

## I DREAMED I SAW HILDA NEATBY LAST NIGHT: SO LITTLE FOR THE MIND AFTER 50 YEARS

MIKE CORBETT *Acadia University*

**ABSTRACT.** It has been nearly fifty years since the publication of *So Little for the Mind*, Hilda Neatby's controversial conservative attack on what she understood as "progressive education." This paper argues that Neatby's book remains important reading despite its limitations and its context. Neatby's work represents what I call a 'big dream' in educational thought. It is an educational text that is passionately anti-scientific in its structure and argument; it represents a fundamental liberal humanist critique of educational theory and research. Neatby's work is important for the way in which it initiates contemporary conservative educational critique in Canada, but also because it anticipates post-structural arguments about the radical intrusiveness of a focus on the "whole child" in the context of the modern educational apparatus. Finally, I critique some of Neatby's key assumptions and relate these to an autobiographical account of the educational experience of one small-town Nova Scotian family from the 1920s.

CETTE NUIT J'AI REVÉ D'AVOIR VU HILDA NEATBY: SI PEU POUR L'ESPRIT 50 ANS APRÈS

**RÉSUMÉ.** Presque 50 ans se sont écoulés depuis la publication de *So Little for the Mind* (*Si peu pour l'esprit*), l'attaque conservatrice et controversée de Hilda Neatby contre "l'éducation progressive" telle qu'elle l'avait perçue. L'article présent démontre que le livre de Neatby reste une lecture importante malgré son contexte et les limites de son sujet. Le travail de Neatby constitue ce qu'on peut appeler "un grand rêve" de la pensée en éducation. De par sa structure et par son argumentation, son texte se révèle passionnément anti-scientifique, représentant ainsi une critique de la théorie et de la recherche en éducation qui demeure fondamentale, libérale et humaniste. Le travail de Neatby demeure important par sa façon d'introduire une critique conservatrice et contemporaine dans le milieu de l'éducation au Canada, mais également par sa façon de présager une argumentation post-structuraliste au sujet du danger d'intrusion radicale que comporte l'approche de "l'enfant global" (the "whole child") dans le contexte d'une organisation scolaire moderne. En dernier lieu je critique quelques-unes des suppositions de base de Neatby en établissant le rapport de celles-ci à un récit autobiographique d'une famille nouvelle écossaise et son vécu scolaire dans une petite ville des années 20.

## Hilda and Joe

At Woodstock in 1969 Joan Baez sang a simple song based on an obscure 1925 poem about an ordinary labourer-minstrel, Joe Hill, who was executed by a firing squad in Utah in 1915.<sup>1</sup> This performance elevated a little-known martyr to a certain spiritual celebrity. If the history of Canadian education has a spiritual celebrity, it is probably Hilda Neatby. Neatby was no political radical, to be sure, but she was a radical conservative who railed as hard against what she saw as the "establishment" of her time as did the unfortunate Mr. Hill. While Neatby enjoyed a long academic career, her public star burned brightest in the mid 1950s after she published a scathing expose of the decline of Canada's public schools, *So Little for the Mind* (1953).

It is half a century since Neatby's book set off a bright, yet brief flash of dissent and debate in the nascent Canadian educational bureaucracy. The writing is scathing, bitter, trenchant and powerful. Neatby took on what she saw as the emerging theoretical and quasi-scientific apparatus of the growing educational technocracy in the teachers colleges and in the schools. She also launched a direct attack on the influence of the ideas of John Dewey and his followers, loosely defined as progressives. Neatby believed that she and her classically educated peers could regain control of the schools and return them to good old days and the pursuit of exclusive, difficult, timeless, and enduring knowledge in the classical Greco-Roman and particularly, Christian traditions. But like Joe Hill's revolutionary "Wobblies," the One Big Union that would turn the tide of the history of industrial capitalism, Neatby's broadside was far too little, far too late. Today, her work on education is all but forgotten outside a small group of cultural historians and educational scholars.<sup>2</sup> Neatby was a historian who spent most of her academic career at the University of Saskatchewan. As a result of her participation in the Massey Commission on the Arts, Letters and the Sciences (1951), Neatby received funding from committee chair Vincent Massey to write a book challenging the central tenets of child-centered educational theory and particularly the influence of Dewey on the evolution of Canada's schools.

Hilda Neatby died in 1975, yet, like Joe Hill, she is not exactly dead in the sense that the struggle she represented is very much alive.<sup>3</sup> In the context of a seminar on the history of Canadian Education I recently returned to Neatby's work. *So Little for the Mind* is chilling reading. The fundamental tenets of progressivism are by now so well entrenched in professional teacher education (Egan, 2002) that it remains difficult for most teacher educators to read Neatby and not feel defensive and misunderstood. She just doesn't get it. We now have generations of scholarship and theory in education that seems to confirm the core notion that the experience of the child is the foundation of learning.<sup>4</sup> The child-centered, constructivist ideas popular-

ized by Dewey now pass as virtually unassailable common sense in much theoretical discourse in education. In the pragmatic "teaching methods" literature of the education school textbook, Dewey's discourse reigns very close to supreme. It is a little bit like the common sense of industrial capitalism that Joe Hill railed against in his activism.

Neatby's work in education sits at the beginning of the period of massive expansion of Canada's public secondary and post-secondary education system. The children of the baby boom were entering the public schools, and, in the spirit of the emerging social politics of the civil rights movement, their parents were demanding better schools for them. As the public service bureaucracy and the "helping" professions rose and expanded, more young people with post secondary credentials were needed to fill positions. The result was a rapid growth in all levels of the school system through the 1950s and 60s. Neatby was also responding to changes in the university system that saw the decline of the influence of classical subjects as well as a transformation of the traditional humanities and arts disciplines to include upstart areas of study such as political science and sociology. Other "upstarts" were the professional schools that moved on to university campuses across Canada, blurring the line between academic and practical study, a trend that was anathema to Hilda Neatby.

Yet by criticising the expansion of the public education system and the opening up of the exclusive club of the universities, Neatby seems not just anti-progressive, but quite literally anti-progress. How for instance, could Neatby criticise the idea that educational researchers ought to look carefully at children's learning processes in order to better understand how to teach them and liberate them from the boredom and drill of traditional teaching methods? How could she question the importance of something as commonsensical as the idea of relevance in education? How could she question the apparently democratic post-World War II growth and expansion of educational opportunity to more children?

