Adult education history in Britain: past, present and future (part I)

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This article – the first part of a two-part contribution – considers the current and past state of research on the history of adult education in Britain. Although there has been a broadening of interest among historians of adult education, the field remains to an extent in the shadow of the 'great tradition' of liberal education epitomised by university tutorial classes and the Workers' Educational Association, as well as the contested historiography of independent working-class education. The article takes issue with three distinctions that have been widely made in the literature: between vocational and non-vocational education, between different motivations for participation in adult learning, and between 'sponsored' and 'independent' working-class education. It is shown that these distinctions are productively undermined by a shift in the focus of historiography from education to learning, and in particular by the growing interest among historians in popular reading and writing practices in the past. This is one of a number of ways in which the history of adult education has overlapped with, and contributed to, other areas of historical research.

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In 2006, Janet Coles wondered 'whatever happened to the history of adult education?' Once a flourishing area of research within adult education, by this time it had been weakened by the closure or 'downsizing' of university adult education departments and the blurring of sub-disciplinary boundaries within education, not to mention the impact of postmodernism and other developments on the study of history itself.[1] Fifty years after Harold Wiltshire's landmark article on the 'Great Tradition', Coles's gloomy diagnosis of the state of adult education history echoed concerns being voiced elsewhere about the decline of adult education itself.[2] The history of adult education was, and perhaps still is, seen as a fairly small corner of a field – the history of education – that itself often struggles to connect with both 'mainstream' history and the other disciplines of education.[3] For much of the twentieth century and today, adult education has had a powerful sense of its own marginality, particularly within the university sector, and this has affected its relationship with its own history. As Malcolm Chase noted in 1995, '[a]dult education, perceiving itself to be marginal, has felt the need frequently to seek both the validation and inspiration of history', and although this ensured that there was a robust historiography of adult education, this

[1] Janet Coles, 'Whatever Happened to the History of Adult Education?', in *SCUTREA 2006, 36th Annual Conference: Inter-Cultural Perspectives on Research into Adult Learning* (Leeds: SCUTREA, 2006), 69-75.
[2] [Editorial], 'From the "Great Tradition" to "Celebrity Big Brother": Whatever Became of Adult Education', *International Journal of Lifelong Learning*, 24 (2005), 455-7; H. C. Wiltshire, 'The Great Tradition in University Adult Education', *Adult Education*, 29(2) (1956), 88-97.
[3] Roy Lowe, 'Do We Still Need History of Education: Is It Central or Peripheral?', *History of Education*, 31 (2002), 491-504.

historiography was defensive, inward-looking and lacked connections to wider historical debates and themes.[4] The aim of this article, like Chase's, is to assess the historiography of adult education Britain and to offer some suggestions for its further development.

The article is in two parts. This, the first, will survey the current state of the field, almost a quarter of a century after Chase did so in 1995 and more than a decade since Coles offered her downbeat assessment. My analysis is more optimistic than those put forward by either Coles or Chase: I will identify a number of signs of strength and diversity in adult education history, reflecting other developments in the historiography of education with which the history of adult education has engaged. Part II will look mainly to the future, offering suggestions for new directions, and arguing that adult education history is particularly well placed to build links with other areas of historical inquiry.[5] My focus, in both Parts I and II, is on British adult education history, but some of the points made may apply elsewhere.

The history of adult education: then and now

My starting-point is the article, published in the journal *Studies in the Education of Adults* in 1995, in which Malcolm Chase set out what he saw as the main features and flaws of the historiography of adult education in Britain. For Chase, the historiography of adult education in Britain was 'starkly empirical'; it was inward-looking – 'overwhelmingly the work of adult education practitioners' themselves – and therefore often self-justifying or even celebratory; it focused largely on formal educational institutions; it was reluctant to deal with more recent developments in the 'immediate past'; and it was excessively, and defensively, concerned with the 'Great Tradition' of liberal adult education.[6] Most historians of adult education themselves came from within this tradition, which was carried mainly by the universities and the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), and had the three-year tutorial class at its apex. The 'Great Tradition' dominated the historiography of adult education to the extent that key institutions and 'movements' of the nineteenth century were represented somewhat whiggishly as its precursors, and the second half of the twentieth century, where it was critically examined at all, was seen mainly in terms of its decline. The latter, in particular, remains a prominent theme in the literature on adult education.[7] Chase argued that this 'version of history' had 'shaped self-perception in adult education'[8] – not least due to the prominence of historians in leadership positions with university extra-mural departments – and that it had skewed the historiography. In particular, he pointed to a relative dearth of studies of vocational education and training.[9] Similar points were made more recently by Tom Woodin, who in 2007 briefly reviewed the landmark histories of adult education, showing how the accounts of A. E. Dodds in 1919, Robert Peers in 1958 and Thomas Kelly in 1962 all described a process whereby the 'Great Tradition' emerged from the less institutionalised milieu of the nineteenth century, embodying the triumph of 'liberal

