures a snapshot of the activity of the Boys and Girls Library (Figure 4). The main grid shows the circulation figures for each day of the month, separated by Dewey headings. Below, “Other Statistics” are gathered, again daily (and again entered by hand): registrations, re-registrations, transfers, and expiries; major and minor questions (presumably reference questions); and major and minor mends.

This log records the basic daily work of the library but under-represents other library services. Every November, the Boys and Girls Library featured a children’s book week, for example, but it is not reflected in these statistics.

Circulation Statistics																																																																																																																																	
BOOKS												OTHER MATERIAL																																																																																																																					
Date	Page	Issue	Total	Dewey	Date	Page	Issue	Total	Dewey	Date	Page	Issue	Total	Dewey	Date	Page	Issue	Total	Dewey	Date	Page	Issue	Total	Dewey																																																																																																									
1	6	1	33	6	7	7	2	33	6	8	1	3	4	1	9	1	3	4	1	10	1	3	4	1	11	1	3	4	1	12	1	3	4	1	13	1	3	4	1	14	1	3	4	1	15	1	3	4	1	16	1	3	4	1	17	1	3	4	1	18	1	3	4	1	19	1	3	4	1	20	1	3	4	1	21	1	3	4	1	22	1	3	4	1	23	1	3	4	1	24	1	3	4	1	25	1	3	4	1	26	1	3	4	1	27	1	3	4	1	28	1	3	4	1	29	1	3	4	1	30	1	3	4	1	31	1	3	4	1
Other Statistics REGISTRATIONS RE-REGISTRATIONS TRANSFERS EXPIRIES MAJOR QUESTIONS MINOR QUESTIONS MAJOR MENDS MINOR MENDS NOTES																																																																																																																																	

Figure 4. Work record for November 1961, Boys and Girls Section of the Gosling Memorial Library (Courtesy NPLP Fonds, 7.02 NL Collection, Provincial Resource Library).

The acquisitions register, recording every book ordered, also illuminates a bygone time. Unfortunately, the Boys and Girls Library retained this register only for the years 1936–39. The lists from the earliest days of the Gosling Library are rich with interest. My sample page (Figure 5) offers one small insight into how the Dominion of Newfoundland interacted with larger political and economic entities.

This page presents a conventional acquisitions list. The column headings read: Remarks, Accession Number, Author, Title, Vol., Publisher, Year, Source, and Cost. The Remarks column includes a few numbers but mostly features ticks, presumably indicating that the book had arrived. The range of titles deemed appropriate for the boys and girls of 1937 skews British on this page, in part because of separate entries for each of six copies of *Our Princesses and Their Dogs*, four copies of *King George VI's and Queen Elizabeth's Coronation Book*, three copies of *Salute the King*, and two of *The A.B.C. Guide to the Coronation*. One book is about George Washington, and a copy of Smallwood's *Book of Newfoundland* appears at the bottom of the page.

2471  
Date April 22nd. 1937.

REMARKS	Accession Number	AUTHOR	TITLE	VOL.	PUBLISHER	YEAR	SOURCE	COST
✓	26 28	James	Young Cowboy		Scribners	1936	Scribner	1.50
✓	26 27	Platt	Stories of the Scottish Border		Harrap	1935	Foyles	2/6
✓	26 28	Molesworth	The Cuckoo Clock		Macm.	1933	Macm	
✓	26 29	Chance	Our Princesses and their Dogs		Murray	1937	Bairds	.75
✓	26 30	"	" " " "	C-2	"	"	"	W.543
✓	26 31	"	" " " "	C-3	"	"	"	W.544
✓	26 32	"	" " " "	C-4	"	"	"	W.545
✓	26 33	"	" " " "	C-5	"	"	"	W.546
✓	26 34	"	" " " "	C-6	"	"	"	
✓	26 35							
✓	26 36		The A.B.C. Guide to the Coronation		Hutchinson	1937	"	.80
✓	26 37	"	" " " "		"	"	"	.20
✓	26 38		Coronation Book King George VI's & Queen Elizabeth's		Shaw	"	"	.40
✓	26 39	"	" " " "	C-2	"	"	"	
✓	26 40	"	" " " "	C-3	"	"	"	
✓	26 41	"	" " " "	C-4	"	"	"	
✓	26 42	Mee	Salute the King		Hodder	"	"	1.00
✓	26 43	"	" " " "	C-2	"	"	"	
✓	26 44	"	" " " "	C-3	"	"	"	
✓	26 45		Coatsworth Sword of the Wilderness		Macm.	1936	Scribner	\$2.00
✓	26 46	Bishop	The Flying Squad		Harrap	1930	Foyles Murray	2/6
✓	26 47	Thayer	George Washington		Wilford	bd	Foyles	1/6
✓	26 48	Gardner	Greek Art and Architecture		O.U.P.	1922	"	2/6
✓	26 49	Barrie	Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens		Hodder	nd	"	10/6
✓	26 50	Smallwood(ed.)	Book of Newfoundland. V.1		Bk. Pub.	1937	Public Wks.	.5

Figure 5. Acquisitions register page for 22 April 1937, Boys and Girls Library, Gosling Memorial Library (Courtesy NLPL Fonds, 7.05 NL Collection, Provincial Resource Library).

