Workers' Institutes Movements in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada

The Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had revolutionary effects on European society. Among them was the growing realization that the efficacy of the industrial workforce would be greatly improved if workers were better educated. Most of the early factory workers were drawn from rural areas and most of these people were illiterate. Elementary schools were run by voluntary societies and poor people simply could not afford the fees for their children's education. In an industrial society that is not routinely educating most of its children, adult education becomes crucial to economic and social development.

As a means of providing practical education for workers whose jobs involved the construction and maintenance of industrial machinery, University of Glasgow physics professor, John Anderson, began to offer free evening classes to men. Anderson was a political and social radical, who believed deeply in the tenets of the French Revolution. Philosophical notions of liberty and equality during this period were finding practical application in educational and political reforms. Accordingly, when Anderson died in 1796, he left money for the education of the "unacademic classes." His wishes were realized in the formation of Anderson College (later the Glasgow Mechanics Institute), under the leadership of George Birkbeck, a professor of natural philosophy.

In 1804, Birkbeck moved to London to work as a physician. His lifelong interest in the education of the working class led to the establishment in 1824 of the London Mechanics Institute, which eventually became Birkbeck College, now incorporated as part of the University of London. Although the word "institute" has had many subsequent applications, it takes its original meaning from the Latin, "institutus," meaning "to instruct"; teaching and learning were therefore at the heart of the Institutes movement. Like most voluntary associations, the Institutes were organized and operated by middle and upper class social reformers. All of the teaching was donated free of charge.

Scientific instruction for workers was contentious in the early 1800s. The middle class was concerned that education would make workers dissatisfied with their lives and potentially disruptive. For their part, many workers were suspicious of scientific education aimed at industrial advancement; it reminded them that jobs were lost each time there were "improvements" on the shop floor. Many men were therefore reticent about attending the Institutes. On the other hand, radicals like George Birkbeck believed that a broader diffusion of knowledge would create a better society; such men were prepared to work for years in order to attain their goals.

Gradually, workers began to trust in the pleasures and benefits of an education. While the Mechanics Institutes (MI) originally taught mathematics and the principles of science, working men soon began to want a broader education and better access to information. By mid-century the MI movement had spread throughout the British Isles. In Yorkshire, for example, 46 Mechanics Institutes with 9000 members in 1846 and grown to 138 Institutes with 24,000 members in 1859. The free evening and weekend classes now

included the three R's, geography, history, drawing, music, literature, French, German, Latin, bookkeeping, chemistry, physics, natural philosophy, theology, elocution, and sewing (women had begun to attend).

Most Institutes owned their own buildings, operated lending libraries, and developed recreational facilities; some even had theatres (Hastings, 336). Constant political pressure from social radicals and the successes of the MI movement, the Ragged Schools Union, and the Society for the Diffusion of Knowledge eventually led to passage of the Education Act of 1870, which created publicly sponsored School Boards and began the process of providing free access to education for all children. Once formal structures were in place for mass education, voluntary societies such as the MI were no longer required. Many workers institutes and colleges were absorbed by public institutions, or were re-purposed as public libraries.

The Institutes movement was exported to the British Empire early in the nineteenth century. In 1827 the first Mechanics Institute in Australia was established in Hobart, Tasmania. In Canada, a Mechanics Institute was established in Montreal, in 1828. Two years later, a MI was established in York (modern day Toronto) and, by 1895, there were over 300 institutes in Ontario with over 31,000 members. Unlike the Institutes movement in the United Kingdom, the Canadian MI movement was essentially a voluntary association for the aspiring middle class. Its activities were therefore somewhat altered from the original model – while lectures were held in Institutes buildings, the reading rooms and libraries dominated club activities. In fact, Mechanics Institutes libraries formed the backbone of what was to become the public library system in the provinces where they operated.

The migration of the Institutes movement to rural populations is a phenomenon of the Empire. By the mid-nineteenth century, poor and outmoded farming practices had depleted the quality and quantity of agricultural production. Few farmers had either diversified or specialized in the crops that were necessary to feed growing urban populations. Towards the end of the century, economic depression and deteriorating production led many farm families to abandon their farms for the cities. Young women, especially, were moving increasingly to the cities in search of paid work. Farmers themselves did not interpret the problem as a need for technical education, but as a need for political and economic reform. Across the continent, the more pro-active members of the farming community formed independent farm organizations to lobby government for improved transportation systems, the establishment of publicly-owned utilities, rural mail delivery, better marketing strategies, and increased participation in policy-formation.