[4] Malcolm Chase, '"Mythmaking and Mortmain"': The Uses of Adult Education History?', *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 27 (1995), 53
[5] REFERENCE TO PART II.
[6] Ibid., quoted at 53, 55, 60.
[7] See for example Chris Duke, 'Trapped in a Local History: Why Did Extramural Fail to Engage in the Era of Engagement?', *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education*, 14 (2008), 213-32.
[8] Chase, '"Mythmaking and Mortmain"', 57.
[9] Ibid., 54.

education'; however, as Peers and Kelly both showed, this triumph resulted in 'institutional marginality' in relation both to the universities in particular and the wider education system in general.[10] For both Woodin and Chase, this cast a long shadow over the historiography of adult education.

Since Chase wrote in 1995, historical research has lost status within adult education, and indeed across educational studies more widely.[11] There has certainly been a decline, though not a complete disappearance, of historical articles in the leading UK-based adult education journals; Coles remarked on this in 2006 and there has been little change since then.[12] Even within the history of education, adult education has sometimes appeared to be a marginal area of interest. In 2012, a whole issue of the journal *History of Education* was given over to a series of reflections on the work that had been published in the journal during the previous forty years. Some prominent historians of education considered the evolution of historical writing on various educational topics, and the emergence and demise of particular approaches to the subject. Alongside Gary McCulloch's important book, *The Struggle for the History of Education*, published in 2011,[13] these articles effectively summarise the current state of scholarship in the field – most range beyond *History of Education* and consider research published elsewhere – and make some suggestions for the future. It is notable, however, that the list of specialist topics covered in the special issue – primary, secondary and higher education, teacher education, and the thematic areas of gender, biography and religions – did not include adult education, an area that (along with higher education) was also given very limited treatment in McCulloch's survey.

It would be wrong, however, to suggest that the history of adult education has disappeared; indeed, since Coles's gloomy prognosis there has been something of a revival of research in this area. Considering only one journal – *History of Education* – and only British topics, between 2008 and 2014 there were articles on soldier education in the British Army by Jim Beach; citizenship education among women in interwar Scotland by Valerie Wright; the Selborne Lecture Bureau by Richard Clarke; the clergy and adult education from 1750 to 1960 by Sarah Speight; 'public education' for civil defence by John Preston; and Victorian and Edwardian debates about the purpose and content of 'liberal education' in the Working Men's College by Marcella Pellegrino Sutcliffe. There have also been two articles by Neil Kevin Hargraves on Newbattle Abbey, an adult residential college; my own work on adult schools and educational settlements; and, to show that the 'Great Tradition' remains of interest, Robert Turner's article on WEA tutorial classes in interwar Scotland.[14] Much,

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[10] Tom Woodin, 'Working-Class Education and Social Change in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Britain', *History of Education*, 36 (2007), 483-96; A. E. Dodds, *Education and Social Movements 1700-1850* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1919; Robert Peers, *Adult Education: A Comparative Study* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958); Thomas Kelly, *A History of Adult Education in Great Britain* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1970 [1st ed. 1962]).

[11] Gary McCulloch, *The Struggle for the History of Education* (London: Routledge, 2011), 98-101.

[12] There were no primarily historical articles in either the *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education* or *Studies in the Education of Adults* in 2014, 2015 or 2017. The latter published one in 2016, and the former one in 2018.

[13] McCulloch, *Struggle for the History of Education*.