The answer represents a fundamental irony of education in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Neatby was indeed an ethnocentric prophet of cultural decline, a cranky academic, and an unrepentant elitist, but she was more than that. Neatby essentially saw an educational program that focussed on a child's mundane experience as essentially impoverished. This problem continues to resonate not only among conservative humanist critics who essentially follow Neatby (Bloom, 1988; Ravitch, 2000; Hirsch, 1987), but also among poststructuralists (Walkerdine, 1990; Popkewitz et. al., 2001), educational philosophers (Egan, 2002), and eco-pedagogues (Bowers, 2000, 2003). I think Egan (2002) puts it as well as anyone when he wonders why, if entrenched and well-established progressivist ideas are so powerful, does school remain so irrelevant, boring and uninteresting to so many students?

As I reread *So Little for the Mind*, I was reminded of the importance of grand dreams in education and the danger that lurks when we place all of our eggs in the technical baskets of computer technology, brain-based research, and a curriculum meticulously preoccupied with experimentally "proven" developmental notions and age-stage outcomes to fit those notions. Neatby is worth reading for the wonderful ride one experiences when someone with a keen mind goes after received truth, orthodoxy and conventional wisdom. In her own way, Hilda Neatby was dreaming as big as was Joe Hill. Like Joe Hill, Neatby saw the enemy clearly and did her best to bring the system down. And like Joe Hill she failed miserably.

#### *Neatby's argument*

Neatby's central argument is that a small cadre of what she termed "educational experts" (bureaucrats and teachers' college instructors in the main) were responsible for promoting and defending a misguided liberalism founded on simplified and misinterpreted readings of John Dewey. According to Neatby, Dewey's philosophy developed in two principal directions, one pedagogical and the other administrative, creating an unholy alliance of scientism, administrative rationalism, a preoccupation with measurement, and pedagogical practices which explicitly abandoned all roots in the classical traditions which nurtured Western civilization. For Neatby, classical academic tradition was replaced by a vulgar and utilitarian preoccupation with ordinary experience setting the conditions for educational catastrophe. By focussing the starting point for education on the everyday experience of ordinary children, it was Neatby's claim that Dewey abandoned central ideas and key practices of scholarship and pedagogy which served to elevate the classically educated person above the realm of ordinary competence in the work-a-day world. Rather than creating an educational environment conducive to democracy as Dewey claimed, Neatby argued that elevation above ordinary experience actually distinguishes true education from ordinary living and creates the only kind of social condition in which freedom and democracy could flourish in the first place. Neatby claimed that Dewey, "wandered away from his own garden," confusing socialization with schooling and abandoning the proper business of school which is intellectual training, cultural enlightenment, moral instruction (particularly for the masses), and nurturing the able for leadership (1953, p. 238).

Situated historically in the aftermath of the defeat of Nazism, the ascent of Soviet and Maoist totalitarianism, McCarthyism, the explosion of mass media-driven American popular culture, the final demise of the British Empire, escalating decolonization, and the post-war baby boom, Neatby saw Canadian society at a crossroads. Canadian schools could, in her terms, go down the road of low-brow American popular culture and anti-intellectu-

alism, or stay the course and preserve an admittedly elitist classical academic tradition.

Neatby found in Dewey's educational philosophy the intellectually and spiritually impoverished, bland, anti-cultural, immoral, laissez faire attitudes and practices that would hasten rather than confront the coming crisis of Western civilization. For Neatby, the real danger at the root of this slide toward American ideas was modernity itself.<sup>5</sup> Education must then be pressed into the service of resistance to "modern" problems and indeed the problem of modernity itself, rather than used to promote its decadent drift. In her crusade, Neatby joined the ranks of academic and cultural anti-modernists who made it their business to save a few bastions of purity from the contagion of American cultural influence (McKay, 1994; Massolin, 1998, 2001).

Neatby defined Dewey's philosophy as anti-intellectual because she claimed that it ignores the simple heroic historical truth of how democracy was achieved in the first place, which is by carefully transmitting tradition and moral foundations across generations. Cut loose from tradition, there are no significant standards against which to evaluate and judge the development of children's minds. In this context, school becomes little more than an aimless busywork beehive inspired by nothing other than an increasingly focussed analysis of the child's immediate inclinations and the obscure sense that intellectual power, sociability and morality develop "naturally" without direct instruction. It was Neatby's sense that Dewey not only ignored traditional transmission pedagogy, he actually turned it on its head, positing tradition as irrelevant, "passive" and external to the child who is more concerned with immediate ends and interests, and specifically, with activity.

With the establishment of universal secondary schooling came the bureaucracy to administer, maintain, staff and support it. Not surprisingly, Neatby's chief antagonist in her account of the rise of mass schooling was the emerging "educational expert."<sup>6</sup> Educational experts, in Neatby's view, developed the esoteric language necessary to their constitution as priesthood. Central to the defence of their professional claims to expertise was the right to control the nation's schools.<sup>7</sup> This is a discourse which was repugnant to her because it removed the conversation about what goes on in schools out of elite academic channels and placed it squarely into life in schools and in the everyday lives of ordinary children regardless of their background or social position. Neatby claimed that educational experts conjured themselves as authorities through a discourse that mapped new academic standards which could not be judged by either discipline-based academics or by an educated public. The experts accomplished this sleight-of-hand by concocting pseudo-scientific psychological investigations of the actual processes of children learning in ordinary circumstances, thereby constructing a



kind of hybrid scholarly/ vernacular knowledge out of the most mundane human accomplishments creating, "a cloud of incense behind which educators may carry out their secret operations while the faithful stand apart in awed silence" (Neatby, 1953, p. 38).

Neatby's rage was missionary in its intensity and her caustic wit was sharpened by the urgency of her cause. For Hilda Neatby, the stakes were inestimably high and nothing less than civilization and democracy hung in the balance. Unlike most contemporary conservative educational critics (who generally support extensive technocratic surveillance in the form of assessment, remediation, therapeutic and testing regimes), Neatby did not trust quantification any more than she trusted experience as a way of orienting educational practice. For her, the only safe way to insure educational quality was to teach it in a traditional academic system controlled and managed by academics themselves using necessarily complex judgment based upon scholarly standards.