Among these organizations, the most widespread and influential was the Grange, which began in the United States in 1867 and moved to Canada in 1874. Organized on the Masonic model, the Grange, or the Order of Patrons of Husbandry, was a non-sectarian, non-partisan voluntary association of farmers dedicated to improving the conditions of rural life through collective action. Women played a prominent role in the Grange:

> Early in the movement, Grangers welcomed women into their ranks with equal voice and voting rights, recognizing their importance to rural family economies and communities. Women took the opportunity and participated fully. They wrote for the Grange Visitor and other rural papers, lobbied in state and local forums for fair treatment of small farmers and gave speeches at Grange sponsored speaking tours. The extension of equal voting rights in this organization led Grange women to support both woman suffrage and temperance. The Grange also provided a very important social outlet for farm women, one that allowed them to participate as equals in an organization that attempted to directly improve their lives and the lives of their families (Hartman).

The principles that informed the Grange and subsequent organizations such as the United Farmers of Alberta (UFA) (1909) and the United Farmers of Ontario (1914) began to shape expectations for the roles that women could assume in community organizations. The notion that women were equal partners with men in maintaining the viability of the family farm would later underpin the impetus to establish Women's Institutes.

Ranged against this socio-political agenda of farmers looking for structural change was a campaign on the part of governments and the newly formed agricultural colleges to convince farmers that the real need was for agricultural education. Inspired by the idealized notions of the country life movement, governments were convinced that farmers and their wives could be encouraged to stay on the farm if their daily lives were improved through modern farming techniques and knowledge of domestic science. Agricultural experimental stations were established and extension programs were inaugurated. In the United States, the format of the teachers' institute suggested a model for the instruction of farmers. Short courses called "institutes" were offered by the Land Grant Colleges that were established by the Federal Government after 1862.

In Canada, the Ontario Agricultural College at Guelph was established in 1874. It offered American-style farmers' institute courses from 1885-1896. These courses grew into the central focus of the Farmers Institutes (FI), which was a peculiarly Canadian synthesis of the British Mechanics Institutes and the American farmers institutes. In Ontario and other provinces, the passage of legislation formally establishing Farmers Institutes enabled provincial governments to control the Institutes through the provision of financial support. The courses offered through the FI began to attract the interest of farm wives, who also wanted to benefit from the most recent knowledge in agriculture and domestic science.

But, in comparison to the allure of independent farmers' organizations, the government-controlled Farmers Institutes were only moderately successful. In order to strengthen farmers' commitment to the Institutes, the provincial government decided to establish separate evenings for women's education. In 1897, two women's institute clubs were formed in southern Ontario on the encouragement of a local FI; within two years, the provincial government began the task of expanding these clubs into a province-wide network along the lines of the Farmers Institutes. As soon as farm women became involved in the institute movement, the FI increased in popularity; by 1914, it was the

largest farm organization in the province. Instruction for the WIs was eventually supplied by the home economists from the newly-established Domestic Science program at the MacDonald Institute, on the grounds of the Ontario Agricultural College.

The establishment of agricultural organizations in the Canadian West followed similar but not identical patterns to those of Ontario. In Alberta, "institutes," or short courses, were managed by the Department of Agriculture's Superintendent of Fairs and Institutes from 1907 onwards. However, formal Farmers' Institute Clubs did not materialize: perhaps because Alberta followed the American model more closely than the Ontario; perhaps because strong farmers' cooperatives had been in existence for many years before 1905, when Alberta became a province. These independent organizations eventually merged into the United Farmers of Alberta in 1909; a women's auxiliary, the UFWA, was established after 1915.

It is therefore noteworthy that the Women's Institutes movement was adopted in Alberta on its own merits, without an accompanying FI. As early as 1909, women with previous WI experience in Ontario had formed institute clubs in Alberta. As a means of organizing these individual clubs into a province-wide network, the Department of Agriculture began to encourage and enable the establishment of the WI from 1912 onward, eventually formalizing WI in legislation as a non-governmental organization sponsored by the Province.

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