[14] Jim Beach 'Soldier Education in the British Army 1920-2007', *History of Education*, 37 (2008), 679-99; Valerie Wright, 'Education for Active Citizenship: Women's Organisations in Interwar Scotland', *History of Education*, 38 (2009), 419-36; Richard Clarke, 'Adult

though by no means all, of this work is 'practitioner research', and this remains a feature of adult education historiography. An example is the centenary history of the WEA published in 2003, which featured 14 contributors, at least 10 of whom either were or had been directly involved in the organisation.[15] Nevertheless, there are clear signs that the shackles of the 'Great Tradition' have been thrown off – if indeed they were ever quite as cumbersome as has been suggested. Even in 1996, in a response to Chase, Roger Fieldhouse pointed to work by Konrad Elsdon and others on adult learning in voluntary organisations, a growing body of scholarship on the history of vocational education (some of which Chase also noted), and his own *History of Modern British Adult Education*, published in the same year.[16] This book ranged from universities to adult basic education and 'community education', and was written with a number of 'associates', many of whom were also adult education practitioners; this was reflected in its twentieth-century focus (there was only one chapter on the nineteenth century) and a tendency to present the history of adult education from a policy perspective. In retrospect, Fieldhouse's book seems to have heralded the emergence of an increasingly eclectic historiography, which embraced many aspects of adult learning: articles on women and the science curriculum at Regent Street Polytechnic, interwar Ministry of Labour training schemes for young women, and the education and training of young adults at Boots Pure Drug Company were published in *History of Education* during the late 1990s and early 2000s.[17] Moreover, historians have considered the educational impact of museums and

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Education between the Wars: The Curious Case of the Selborne Lecture Bureau', *History of Education*, 39 (2000), 613-29; Sarah Speight, 'A Gentlemanly Pastime: Antiquarianism, Adult Education and the Clergy in England 1750-1960', *History of Education*, 40 (2011), 143-55; Mark Freeman, 'The Decline of the Adult School Movement between the Wars', *History of Education*, 39 (2010), 481-506; Mark Freeman, '"An advanced type of democracy": Governance and Politics in Adult Education c.1918-1930', *History of Education*, 42 (2013), 45-69; John Preston, 'The Strange Death of UK Civil Defence Education in the 1980s', *History of Education*, 44 (2015), 225-42; Marcella Pellegrino Sutcliffe, 'The Origins of the "Two Cultures" Debate in the Adult Education Movement: The Case of the Working Men's College (c.1854-1914)', *History of Education*, 43 (2014), 141-59; Neil Kevin Hargraves, 'An "experiment in the wilderness": Newbattle Abbey College and the Idea of Residential Adult Education in Scotland 1931-1955', *History of Education*, 39 (2010), 95-114; Neil Kevin Hargraves, 'Residential Adult Education and the "problem of uniqueness": Newbattle Abbey College 1960-1989', *History of Education*, 40 (2011), 59-82; Robert Turner, 'Workers' Educational Association Tutorial Classes and Citizenship in Scotland 1907-1939', *History of Education*, 38 (2009), 367-81. There has been something of a fall-off in articles on British adult education in *History of Education*, though not necessarily in other journals, in more recent years.

[15] Stephen K. Roberts (ed.), *A Ministry of Enthusiasm: Centenary Essays on the Workers' Educational Association* (London: Pluto Press, 2003), list of contributors, 312-13.

[16] Roger Fieldhouse, '"Mythmaking and Mortmain": A Response', *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 28 (1996), 117-20; Roger Fieldhouse and associates, *A History of Modern British Adult Education* (Leicester: NIACE, 1996).

[17] Julie Stevenson, '"Among the qualifications of a good wife, a knowledge of cookery is not the least desirable" (Quintin Hogg): Women and the Curriculum at the Polytechnic at Regent Street 1888-1913', *History of Education*, 26 (1997), 267-86; Pamela Horn, 'Ministry of Labour Female Training Programmes between the Wars: 1919-39', *History of Education*, 31 (2002), 71-82; Simon Phillips, '"Character, Grit and Personality": Continued Education,

galleries, libraries and poetry, as well as, in Jean Barr's work, the 'idea of an educated public'.[18] Above all, as some of these examples show, historians have followed Chase's injunction to pay more attention to issues of gender within adult education – but more needs to be done in this respect.[19]

Although more diverse than ever before, it remains true that writing the history of British adult education has been mainly an empirical enterprise, and this is true of the history of education as a whole. Indeed, it is true of most history written in Britain, with the exception of the rich Marxist tradition, in which Brian Simon, still probably the best known historian of British education, participated – although, as McCulloch has pointed out, Simon has often failed to get the attention he deserves within the Marxist historiographical canon.[20] Some overseas scholars, such as Marc Depaepe, have commented on the reluctance of British educational historians to engage with, or even to deploy, social theory in their work; for Simon, as Depaepe emphasises, 'historical narrative ... clearly took precedence over the theory and with it, too, uncertainty about the applicability of the Marxist model'.[21] Chase pointed out that even Marxist histories of adult education were 'largely descriptive' and perhaps surprisingly unsubtle in their 'articulation of power relations within adult education'.[22] More recently and more generally, John Howlett and Paul John McDonald have criticised 'mainstream British historians' failure to engage with any historical methodologies other than their own straightforward empiricism'.[23] In adult education history there have been some productive attempts to deploy theoretical insights to historical narratives, although not usually in a sustained way. One example is Stuart Marriott's study of *Extramural Empires*, written in the 1980s, which drew on Burton Clark's theory of marginality to help to explain how and why adult education 'managers' behaved as they did, although this was not a sufficient explanation, in Marriott's view.[24]