The notion that everything important to education (morality, intellectual growth and culture) grows out of activity in a "natural" way represented for Neatby an excuse for gutting the real core of sensible schooling, i.e. direct academic instruction by experts in particular fields, abstract moral instruction, and a long-term view of the ultimate aims of society as opposed to the immediate aims of children. In Neatby's analysis, schools ought to introduce the child to culture and tradition, slowly and carefully, protecting the integrity of the distinction between the scholarly, knowledgeable master and the ignorant, but typically capable child. Under the system imagined by progressivism, it was Neatby's view that many capable children would be blocked (often by boredom and a lack of challenge) from acquiring the kind of quality education necessary to ensure not only the particular child's personal well being, but also that of democratic society itself which depended totally on the contributions of the best and the brightest.

This debate, of course, resonates today, but its reverberation is ambiguous, just as the contemporary critiques of Nikiforuk, Ravitch, Bennett, Bloom and Hirsch resonate the mainstream "common sense" of an embattled middle class (Ehrenreich, 1990) and the marginal feedback of the last vestiges of an exclusive yet open academic order. This is because the essentialist traditions Neatby so steadfastly defended and that later authors have attempted to restore to a central place in debates around public schooling represent an echo of fundamental assumptions which have been thoroughly aired since the early 1950s. It is to these assumptions that I will now turn.

#### *Neatby's assumptions*

Neatby's argument is perhaps more interesting from the point of view of what is left unsaid, or what is stated in the sense that certain claims are so

evident that they need no explicit defence. I think it is these assumptions which cut to the heart of Neatby's own discourse and which make her analysis such uncomfortable reading today (at least for me). Neatby sits nervously on the edge of a modern sensibility, a position from which she reaches back toward a way of thinking which is profoundly strange and yet deeply familiar. What follows is an analysis of some of the assumptions I find in Neatby's writing.

#### *1. The assumption of creeping Americanization*

American egalitarianism and radical democracy are supposed by Neatby to be embodied by Dewey's social philosophy. She argued this vague and undefined notion of what democracy is (and ought to be) will supplant and debase supposedly superior Anglo-British culture and lead Canada into the morass of social chaos represented by American popular culture. This is a debate which continues to resonate and it is one about which Neatby cared very deeply, particularly after her experience with Vincent Massey and the royal commission that bore his name.

American influence on Canadian culture continues to be a central concern both in schools and in the broader cultural sphere. Additionally, the role of the liberal arts in contemporary schools and in the university continues to be challenged by calls for relevance, accountability in the form of clear and measurable outcomes, and economic utility of vocationalism, corporate partnerships, pragmatic skills training, and increasingly technical education. Neatby saw these "pragmatic" developments as another avenue of American cultural domination. Important in this creeping Americanism was the way that a focus on current investigations in large educational research institutions like Stanford and Columbia Teacher's College represent the American experience as a scientific standard.<sup>8</sup> Neatby rejected the ahistorical empiricism of the allegedly universal findings of the educational experts, presenting them instead as populist ideology dressed up as science.

Neatby saw schools as the guardian against the kind of populist and utilitarian corruption of the work-a-day world supplemented and supported by mass culture glorified in the United States. She saw little to celebrate in "can do" pragmatic Americanism and the alleged wisdom and virtues of the common people. This discourse of pragmatism must have sounded more than a bit like dreaded communism and Neatby saw in Dewey's philosophy a glorification of barbarism, elevating private vernacular experience above the collective experience represented by venerated cultural traditions. Rather than playing a central role in the development and maintenance of aristocratic spiritual and intellectual traditions, Neatby claimed that schools had been moved into the enemy camp, posing a grave danger to the very society this democratic heritage created. Neatby's call was for education to return to that position which it traditionally held outside the ebb and flow of

ordinary social intercourse. Ultimately, Neatby's concerns came to be played out in the Canadian Studies movement of the 1970s, a development which might have given her some solace were it not so interdisciplinary (Wadland, 2000).

In her context, Neatby was able to deny what is now almost a truism, the notion that school is unavoidably rooted in the society in which it operates. The organization of school and its relationship to life in the world is precisely what most educational research since the 1950s has tried to understand. Neatby, however, seems to imagine a timeless school as an idealized place of high culture and ethereal morality. To quote one of her heroes, George Iddings Bell, "the business of the school and the home and the church is to feed the lambs, not amuse the goats."<sup>9</sup>

Neatby feared the goats and she saw in Dewey's progressivism a perverted philosophy that glorified the unrestrained individualism of American culture. Perhaps the goats are ascendant and in the resulting post-modern cacophony Neatby's modern descendants retrench (awaiting the crisis that will once again reunify us beneath a master narrative), demanding something which is now impossible, the right to impose a unified moral vision on every Canadian child. After September 11, 2001, this spectre has simultaneously become frightening and strangely seductive as competing brands of jingoism and absolutist posturing square off in the phenomenon Benjamin Barber calls *Jihad vs. McWorld* (1995).

## 2. The assumption that democracy precludes rather than includes the agency of the child

Neatby maintained throughout *So Little for the Mind* that democracy has resulted from the well managed evolution of Christian and classical Greco-Roman traditions and not from any base desire of the masses for social equality. This follows upon an assumption I will take up later, the idea that the world has been prepared for real democracy by a benign "fluid and voluntary aristocracy" (Neatby, 1953, p. 48). This elite cadre, which is nurtured in good schools and particularly in liberal arts universities, uses its understanding of the roots of the democratic tradition to protect the masses from their natural condition which is to walk a tightrope between chaos and servitude. Neatby claimed that by creating vaguely defined democratic schools, Dewey and his followers actually invited the anarchy which is the "natural condition" of the masses and the foundation of their largely unorganized and random experience. For Neatby, the real roots of democracy were not to be found in the rabble, but in the controlled dissemination of democratic traditions.<sup>10</sup>

There is a contradiction at the root of this assumption which Neatby probably could not address, or perhaps even see. How can one support an

aristocratically grounded democracy and still call it democracy? In the 1950s it may have been still possible to make the claim that democracy was not about equal participation for everyone, but only for those select few who "counted." This is essentially what Neatby was saying, but I think she was also saying something more. Neatby wondered about the relationship between adults and children in institutions like the family and the school. She saw emerging in the child-centered language of progressivism which had already made its way into most official curricula across Canada, the suggestion that children themselves might be equal to adults, that they might have the same rights as adults, that they have something to teach adults about our "nature" or the "nature of learning," and that education might become framed in terms of an exchange rather than transmission. To Neatby this was not only absurd, it was profoundly dangerous. Civilization would surely be turned on its head if children were granted anything approaching social equality and the accompanying privilege of commenting credibly upon issues about which they (by virtue of their lack of significant experience and serious study) were ignorant. The rise of the mass media and information technology in the ensuing fifty years has certainly accentuated this problem.