The price column is intriguing. The listed currency fluctuates between dollars and cents and shillings and pence. It is not clear whether the dollars are American or Canadian or a mix of both. Alternatively,

since many of the dollar entries go to Bairds, a local importer, we may also be looking at Newfoundland dollars. Smallwood's book is listed as a gift. It is worth noting that the charge for all the books about the royal family is paid in dollars, while the George Washington book comes from Foyles in London at a price of 1/6.

These documents reveal an orderly work world where numerous decisions were made and recorded, reflecting a clear mandate to support the reading habits of the children of St. John's, whether in 1937, 1957, or 1961. The acquisitions records conclude long before my time as a library user, but in my perusal of their pages I did occasionally catch sight of a title I knew I had read as a child — very likely the same copy. I could read that specific book because somebody made an explicit decision to purchase it. It is a sad loss that later acquisitions information is no longer available.

## **Other Literacy Support Structures**



Figure 6. Guide Company, 1961 or 1962 (Courtesy Clarence Button Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Memorial University of Newfoundland).

### *Brownies and Guides*

Between the ages of 8 and 13, I was a Brownie and a Girl Guide. The photograph above (Figure 6) shows my Guide Company in 1961 or 1962; I am third from the left in the back row. The Guide Captain had

been my Kindergarten teacher and Guide meetings took place in the Kindergarten classroom of the new Harrington School.

This picture could serve as a manifesto for the significance of implicit literate understanding. The girls in the back row display extra insignia — stripes on the pockets of their uniform dress to signify that they are a patrol leader or a second-in command; lanyards to communicate status and prowess. Where a girl's arm in that back row can be seen, it sports achievement badges, an addition conspicuously missing on the more visible sleeves of the younger girls in the front row. The sense of hierarchy is imposing, as no doubt it was intended to be.

My mother saved my Brownie membership card, and it displays a "Brownie literacy" that was orderly and cumulative. Achievements leading to a Golden Bar were enhanced for the greater glory of a Golden Hand. The requirements for badges were spelled out carefully; a committee somewhere decided what criteria were satisfactory. Literacy requirements simply taken for granted included reading the Brownie handbook and mastering the specifications for badges (and some badges acknowledged reading activities explicitly). Local Brown Owls (adult leaders of the Brownies), Guiders, and Commissioners organized the local scene, according to protocols laid down nationally and internationally. During my time as a Girl Guide, in September 1961, Olave, Lady Baden-Powell visited St. John's, to be greeted by an enormous rally, which must have absorbed many voluntary committee hours to organize.

My mother was a Guide Commissioner during the 1950s, and, along with the girls in her charge, donned her own uniform for any formal occasion. The Guiding organization was hierarchical from bottom to top; and its allegiance to the virtues of uniforms ran through all levels. Rituals of who wore what and on which occasion, protocols of salutes and handshakes, recognition of degrees of seniority made clear to the rawest novice Brownie — to belong to the Brownie world, a child had to master them all in an exercise of reading both words and symbols that was simultaneously abstract and embodied.



*Literate Invitations in the Larger Environment*

Many other literacy institutions contributed to my life. Newspapers and radio and then television programs, for example, all fed my developing understanding of the wider world. Each of these formats mixed local and global ingredients. There is not space here to develop a detailed account of the kinds of active decision-making that went into their daily impact on the lives of the people of St. John's, but they did not materialize by accident or out of any kind of cosmic necessity. They were designed and instantiated *on purpose*, and the decisions made by their creators inflected how I understood the wider world.

A consolidated history of the institutions conveying information and entertainment to Newfoundlanders would make for very rewarding reading. Fragments of that history are currently available and they provide fascinating insights (see, for example, Moore [2007] on early films in Newfoundland, Webb [2008] on pre-Confederation radio service in Newfoundland, and Riggs [2005] on the history of Dicks, the bookstore).