The emergence of gender studies in history has offered further opportunities to pursue new theoretical approaches. Nevertheless, even the important work of writing girls and women into the history of education has often been concerned with the 'rescue' of individuals and groups who have been 'hidden from history', and much of this has been, perhaps necessarily, empirical and descriptive. Today it almost goes without saying that paying closer attention to ethnicity and sexuality as markers of identity in educational contexts can yield important insights; this can certainly no longer be dismissed as 'political correctness on race and sexual orientation', as Fieldhouse put it in 1996.[25] It is also important to note issues of

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Recreation and Training at Boots Pure Drug Company 1918-45', *History of Education*, 32 (2003), 627-43.

[18] Jean Barr, *The Stranger Within: On the Idea of an Educated Public* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2008).

[19] Chase, '"Mythmaking and Mortmain"', 61.

[20] McCulloch, *Struggle*, 53.

[21] Marc Depaepe, 'It's a Long Way to ... an International Social History of Education: In Search of Brian Simon's Legacy in Today's Educational History', *History of Education*, 33 (2004), 536.

[22] Chase, '"Mythmaking and Mortmain"', 55.

[23] John Howlett and Paul John McDonald, 'Quentin Skinner, Intentionality and the History of Education', *Paedagogica Historica*, 47 (2011), 416.

[24] Stuart Marriott, *Extramural Empires: Service and Self-Interest in English University Adult Education 1873-1983* (Nottingham: University of Nottingham Department of Adult Education, 1984).

[25] Fieldhouse, '"Mythmaking and Mortmain"', 119.

gender in the production of adult education history. At least until the mid-1990s, when Chase and Fieldhouse published their work, the historiography of adult education was dominated by male authors, a dominance that has – though only up to a point – been challenged in the twenty-first century.[26]

Finally, the enthusiastic adoption of global and transnational approaches by historians of education has presented opportunities to deploy theoretical insights, notably from network theory, in historical research. Adult education history took the transnational turn early, with various important publications, some arising from the European research network on 'Cross-Cultural Influences in the Historical Development of Popular Adult Education in Europe', in the 1990s.[27] Arguably, this early momentum has not been sustained; however, it is certainly an area in which further development can be expected.

Distinctions, dichotomies and debates: themes in the historiography of British adult education

It is clear, then, that the history of adult education has, in a modest way, been enhanced by the application of theoretical insights from other areas of historical and sociological scholarship. However, the field remains excessively concerned with three key distinctions that have been made within the historiography, which reflect the contours of adult education policies and movements during the twentieth century. The first and most important of these is the ubiquitous but not especially helpful distinction between vocational and non-vocational education, which was a central concern of the landmark Ministry of Reconstruction Adult Education Committee report of 1919 – often seen as a key moment in the history of adult education – and which underpinned idea of the 'Great Tradition'. Vocational education has always been the larger in terms of student numbers, political priorities and streams of funding, and has sometimes featured prominently in historiographical debates, notably of course in the longstanding controversy on the issue of technical education and British economic decline.[28] However, it has usually been considered separately from non-vocational or 'liberal' adult education; and as Chase pointed out, 'the almost habitual exclusion of vocational education and training from the definition of adult education has inevitably reinforced the exclusivity of the historiography'.[29] By the time Chase was writing, there was, in fact, a body of work on the history of vocational education and training, and some of this, such as W. A. Devereux's study *Adult Education in Inner London 1870-1980*, published in

[26] In Part I of this article, for example, around 70% of the works cited are by male authors, whereas in Part II, which deals with more current material, the proportion is around 55%. It is not clear how representative these proportions may be of the field as a whole; however, a search for the category 'Adult and workers' education' on the UK History of Education Society 'Exe Libris' bibliographical database throws up a large preponderance of male-authored articles, even in more recent years. See http://projects.exeter.ac.uk/hoebibliography/index.php (accessed 20 January 2019).