Buried in this assumption is a tacit theory of learning and perhaps of child development as well. For Neatby, learning seems to have been the unproblematic absorption of information. One could either read, or one could not, as she put it. Children do not construct understanding; they receive it, and until they have incorporated an appropriate share of essential knowledge, they are insufficiently complete to credibly "make sense" and to deserve being taken seriously. No doubt Dewey's psychology did seem bizarre to Neatby with its call for teachers to watch the child and actually learn about learning from him or her. This, to Neatby, was not only putting the cart before the horse, it was asking the cart to show the horse the way home. She imagined educational experts carefully watching the trivial, unstructured play of infants, imagining that they were finding some fundamental principle of learning or the development of human intelligence. This, to Neatby, was totally absurd.

Here Neatby was again a harbinger of a deeply problematic phenomenon; the child as a legitimate social agent whose accounts are meaningful. Families, contemporary legal systems and schools are just some of the institutional spaces where children's voices are no longer routinely discounted and in fact the challenges of what to do with (and about) children's utterances on a variety of serious subjects remains problematic. No doubt, Dewey and his followers along with what Neatby would see as pretender sciences like sociology and psychology, bear significant responsibility here, for better or worse. Issues of the accountability of the child's voice have become increasingly controversial, but probably not in the way Neatby could have anticipated.

### 3. *The assumption of the irrationality of the masses*

An attendant notion to that of the assumption of inequality is the idea that not everyone is intellectually equipped to be rational. Neatby claimed that Dewey's' progressivism, particularly the administrative, scientific aspects of it is grounded in amoral rationalism. First of all, there is the problem of a rationalism which is not grounded ethically, a dilemma which is also foundational to postmodernism and critical theory (Bauman, 1993). Characteristically, Neatby saw chaos here. If people were simply expected to be rational with no overarching moral base, then pity help us. Neatby wrote:

Rationalists by a pure act of faith encourage the enormous assumption that all or at least the vast majority could and would reason effectively. Comparatively few people are really anxious consciously to exercise their reason; the majority, it would seem deeply desire faith (1953, p. 316).

Contemporary sociobiologists have advanced similar claims about the inherent irrationality of the species. Richard Lewontin quotes Harvard sociobiologist Edward O. Wilson who claims in a massive, allegedly scientific study of the biological origins of human behaviour, that "man would rather believe than know" (Lewontin, 1990). The problem, according to Lewontin, is that this claim is supported by no actual scientific evidence, but rather by a set of stories about why social regularities occur. Neatby, like Wilson, advances a claim here which falls into the realm of what Lewontin calls "bar-room wisdom": or the kind of statement which has a certain commonsense flavour, but which requires no substantive proof supposedly because of its unquestionable face validity.<sup>11</sup>

One wonders what Neatby would have made of contemporary critics of education and the way they use the technologies of measurement to make claims similar to her own about the declining quality of schools. Here, the rationalism Neatby decried has turned out to be a double-edged sword and perhaps the educational experts were not quite as clever as Neatby anticipated. Could it be that they created the very weapons which could be turned against them by bureaucrats, lobbyists and politicians immersed in a cult of "accountability," ultimately leading to their own undoing? I cannot help but think that Neatby would be amused by such a prospect.

### 4. *The assumption of education as elevation above mundane experience*

Neatby argued that Dewey's educational vision inverted the proper educational equation, glorifying and moving to the center of the whole enterprise that which is most dangerous: ordinary culture. Ordinary culture, the regular practice of mundane behaviour, was in fact the real enemy of a proper education for Hilda Neatby. Real education, for Neatby, was concerned with the steadfast maintenance of the difference between the grand tradition of high culture and morality and the base anarchy of ordinary life. In her conclusion, Neatby actually argues that it is the glorification of con-

formity and commonality which lead to dictatorship and fascism. Without a grand narrative and an educated quasi-aristocracy to protect it and preserve it, we are thrown into the kind of chaos which allows the Big Lie to emerge, leading to the ultimate destruction of the foundation of democracy itself. Thus, Neatby is able to simultaneously defend the apparently contradictory ideas of aristocracy and democracy. The greatest problem with this argument is that it is exactly the aristocratic grand narrative which supported Hitler's ideology, and incidentally, the European ideology of global conquest which was rapidly crumbling while Neatby wrote. This includes significantly the conquest of British North America and New France, Neatby's own academic specialty. Here, Neatby's analysis rings particularly hollow in the light of both modern historical scholarship and accounts of the lived experience of ordinary First Nations people, ethnic minorities, working class people, and women.

Amazingly, Neatby was able to bracket her own childhood poverty and miserable treatment at the hands of a deeply sexist academy (Hayden, 1983), effectively ignoring her own "experience" which presumably was just as unimportant as that of anyone else. Neatby and her modern followers seem to understand culture and history as the ossified experience of some select people rather than the lived experience of all people. Her fixation with the heroic "great man" theory of history, a narrowly defined literary and cultural tradition, and a clearly distorted understanding of the racism at the heart of imperialism and its consequences for vast numbers of people, all serve as reminders of the deep problems inherent in contemporary "cultural literacy" oriented critiques of the project and outcomes of modern schooling.

### 5. *The assumption of fundamental and unavoidable inequality*

Neatby assumes throughout *So Little for the Mind* that people are not equal, nor do they desire to be. In this sense her analysis rejects a liberal notion which has become so ingrained in the way the project of public schooling is commonly understood that it is difficult to imagine a serious educational thinker who actually admits to supporting social inequality.<sup>12</sup> The ironic truth is that in the 50 years since the publication of Neatby's book, educational sociologists have consistently shown that Neatby is substantively right in the sense that social equality is indeed a myth and that progressive education, even in its "critical" variants which are explicitly concerned with the resolution of social inequality (eg. Bourdieu, 1984 and Bernstein, 1971) have failed to create anything remotely resembling egalitarian educational aspirations, processes or outcomes.<sup>13</sup> As Pierre Bourdieu consistently and persistently pointed out, it is the very processes of schooling which now mark social inequality with a stamp of objectivity by measuring and comparing students on the basis of academic content and dispositions which are unevenly available to students (1990).