Other institutions were shifting the literacy landscape in Newfoundland in different ways that affected children rather more indirectly. Gillespie (2016) discusses the impact of union organization on Newfoundland society over many decades, including the period I have examined. Webb (2016) outlines the development of different disciplinary approaches to the academic study of Newfoundland culture and economics. Such developments contributed to shifts in the tacit literacy climate of Newfoundland society. During the time I have considered — 1950–62 — the changes were nascent, inchoate. By the time of the centennial year of 1967 that Barker regards as an important turning point in the history of Newfoundland literacy, conditions were in place for the explosion of cultural self-expression that now distinguishes Newfoundland society.

Conditions of literacy are complex, and much more is out of sight and hidden in depths than cannot be perceived except with mindful and focused inspection. In order to reflect on the scale of such a story of literacy, I conclude with a singular, telling example:

some elements of the history of one book that came into our family's possession in 1957.

### *Local and Abstract: A Final Example*

The paper book, with its coded marks on the page and its particular history as an object owned and shared by readers, moves in and out of local life while representing something broader in terms of time and space. To sum up the complexity of the book and its readers and the unseen efforts of the people who make that reading possible, I take one small example of a book currently located in my home in Edmonton, Alberta. Titled *Milton's Poetical Works* on the spine, with a slightly longer wording on the title page, it is bound in a thick layer of handsome purple plush, now somewhat faded. The front cover, shown in Figure 7, is embossed with a "JM" monogram. On the endpaper are two names: written in pencil, "Effie M. Horwood Xmas 1913"; and, on a sticker adhering to the top corner, "The McCurdys," followed by an address that was my parents' last independent home in Victoria, BC.

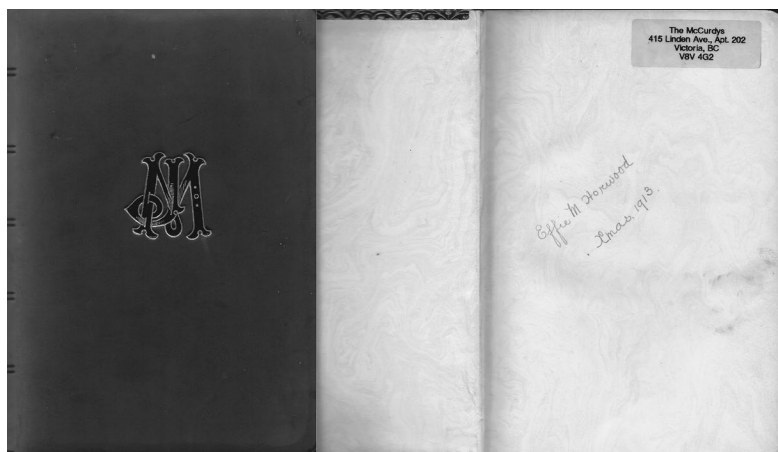


Figure 7. The front cover and the endpapers of *Milton's Poetical Works*, first owned by Effie Horwood and then by Sherburne McCurdy. The scan does not do justice to the padded plush or to the regal purple hue of the actual cover.

From 1910 until her sudden death in 1957, Effie Horwood taught in the school system eventually known as Prince of Wales College. She

had been a student in the Methodist College from 1896 onward and she trained as a teacher in the same institution. Overall, her connection with the school lasted 61 of her 67 years.

Miss Horwood left two books of poetry to my father, who then was the principal of Prince of Wales. The second was an equally sumptuous leather-bound copy of Tennyson's poetry, signed by her in 1908. I inherited those books from him. The Milton volume contained clippings of two different newspaper obituaries of Effie Horwood, cut tight around the text and with no provenance provided. One of them comments that she was educated "at the Old Methodist College, Long's Hill, under Dr. Holloway and Mr. Harrington" (source unknown).

Gough's biography of Robert Holloway provides the further information that he, as a pupil teacher at the Wesleyan Training College in England, had his classes inspected by Matthew Arnold, who he remembered well. Arnold "praised the staff for their efforts to diversify the curriculum and to provide for the pupils' individual needs. . . . Matthew Arnold envisaged universal compulsory education as a way of producing cultured citizens of a new democracy" (Gough, 2005: 14).

This Oxford edition of Milton's poetry, published in London in 1912 and purchased by or for Effie Horwood in 1913, offers an embodied example of the local and the larger world, all in a single object that can be held in the hand. Miss Horwood did not provide a location with her signature on the flyleaf, but she was already teaching at the Methodist College on Long's Hill in 1913, so the book existed in St. John's and was very possibly purchased there as well. The book presents an authoritative version of the works of one of the greatest poets of the English language, a man who lived between 1608 and 1674, and who was himself a robust champion of the significance of reading and the rights of readers (*Aereopagitica*, 1644). The Preface to my volume says, "This edition of Milton's Poetry is a reprint, as careful as Editors and Printers have been able to make it, from the earliest printed copies of the several poems" (Beeching, 1912: v). The earliest poems in the volume are reproduced from a book first published in 1645.