[27] See for example Stuart Marriott and Barry J. Hake (eds), *Cultural and Intercultural Experiences in European Adult Education: Essays on Popular and Higher Education since 1890* (Leeds: University of Leeds, 1994); Anthony Cooke and Ann MacSween (eds), *The Rise and Fall of Adult Education Institutions and Social Movements* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2000).

[28] For a summary, see Michael Sanderson, 'Educational and Economic History: The Good Neighbours', *History of Education*, 36 (2007), 434-5.

[29] Chase, '"Mythmaking and Mortmain"', 54.

1982, was 'practitioner research' of high quality, based on primary sources and effectively outlining the contours of policy and practice in relation to both vocational and non-vocational education. Other studies provided detailed accounts of vocational training in the context of employment policy in the second half of the twentieth century; a good example is Brendan Evans's history of the Manpower Services Commission and its predecessors and successors, though this was not well integrated with other histories of education.[30] There has also been a longer tradition of writing the history of military education, and Beach's work continues this vein of scholarship.[31] Moreover, there was a useful historical account of trade union education in John Holford's book *Union Education in Britain*, although again this did not draw many links with wider historiography except for labour history and the history of independent working-class education.[32] All this research was in the British empirical tradition, but it usefully illustrated the range of instititional provision that existed, not only in LEA institutions, polytechnics and specialist colleges, but also in workplaces and industries, the armed services and elsewhere. As noted above, the history of adult education in Britain published by Fieldhouse and others in 1996 gave more weight to vocational provision and to such previously neglected areas such as adult basic education.[33] However, in this book an implicit hierarchy can still be discerned: both workplace learning and a number of 'auxiliaries' – including community organisations, women's groups and prison education – were covered in separate chapters towards the end of the book, not fully integrated into the mainstream story of adult education. Some of these 'auxiliaries' may have had a wider reach than the WEA or the universities. Most could be seen as 'auxiliaries' in the sense that they were not primarily, and certainly not solely, educational organisations, but the size and scale of their educational activities merits a fuller consideration in the historiography of adult education.

Despite the range of existing work, Chase's call for more studies of vocational education remains valid more than twenty years later. This need is particularly apparent in the context of the marginalisation of adult education history within wider disciplinary currents: examining the history of vocational education and training provides opportunities for historians of education to establish closer links with other areas of historical study, examples being medical history, rural history and, perhaps most importantly, business and economic history. This last opportunity was recognised in 2007 by Michael Sanderson, who, in considering the history of education and economic history as 'good neighbours', called for more studies of 'the difficult area of the juncture between education and employment'.[34] Many opportunities exist to consider commercial and industrial education, as well as agricultural training and rural education, cookery schools, and so on. Recent work has addressed some of these issues, often imaginatively and effectively. Alice Kirke's doctoral

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[30] Brendan Evans, *The Politics of the Training Market: From Manpower Services Commission to Training and Enterprise Councils* (London: Routledge, 1992).

[31] Beach, 'Soldier Education'; Jim Beach, 'Bolshevising the Army? Lord Gorell and Army Education 1918-1920', *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, 88 (2010), 170-98. See also H. W. Dickinson, *Educating the Royal Navy: Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Education for Officers* (London: Routledge, 2007). See also S. P. Mackenzie, *Politics and Military Morale: Current-Affairs Education in the British Army 1914-1950* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

[32] John Holford, *Union Education in Britain: A TUC Activity* (Nottingham: University of Nottingham Department of Adult Education, 1993).

[33] Fieldhouse and associates, *History of Modern British Adult Education*.

[34] Sanderson, 'Educational and Economic History'.

research on rural and agricultural education includes an important contribution to scholarship on educational, rural and gender history, and John Field's book on British work camps shows how these 'socio-pedagogical' institutions provided both informal education and labour force training, as well as playing a role in social movements of various kinds.[35] Moreover, there are some good recent institutional histories which address technical and vocational education, sometimes emphasising the limitations of the vocational/non-vocational distinction: an example is the history of the Royal Polytechnic Institution, published in 2013.[36] A distinction that seems important from a policy-making point of view might be insignificant from learners' own perspectives: Linda Merricks has argued that vocational education could affect students in the same way as WEA classes, for example by providing learners with contextual knowledge and by fostering self-confidence.[37] The distinction has an unavoidable importance in the history of adult education, but this results from its centrality to much nineteenth- and twentieth-century policy-making, rather than from any intrinsic value that it might possess.