There is a certain irony in Neatby's fifty year old analysis of the public school as an egalitarian institution. Here she presages the dual-edged critique of schooling which calls for high quality, high cultural content and at the same time, a highly effective levelling of social differences. Much contemporary educational criticism assumes both liberal egalitarianism and elitism simultaneously in a way reminiscent of Gramsci's idea that through the hegemonic instruments of the modern state, "all men might be bourgeois" (1971). This is evident in modern curriculum documents which are simultaneously based upon Deweyan/Vygotskian constructivist theory and scientific management driven accountability agendas like the currently popular "outcome" driven model. Hilda Neatby understood that progressive schooling can be seen as a more intrusive form of social control, organized along the lines of forming subjectivities and effectively creating a docile workforce to do the mundane chores necessary for industrial capitalism (Curtis, 1988) rather than an elite cadre of intellectuals to temper an otherwise rampant anti-cultural, anti-democratic drift. Neatby saw the educated few as the guardians of civil society, liberty and true democracy for, as she put it, "the many must still live on by the efforts of the few" (1953, p. 48).

While this assumption is widely dismissed at the level of "inclusive" official discourse and private sentiment, the rising tide of competition and marketization signal its return in another form. Most educational jurisdictions in the West now employ some form of high stakes mass assessment of both individuals and of schools, resulting in "league tables" and competition for students that typically degenerates into systems of choice for those in a position to exercise it (Whitty, 1998). Neatby's assumption of fundamental inequality is now presented in a standard and simplified measure of educational quality which quantifies the differences within and between individuals, schools and provinces and nations legitimizing and bolstering the application of market metaphors and practices. Stephen Ball comments that in this discourse, "complex assessment is designed to obscure, simple tests are revealing," and of course, simple and measurable "provide the information system which will drive the market in education" (1994, p. 41). Fundamental inequalities are no longer presented as a reflection of nature as Neatby would have it, but rather, as an empirically observable anomaly that good schools can fix. The trouble is that despite radically increased testing no one has been able to make a pig any fatter by weighing it as Margaret Meek commented, and the league tables continue to reflect economic advantage and disadvantage more than anything else.

Since people are not equal in Neatby's view, the schools should properly serve as a social sorting mechanism which is essential to the maintenance of the social order and by extension, democracy as Neatby would define it. Her aristocracy served the purpose of protecting the masses from themselves

and from the anarchy and demagoguery which would otherwise result. Progressives, on the other hand, actively promoted what Neatby saw as social chaos, not only by rejecting the sorting function of school, but also by advancing the claim that educational experts were the only ones capable of developing the necessary standards and worse yet, soft technologies (Postman, 1992) to accomplish social sorting. The end result is the establishment of what Neatby saw as a fundamental lie, the idea that people are equal, an idea which in turn generated a school system designed to demonstrate this lie by paying no attention to matters of the mind. Of course, everyone has experience, and in this we are all equal, but for Neatby, a school regime which systematically works to blur natural inequality marks a departure from what she would have undoubtedly seen as nature's fundamental distinctions. For her it is precisely these distinctions which have allowed civilization to move forward on the backs (minds) of more able individuals.

Clearly, Neatby misjudged the ultimate results of public schooling. Evidence shows that schools have continued to serve very effectively as a social sorting mechanism regardless of the designs of Dewey and his followers. Again, the sociological evidence over the past half century demonstrates clearly that the schools are still effectively reproducing the social class structure, or conversely, that the social class structure is effectively reproducing in the institutional context of the public school. On this account Neatby appears to have been crying wolf. The second problem is that the kind of progressivism described by Neatby appears to have largely missed the schools anyhow, remaining stuck in curriculum documents and texts written by educational experts who may have turned out to be much less influential than Neatby feared (Goodlad, 1985). For example, Neil Sutherland compares the actual school experience of children between the 1920s and the 1960s, finding that the transmission model of instruction remained intact through the middle decades of the century in British Columbia (1995). There is no evidence to support the claim that things were very different anywhere else in the country on a large scale. One wonders what Neatby would have concluded had she spent less time reading curriculum documents and more time actually investigating life in Canadian schools in the late 1940s and early 1950s.<sup>14</sup> The same question can be asked of modern educational critics.

#### *Why read Neatby?*

Why should we read Neatby today? I think one reason why Neatby's analysis remains important is because she had a historian's understanding the importance of discourse well before this became fashionable in educational analysis. Neatby saw clearly that progressivism was no more "natural" than any other way of thinking about how children learn or about how school should be structured. She challenged the claims of naturalism of the progressives by

showing progressivism to be another discourse, and one which despite its emphasis on the "freedom" of the child can be constructed as much more pervasive and powerfully repressive than the traditionalism she defended.

Neatby also understood the technical discourse of quantitative assessment as another instrumental power effect which was thoroughly infused with ideological content masquerading as value-free, objective measurement of learning and the psychological processes it represents. Neatby argued forcefully that these soft technologies amounted to a means through which the educational experts could escape having to justify assessment by appealing to the alleged objectivity of quasi-experimental methods and statistical procedures copied from the natural sciences.

Anticipating the poststructural analysis of Foucault and his followers (Foucault, 1979, 1980; Ball, 1990, 1994), Neatby saw how the intensive focus on the "whole child" could lead to a fixation on the minutiae of experience and perception.<sup>15</sup> Neatby sensed and feared an emerging regime of regulation, measurement, a preoccupation with administrative trivia, and surveillance at the level of behaviour and academics that could not have been imagined in 1953, but which we know all too well today.<sup>16</sup> This includes not only the significant development of integration in the public schools but also the rise of specialties and disorders and the new quasi-educational experts who define and manage myriad disorders and difference. As critical commentators as diverse as Lisa Delpitt, Denny Taylor and Valery Walkerdine have shown, humanistic "progressive" pedagogical practice may not be particularly "liberating" for anyone involved and particularly for disadvantaged populations (Walkerdine, 1990; Delpitt, 1988; Taylor, 1993).