Miss Horwood (1890–1957) lived — and presumably looked at this book — in St. John’s, and her personal history invokes a chain of connection back to Robert Holloway (1850–1904), an educator of high esteem whose impact on Methodist education in Newfoundland still resonated in my lifetime. Through Holloway, we can follow that chain back, away from the Dominion to the “mother country” and the educational inspiration of Matthew Arnold (1822–1888), poet and inspector of schools. After 1957, the book lived in a place of honour on my parents’ bedroom mantelpiece on Pennywell Road. It ultimately moved with them, first to Edmonton, and then to Victoria, and has now returned to Edmonton with me.

The obituaries of Effie Horwood make some associations explicit that, otherwise, I would not have been able to articulate — but those associations belong to the book, whatever its current owner’s awareness may be. This grand little volume reaches from the twenty-first century back to the seventeenth. It belongs to St. John’s and it belongs to the large world of arts and letters, both at the same time. Its plush covers manifest a certain attitude to learning and poetry redolent of a different era. It stands as a physical connection to a very particular historical sequence of events and priorities in the history of Methodist and, then, United Church education in St. John’s. And, for me, it brings back strong personal memories of that bedroom mantelpiece on Pennywell Road, where my parents displayed a small set of especially valued books. It is a memory that incorporates a distinctive attitude to education that permeated my home as well as my school. In addition, the name-and-address label on the endpaper vividly reminds me of the apartment in Victoria that my parents occupied in a late stage of their lives.

I elaborate on the resonances of this single artifact because I think this story, so insignificant in many ways, encompasses many of the aspects of literate development that I have attempted to describe in this article. The decisions and actions of four dedicated educators (Matthew Arnold, Robert Holloway, Effie Horwood, and my own father [1924–2007]) are linked to this object through associations that are

relatively easy to establish and that adhere to the book as a physical object containing two distinctive marks of ownership. In a different way, the contents of the book connect to a great seventeenth-century thinker and poet, whose ideas crossed the world of his time and travelled as far as the Dominion of Newfoundland. Somewhere, possibly at Dicks on Water Street, a bookseller acquired this title and made it available for sale.

As a child, I was hugely impressed by the lavishness of this volume, and curious enough to look inside — though I cannot say I was won over to Milton's poetical diction at the age of nine. I was, of course, oblivious to how it might be possible to focus, through the material existence and historical aura of this single book, on so many manifestations of active engagement of human beings committed to enabling literacy. But even as a nine-year-old, I was vaguely aware that this plush hardback connected me to a larger and grander world, and that reading was the key to entering that world. The book links Pennywell Road in 1957 to the building then known as Holloway School on Long's Hill, all the way back to 1896, and to the educational values and efforts of people like Matthew Arnold even further back in the nineteenth century. It incarnates the words of Milton from as early as 1645, edited with care and attention in 1912, and its portability meant it could cross the Atlantic Ocean and then the full breadth of Canada. It has a global history and a local provenance.

My copy of this book is one kind of private legacy of the efforts to support literacy in the 1950s — a legacy that at once looks backwards and outwards from the mantelpiece on Pennywell Road. Another inheritance from that era is more public. Just as bringing Milton to Newfoundland involved specific efforts and decisions, so the educational work done in the 1950s led to the explosion of artistic representations of the city and the province that followed improved federal funding after 1967. Many contemporary Newfoundland novelists, poets, artists, playwrights, satirists, filmmakers, and musicians similarly benefited from the care and attention of numerous boards and committees, volunteers and professionals, working hard through

the 1950s to turn the assets of Confederation to the advantage of the new province's children. Today, these artists represent Newfoundland and Labrador to the world, and to the citizens of this province. When I think about the blank spaces of the 1950s where descriptions of my own world should have flourished, and then look at the contrasting wealth of representation available today, I value the genius and creativity of the creators, but I also acknowledge the debt of gratitude owed to their elders and mentors who made such efforts to scaffold better forms of learning.

## Conclusion

Of course, in 2017 decisions continue to be both necessary and consequential. As I write these words, questions about the library service are under consideration; a new tax has been placed on books; and an education task force has just reported. Stasis is not an option. New decisions will be deliberated, implemented, resisted, and enacted. Today's volunteers continue to work within frameworks established by larger groups, both lay and professional. And in the midst of this world of often invisible, unheralded labour, both local and distant, today's children are learning to read.

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