The second, and related, distinction that is often drawn is between different motivations for participation in adult education. This can be seen in social and individual terms, and is frequently expressed in terms of a distinction between education for social advance and education for individual improvement. There has been much criticism of apparently growing official tendencies to consider adult education in utilitarian and individualistic terms – of what Anthony Cooke calls a shift from 'popular enlightenment' to 'lifelong learning'.[38] 'Lifelong learning' (or 'lifelong education') has moved well away from the meanings it had when the term was originally used,[39] and the 'dominant paradigm' is now 'individualistic', focused on the acquisition of skills in direct relation to individuals' participation in the labour market. Chris Duke sees the rise of this paradigm as a factor, though not the only one, in the slow death of the 'Great Tradition'.[40] In contrast to the recent ubiquity of 'lifelong learning', it has often been argued that personal advancement was *not* the goal of most working-class autodidacts or of those who took part in university extension, WEA and tutorial classes.[41] For some nineteenth-century institutions, however, the evidence is more mixed. It seems likely that different individuals and groups participated in educational activities for a range of reasons, and that these might include the opportunity to

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[35] Alice Kirke, 'Education in Interwar Rural England: Community, Schooling and Voluntarism' (unpublished PhD thesis, University College London, 2017); John Field, *Working Men's Bodies: Work Camps in Britain 1880-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 248.

[36] Helen Glew, Anthony Gorst, Michael Heller and Neil Matthews, *Educating Mind, Body and Spirit: The Legacy of Quintin Hogg and the Polytechnic 1864-1992* (Cambridge: Granta Editions, 2013).

[37] Linda Merricks, 'Technical and Vocational – A Challenge to the Hegemony of Adult Liberal Education?', in Cooke and MacSween, *Rise and Fall*, 279-90.

[38] Anthony Cooke, *From Popular Enlightenment to Lifelong Learning: A History of Adult Education in Scotland 1707-2005* (Leicester: NIACE, 2006).

[39] Basil A. Yeaxlee, *Lifelong Education: A Sketch of the Range and Significance of the Adult Education Movement* (London: Cassell, 1929).

[40] Duke, 'Trapped in a Local History', 223.

[41] Philip Gardner, 'The "life-long draught": From Learning to Teaching and Back', *History of Education*, 36 (2007), 467; Lawrence Goldman, 'Intellectuals and the English Working Class 1870-1945: The Case of Adult Education', *History of Education*, 29 (2000), 296-8; Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), 282-92.

improve their social or occupational opportunities. In 1961, for example, J. F. C. Harrison suggested that workers sought social advance through their involvement in mechanics' institutes.[42] And, of course, even if they did not *seek* it, they might have obtained it. Both social and individual motivations could operate simultaneously. The picture is more complicated in contemporary adult education, in which many initiatives now focus specifically on older and retired people, notably the University of the Third Age (U3A) – included as one of Fieldhouse's 'auxiliaries' in 1996 – which recently claimed more than a thousand groups and over 424,000 members.[43] The U3A does not aim at preparing participants for the labour market, or for enhancing their 'human capital', but in the context of an ageing population it plays an important educational role: as has been frequently noted, participation in education among older age groups has individual health benefits, supports continued workplace activity, and contributes to wider 'community well-being'.[44]

A third important distinction made across much of the literature on the history of British adult education is between 'sponsored' and 'independent' working-class education, mainly in relation to twentieth-century workers' education, the story of which is often told in terms of the competing claims of two groups of providers: the WEA and university tutorial classes on the one hand, and the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC) and Central Labour College (CLC) on the other. The students' strike at Ruskin College in 1909, led by the Plebs League and resulting in a breakaway to form the CLC, initiated a period of principled separation between these two wings of workers' education. After 1924, when the WEA and universities received financial support from the state under the new Adult Education Regulations, this separation was given force by the distancing of independent working-class education from the new stream of statutory funding.[45] Until the absorption of the NCLC by the Trades Union Congress in 1964, the division within workers' education was a significant feature of the adult education landscape, and the 'often sterile polemic', as John McIlroy has called it, between the WEA and NCLC became a key element in the historiography of adult education.[46] Reflecting the nature of the conflict itself, the historiography has been notable for its partisanship: there were still some echoes of this in the WEA centenary volume, *A Ministry of Enthusiasm*, edited by Stephen Roberts and published

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[42] J. F. C. Harrison, *Learning and Living 1790-1960: A Study in the History of the English Adult Education Movement* (London: Routledge, 1961), 211; see J. P. Hemming, 'The Mechanics' Institutes in the Lancashire and Yorkshire Textile Districts from 1850', *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 9 (1977), 18-31.