Neatby also explicitly rejected the core claim of progressive education which is the idea that experience should (indeed must) sit at the center of the process of schooling. Ironically, critical ethnographies of schooling have effectively supported this position in the sense that they show how working class youth understand the gulf between their own life worlds and the middle class space of schooling (eg. Willis, 1977, Gaskell, 1992; McLaren, 1989). In other words, these studies show how young people know whose experience counts in school and whose does not. In Neatby's context it was still possible for an academic to be as honest as say, one of Paul Willis' or Jane Gaskell's informants about who did and who did not have the cultural capital to make use of schooling.

Today, educational experts are forced to maintain the fiction that by beginning with the "experience" of the child, and/or by making a set of intended outcomes very specific, it is possible to create a school that is fair to all. This in turn legitimizes the standardized assessment, remedial interventions, text production, and the multitude of industries, discourses and specialists that

have arisen to map, evaluate, normalize and measure educational experience. The alleged fairness in such a scheme, as Bourdieu has argued, is grounded in the false assumption that since standards are "objective", they are equally attainable by all students. The problem is that the students have a highly differential access to the cultural capital from which the standards themselves are drawn. Bourdieu puts it most clearly when he argues that those students considered to be intellectually "gifted" in terms of supposedly objective standards tend powerfully to come from privileged social class backgrounds. Bourdieu therefore claims that the "gifts" of intelligence standardized intellectual measurement instruments gauge are more appropriately understood as what he calls "social gifts" (1984a). Neatby's critique explicitly foregrounds a conundrum in contemporary debates around what we now call "inclusion" and that is: how can an outcome-base for education measured by mass standardized assessment fit with an education system that accepts all students regardless of what they are able to produce?

In important ways, Neatby's analysis also foreshadowed many contemporary tensions in education as well as the crisis of Canadian confederation, the challenges of multiculturalism, the emerging mass media and consumer monolith to Canada's south and even contemporary campus politics. Perhaps for these reasons alone her work remains relevant. But I have another more personal reason for suggesting that this work remains important in the current political and ideological climate swirling around contemporary schooling. Had Neatby succeeded in her mission, I would probably never have graduated high school. My own experience was largely removed from the world of school, and certainly from the world of university. Neatby's open prejudice perhaps helps us see the implications of forms of critique and educational restructuring that aim to create, enforce and maintain what are called "standards." It was only in a system whose standards were unclear, contested and in flux that some of us could "slip through the cracks" (one of which was a fairly generous student aide package available in the 1970s to working class youth) of the reproduction mechanism and fall into university.

### *The voice of experience*

I was born into the kind of family which produced virtually no high school graduates until the 1970s. On the other hand, all of my children have graduated high school, at least partly because I was in a position to access higher education myself, as were thousands of working class youth of my generation. By the early 1970s generous student aid packages allowed the ranks of the universities to swell. We were not, however, encouraged to wallow in experience. I remember schooling and university in the allegedly radical days of the late 1960s and early 1970s as much the same place Neatby defended, the traditional school. Our educational salvation was not in the clarity of standards around what are now called "essential learnings" or



"outcomes," but in the postmodern confusion about all standards wrought by the social change that characterized the 1970s.

There is a photograph of Hilda Neatby in Michael Hayden's biographical study of her career (1983). The time is 1967 and Neatby is shown receiving the Order of Canada from Governor General Roland Michener. She is wearing a conservative dress and a hat, the kind my maternal grandmother used to wear in those same days. Neatby not only looks like my grandmother, they were born in the same year. And there are other similarities. My grandmother was an Acadian woman from the Cap-Pelé area of New Brunswick. She was unable to stay in school beyond grade 4 or 5 because there was far too much work to do. Her father died when my grandmother was a very young girl and family legend has it that her brothers "weren't much good." So grandmother's fate was pretty much sealed. Neatby's father was a failed physician who migrated to Canada in 1906. He too placed his family in peril, not through his death, but by living the life of a frustrated intellectual and religious zealot, leaving Neatby's mother to keep up middle class appearances and make do while the family quite literally starved. Times were tough in Hilda's world too, but like my grandmother, Neatby proved tougher.

While Neatby was finding her way to the "great books" of the western tradition and to the bible (because her father, although totally destitute, had a 300 volume library), my Grandmother was hardscrabble farming, selling fish and practicing midwifery in her rural community; she took in laundry and borders, cooked and cleaned and listening to scripture recited by the parish priest, virtually the only person in the village who could read or write much of anything in the early years of the twentieth century. In the early 1920s, my grandmother married a multi-occupational lumberjack/fisherman/ farmer/carpenter and proceeded to have her family. Neatby rejected marriage, stayed in school and spent most of the 1920s at the University of Saskatchewan, first as a student and then as a temporary lecturer in history and French (bilingualism was yet another similarity I suppose). Neatby battled sexism in the university, took temporary lecture-ships, taught for more than a decade at Regina College, and finally after a hard struggle (and by modern standards, immense tolerance of the political games routinely played with her academic and personal future by the old boys clubs at two major Canadian universities) found a permanent position at the University of Saskatchewan in 1946, a full twenty-one years after her first temporary appointment (Hayden, 1983). Soon afterward she was appointed to the Massey Commission (1949) and with the financial and moral support of Chairman Vincent Massey, Neatby was able to complete *So Little for the Mind* in 1953.

Meanwhile, my grandmother was effectively excluded from educational opportunity by a brutal economic climate in Acadian New Brunswick that

through the 1930s and 40s continued to provide her own children little real access to formal education beyond the elementary level. My mother got more education than most of her siblings reaching grade 9 before she was withdrawn from school to help at home and work in the baggage factory in the wartime boom town of Amherst, Nova Scotia, where the family migrated in the early 1940s for war work. My mother's people were common folk and it is well documented how common folk, particularly ethnic minorities, faced obstacles in school beyond the most rudimentary levels. Only one of my mother's nine siblings graduated high school. Through the 1960s and 70s, few of my many cousins graduated, in fact, I was the second member of my generation to do so, following my bookish cousin who eventually became a teacher and who still lives in Amherst. Most of the rest of my cousins quit school well before graduation, either to marry or to go to work. In fact, in my extended family I have calculated a 73% dropout rate in my own generation and well over 90% in my mother's. The four of us who have university degrees were financed by student aid. As near as I can determine, my extended family dropout rate in the next generation (my and my cousins' children) is much less than one in five, the national average.<sup>17</sup> Whether this transformation of my own family's educational chances is a result of "progressivism" or not, it is one in which I have a considerable stake and I am certainly gratified that Hilda Neatby and friends did not have her way with the Canadian education system.