[43] https://www.u3a.org.uk/ (accessed 20 January 2019). Nevertheless, participation rates among older people are much lower than those at other stages of the life course, and this has recently been highlighted by Age Concern and the Equality & Human Rights Commission: Peter Jones, *Equality and Human Rights Commission, Triennial Review: Education (Lifelong Learning), Participation in Adult Learning* (2010), 13, 28-9. See Fieldhouse and associates, *History of Modern British Adult Education*, 322-4.

[44] See Martin Hyde and Chris Phillipson, *How Can Lifelong Learning, Including Continuous Training within the Labour Market, Be Enabled, and Who Will Pay for This? Looking Forward to 2025 and 2040 How Might This Evolve?* (London: Government Office for Science, 2014), 7.

[45] J. P. M. Millar, *The Labour College Movement* (London: NCLC Publishing Society, 1979), 69-70; Kelly, *History of Adult Education*, 258, 268; Fieldhouse and associates, *History of Modern British Adult Education*, 171-2, 269-72.

[46] John McIlroy, 'J. P. M. Millar: An Appreciation', *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 22 (1990), 113.

in 2003.[47] As Stuart Marriott has commented, 'partisanship is an enduring quality of writing about adult education', and nowhere is this more true than in the 'struggle for hegemony' between the WEA and NCLC.[48] This struggle between the liberal education of the WEA and universities on the one side and the independent class-based approach on the other reflected, as both Woodin and Lawrence Goldman have pointed out, the parallel political contest between social democracy and socialism in the British labour movement.[49] (I have argued elsewhere that the focus on this contest has obscured other political dimensions of adult education in the first half of the twentieth century, not least the eclipse of Liberalism in the interwar period; however, the historiography remains focused on workers' education with a Labour or socialist political emphasis.)[50] Yet, as Woodin has emphasised, the close study of particular working-class educational movements often results in the breaking down of 'familiar dichotomies', while some studies have noted that the distinction between 'sponsored' and 'independent' working-class education mattered rather more to the movements' leaders than to those who actually attended the classes. Even many of the leaders themselves – though not all of them – maintained cordial personal relations, and it was not unknown for tutors to teach both WEA and NCLC classes.[51]

The dichotomies break down further when historians make the shift that Chase called for in 1995, 'from the history of adult education to histories of adults learning'; indeed, since Chase wrote this, others have also made similar calls addressing the whole field of the history of education.[52] To this end, probably the most significant development of the past twenty years has been the growth of studies of reading practices in the past. Chase noted that studies of literacy had 'largely passed historians of adult education by', but this is certainly not the case two-and-a-half decades later.[53] Most notably, in 2001 Jonathan Rose published *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, a survey of working-class autobiographies that challenged some of the central assumptions, preoccupations and conclusions of histories of adult education and working-class life and culture. The study of reading has certainly helped to move the focus of scholarship away from formal institutions, although Rose also throws considerable light on some institutional aspects of adult education history, notably the impact of the WEA on working-class political consciousness and its relationship 'on the ground' with the labour colleges.[54] By presenting adult education classes as one of the many 'texts' that were 'read' by working-class audiences, Rose and other scholars have brought new perspectives to bear on adult education. Interesting and sometimes unpredictable insights into cultural history can be obtained from a study of reading and how it affected people's

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[47] See for example Bernard Jennings, 'The Friends and Enemies of the WEA', in Roberts, *Ministry of Enthusiasm*, 105-7.

[48] Marriott, *Extramural Empires*, 8; Brian Simon, 'The Struggle for Hegemony 1920-1926', in Brian Simon (ed.), *The Search for Enlightenment: The Working Class and Adult Education in the Twentieth Century* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 15-70.

[49] Goldman, 'Intellectuals', 281-2; Woodin, 'Working-Class Education', 487-9.

[50] Freeman, '"An advanced type of democracy"'.

[51] Woodin, 'Working-Class Education', 488-9; Fieldhouse and associates, *History of Modern British Adult Education*, 399; Millar, *Labour College Movement*, 78-80; Rose, *Intellectual Life*, 279-80.

[52] Chase, '"Mythmaking and Mortmain"', 60; Gary McCulloch and Tom Woodin, 'Towards a Social History of Learners and Learning', *Oxford Review of Education*, 36 (2010), 133-40.

[53] Chase, '"Mythmaking and Mortmain"', 61.