But, of course, Hilda Neatby is not dead, and the spectre of standardization once again looms large in the accountability agendas and the standardized testing regimes sweeping through Canadian educational jurisdictions. I am forced to ask a simple question here: what evidence is there that a rigid set of learning "outcomes" and standardized assessment schemes have improved the life chances of marginal populations? I would like to suggest that more than anything else, there is considerable evidence that these mechanisms do little more than document social inequality and provide statistics for competitive ranking of schools. I do think there is considerable historical evidence to suggest that such schemes have systematically restricted the educational opportunities and life chances of identifiable populations who, as groups, always seem to come out looking badly. What evidence is there to suggest that contemporary mass assessment and standards movements will be any different?

I think Neatby is helpful here because she rejected the technical rationality that simple educational measures reflect in favour of the complex assessment of a sensitive and educated mentor. In 1953, when Hilda Neatby wrote *So Little for the Mind*, Canada was in a state of transition. The war was over and the baby boom was just beginning to hit the schools. Canada was experiencing the commencement of the longest period of sustained growth in its history. Yet Canada had grown to become what was came to be called

a "middle power," providing a geographic buffer between the main combatants in the Cold War, drawn increasingly into the vortex of American cultural imperialism and its geopolitics and ideology. Neatby felt the shock waves of social change, perhaps beginning with the jazz music she abhorred, or the "B" movies she sometimes attended in her student days in Minnesota. She feared that Canadian culture was on the slippery slope to a kind of "democracy" which could destroy the society from within by displacing the generative traditions of Christianity, British culture and classical education with an alienated atheism, inane films, television programs and lowbrow popular sport and music from the United States. Hilda Neatby was not all wrong, but her way of understanding the problem of American cultural imperialism was simply to compare it unfavourably with British cultural imperialism. One might say that she was unable to conceive of what Zygmunt Bauman calls postmodern ethics (1993), arguing that the decline of absolute standards represented a more pervasive form of general decadence and an epistemological shift to technical rationality.

Now globalization and all of its attendant uncertainties have placed us in another transitional moment. Canadian educators are no longer only held hostage by American educational researchers, we are also brought into step with OECD led international comparisons of schooling and, in Atlantic Canada, we are found particularly wanting. Is it just coincidence that Atlantic Canada is also at the bottom of the economic heap?

I wonder what Neatby's kitchen looked like. Lorri Nielsen writes that the kitchen is the place where the life of a home is evident (1993). Everything important is on or around the kitchen table. I may be wrong, but I should imagine Hilda Neatby's house with everything perfectly arranged, and heaven help the child who ran across the threshold, uttered an untoward exclamation or got carried away by experience, forgetting decorum. In my grandmother's kitchen and in her living room, life happened. Despite her best efforts, it was often messy, especially when grandchildren came to visit (which was almost daily). We ran about, the "old people" played cards, a radio tuned into the French channel in Moncton squawked fiddle tunes and American country music; there were smells of pickling and stew, of sweat and laundry soap. My grandmother and grandfather bounced babies on their knees, told (never read) stories, argued, watched Hockey Night in Canada in English for the benefit of unilingual in-laws and their unilingual children, and cheered uninhibitedly for the Canadiens de Montreal. My grandfather would come right out of his chair when Belliveau or Richard scored, jumping highest when they scored against the Toronto Maple Leafs. It only got quiet for a little while on Sunday evening for the rosary when the little radio broadcast Cardinal Leger's "priere en famille." The carpets were foot-worn and white doilies festooned the arms of the big dusty chairs. There were political arguments and work tales told by "uneducated" men drinking

Schooner beer, and only slightly better educated women drinking tea, playing cards and eating sandwiches with crusts removed. It was all the gritty stuff of experience and there was a lot of experience to be had in grandmother and grandfather's house. It was an education, and part of this education was being told to speak English so you could "fit in," and stay in school so, "you don't have to work like I had to."

The greatest problem I see with Neatby's position, and those which have developed out of the line of thinking that she represents, is the assumption that there is something glorious, fair, and fundamentally good about the receding colonial world in which she and my grandmother were raised. Both of these women fought courageous fights against appallingly difficult social conditions, conditions created by the very elitism and exclusiveness Neatby praised. Neatby was, in the end, one of those paradoxical figures who supported the regime that did its best to exclude her. Perhaps she imagined that her own extraordinary efforts were not unusual and to be expected of anyone given the gift of ability necessary to penetrate into the elite world of university scholarship and enter into what she called the "great conversation." Perhaps Hilda Neatby never did see the bars on the windows or understand the extent to which the very "progressive" ideas (for example, those of the early feminists and suffragettes) which she loathed probably forged the conditions that finally allowed her entry into the conversation in the first place. Or perhaps she did understand and simply lived with this contradiction which was fundamental to many women of her generation, just as my grandmother would never think to question my grandfather when he walked into the kitchen for his dinner, muddy boots on his feet.

My final memory of my grandmother is of a woman in her sixties, dressed up to go out to vote for a young Pierre Trudeau one summer evening in 1968. She was wearing a hat much like the one Hilda Neatby wore in her picture with Roland Michener. In the midst of the media hoopla of Trudeaumania and the flower power symbolism of a child centred, youth oriented culture, we received the news that grandmother had fallen down the basement stairs and died. I'm not sure what she would have thought of the way the world has turned out since 1968, but perhaps she is watching from the same heaven inhabited by Hilda Neatby. After all, my grandmother is not dead either.

#### NOTES

1. Joe Hill (Joel Emanuel Hagglund) was a Swedish born union organizer and singer-songwriter who worked for the International Workers of the World. Hill was framed on a murder charge and subsequently executed following a bitter dispute over free speech in Utah in 1915. In 1925, Alfred Hayes wrote the poem entitled *I dreamed I saw Joe Hill last night*, and in 1936 Earl Robinson set the song to music. Hill's spirit is invoked in the ballad which begins with the words: "I dreamed I saw Joe Hill last night, alive as you or me." The ballad goes on to say that Joe Hill is alive in spirit wherever "working men defend their

rights." Like Joe Hill, Hilda Neatby's spirit lives on in the work of contemporary conservative humanist critics of public schooling. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers, J.D. Wilson, Don Fisher, Stephane Levesque, Bill Hare and George Perry for comments on an earlier draft of this paper. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Conference of Atlantic Educators at the Université de Moncton in Moncton New Brunswick in November of 2002.

2. In March of 2004 the University of Saskatchewan hosted an event called "Hildafest" which was a retrospective look at Neatby's career and the continuing influence of her work, including her educational critique.
3. In fact, Neatby was a pioneer in what has become something of an industry: bashing public education. In addition to the direct revenues from the publication of a host of books through the past half-century, public education has become what Peter Drucker characterized in 1993 as a \$400 billion+ business opportunity in the United States alone. The subsequent evolution from a public service to what Neave (1988) calls the "evaluative state" and the marketization of public education (school choice, voucher systems, across the Western world (Day, et. al., 2000; Whitty et. al., 1998) represent the radical realignment Western systems of public education have undergone in the 1990s. The irony is that these developments which amalgamate her conservative humanist educational critique with market forces and devolution of responsibility for public education to locales and markets would have disturbed Hilda Neatby profoundly.
4. For a highly engaging contemporary critique of this view see Kieran Egan's, *Getting it wrong from the beginning* (2002).
5. In 1954 Neatby wrote in response to her critics that the real roots of decay were not the, "inventions of educators and experts, they have emerged naturally from our modern way of life" (Neatby, 1954).
6. In fact, Neatby pays little attention to actual school practice, focusing instead on an analysis of provincial curriculum documents and a smattering of educational research. The work of Sutherland (1995), Wilson and Stortz (1995) and Cochrane (1987) for example illustrate how these documents were typically not reflected in practice.
7. Throughout the text Neatby reserves her most venomous critique for the educational expert and the kind of teachers they train. She bemoans the intellectual calibre of teachers claiming that they reject thinking in order to remain "part of the flock" (1953, p. 102). Neatby saw these teachers as "doers" rather than "scholars" and she went on to describe them as trivial administrators, thoughtless, cheerful compliant characters interested in sports and social activities and those who feel superior "spending time with the immature" (1953: 123). Teachers college instructors are portrayed as second-rate academics, already nervous because they have no specific expertise and made more nervous because they must teach people with relatively superior academic formation and even life experience. This type of critique has by now become commonplace in the international education restructuring discourse described by Whitty et. al. (1998), Robertson (2000), and Day, et. al. (2000). Other examples are Popkewitz's poststructural analysis of the *Teach for America* teacher training program and Henry Giroux's analysis of Leon Botstein's critique of teacher training which has much in common with Neatby's critique of the educational experts (Giroux, 2001, p. 82-92).
8. To quote Neatby: "One province attaches a bibliography to its general statement of which out of some forty-eight works, all but five were published in the United States... Canadian teachers then are warned that American findings are standard and are to be disregarded at their peril" (1953, p. 34).
9. Roland Barthes on the other hand argued that schools have been particularly good at producing unquestioning, compliant sheep and not very good at nurturing loud, complaining goats (Church, 1996). Contrary to Neatby, Barthes believed that the people who actually push civilization forward, who create art and culture and who resist fascism in all of its forms are actually the restless goats. In contemporary Canada, the question of the proper role of school is increasingly understood as a political discussion, and one in which

virtually everyone might and perhaps should become involved (Osborne, 1999; Ungerleider, 2003).

10. Neatby wrote: "The unconscious scorn engendered by Dewey for the Christian church and the aristocratic way of life, both of which nurtured a liberal humanist tradition, has cut them off from the living roots of democracy" (1953, p. 236).
11. My own bar-room question concerns whether or not Neatby's ideas still have the same face validity they might have possessed in 1953, and the possibility of an affirmative answer is deeply troubling.
12. For instance Diane Ravitch's work, which is remarkably similar in orientation to that of Neatby, is typically introduced with the idea that all children are capable of learning regardless of their social position or alleged "gifts," and that a failure to recognize this has been one of the main impediments to effective schooling (2000). One frightening and bizarre exception is the re-emergence of the kind of racist scholarship presented by the likes of Phillip Rushton or by Herrnstein and Murray's *The Bell Curve* (1994). For a multifaceted and powerful deconstruction of this work see Kincheloe et al. (1996).
13. In fact, it has been argued that this kind of critical work may have actually contributed to further social class polarization (Ranciere, 1995). In a recent address to the Canadian Society for the Study of Education, Marie Battiste commented that despite individual successes, overall educational outcomes for Canada's First Nations people have remained dismally unchanged (2004).
14. In his examination of curriculum development in Saskatchewan, Donald Cochrane notes that Neatby's analysis of the influence of Dewey and progressivism was effectively moot. He writes: "in Saskatchewan, Neatby's broadside came at a time of teacher shortages and minimal training programs that exposed teachers neither to Dewey nor to the kind of educational ideas Neatby favoured" (Cochrane, 1987, p. 28).
15. While this article was under review, James Pitsula (2001) published an analysis that investigates the "improbable" comparison of Neatby's work to that of Foucault. Pitsula develops the argument that Neatby and Foucault, though very different kinds of scholars and people, shared an interest in the potentially invasive nature of allegedly liberatory scientific, institutional and professional forms of inquiry into human behaviour. Neatby's work does indeed bear a certain resemblance to poststructural educational analysis (Popkewitz et. al., 2001), as well as the philosophical critique of progressivism and its exclusive focus on "experience" launched by Egan (1997; 2002). Additionally, Bowers' (2000, 2003) vision of eco-pedagogy is also predicated on a critique of Dewey's scientism.
16. For example, Neatby wrote: "In practice, however, the teacher and the curriculum are instruments in the hands of the administrator for conditioning children in an approved manner according to the listed 'values' of 'democracy' or occasionally of 'social living' or of 'effective living'." (1953, p. 42).
17. Neatby's attitude to the high school dropout is predictable. She wrote: "We should stop worrying about 'why our high school students drop out.' If they are offered abundant intellectual nourishment and if they prove themselves unable or unwilling to profit by it, then they should not only be allowed to quit, they should be obliged to withdraw." (1953, p. 333).

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