[54] Rose, *Intellectual Life*, 256-97. For a more recent contribution, see Jonathan Rose, *Readers' Liberation: The Literary Agenda* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

lives and behaviour, consciousness and experience. One example is Catherine Feely's study of the Chester builder's labourer Frank Forster, who wrote a diary of his life and reading in the 1930s. Feely shows how Forster's close reading of a number of texts, notably Joseph Dietzgen's *Positive Outcome of Philosophy*, helped him both to interpret and to shape his own personal experiences, giving him opportunities for 'ordered self-reflection'. Intriguingly, the young single Forster was indirectly inspired by his reading of Dietzgen to take up dancing in order to improve his chances with the opposite sex; this was the result of his application of Dietzgen's ideas about the relationship between thought and action to his own personal situation.[55] As well as a reader, of course, Forster was also a diarist, and it should be noted that, although the historical study of working-class writing has not yet caught up with the volume of work on reading, there have been some important recent contributions in the area from historians such as Ursula Howard (on the nineteenth century) and Tom Woodin (on the late twentieth).[56] It has, of course, been pointed out that autobiographers and diarists might not be typical of the population as a whole,[57] but the insights available from them are significant given the nature of the archival record of adult education. As Goldman has pointed out, it has become a 'truism of educational history that we always learn more about teachers and ... administrators than about students';[58] as in so many other areas of history, this is largely a function of the nature of the written archival record, but it is being productively challenged in current historiography.

The study of past literacies is just one example of a development in which the history of adult education clearly overlaps with, and contributes to, other areas of historical scholarship. Recently, for example, there has been a revitalising of longstanding links with intellectual history, often through work on prominent 'public intellectuals'.[59] In this context, the 'Great Tradition' is still significant, particularly given the intellectual influence of some of its leading participants. For example, Alexander Hutton has shown that adult education was an integral part of the milieu in which the 'new left' defined itself through literary and cultural scholarship; and Hutton's doctoral thesis places adult education at the centre of evolving historiographical approaches to the industrial revolution during the mid-twentieth century.[60] Yet these intellectual developments did not just take place in universities and the WEA: public intellectuals were also prominent in political organisations, broadcasting and the heritage sector. Laura Carter, for example, has shown how the social history of 'everyday life' was pioneered by the historians Marjorie and Charles Quennell, whose work in museums, on the radio and in publishing was an important avenue of informal education

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[55] Catherine Feely, 'From Dialectics to Dancing: Reading, Writing and the Experience of Everyday Life in the Diaries of Frank P. Forster', *History Workshop Journal*, 69 (2010), 98-100.

[56] Ursula Howard, *Literacy and the Practice of Writing in the 19th Century: A Strange Blossoming of Spirit* (Leicester: NIACE, 2012); Tom Woodin, *Working-Class Writing and Publishing in the Late-Twentieth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018).

[57] Rose, *Intellectual Life*, 2.

[58] Lawrence Goldman, 'The First Students in the Workers' Educational Association: Individual Enlightenment and Collective Advance', in Roberts, *Ministry of Enthusiasm*, 41.

[59] See for example Sophie Scott-Brown, 'The Art of the Organiser: Raphael Samuel and the Origins of the History Workshop', *History of Education*, 45 (2016), 372-90.

[60] Alexander Hutton, 'Literature, Criticism and Politics in the Early New Left 1956-62', *Twentieth Century British History*, 27 (2016), 51-75; Alexander Hutton, '"Culture and Society" in Conceptions of the Industrial Revolution in Britain 1930-1965' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2014).

during the interwar period.[61] It is through work such as this that the history of education seems to be returning to history journals, with a number of key recent contributions, for example, in *Cultural and Social History*, the *English Historical Review* and *Past and Present*.[62] Adult education is playing a part in this development, notably in urban history, where 'civics' have featured in work by by Tom Hulme and others, and also rural history, where Kirke's doctoral thesis and a book by Sian Edwards have reminded us of the important role played by voluntary organisations in the informal educational landscape of the British countryside.[63] The history of educational broadcasting is also a potentially rich field of study: from adult literacy programmes to the on-screen portrayal of public intellectuals to the growing body of work on representations of history through the informal educational channels of the media.[64] Adult education history is finding more 'good neighbours', and it is to be hoped that this will continue into the future. Yet there also remains much scope for further research on adult education itself, and Part II of this article identifies some areas that would benefit from further exploration.

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[61] Laura Carter, 'The Quennells and the "History of Everyday Life" in England, c.1918-69', *History Workshop Journal*, 81 (2016), 106-34.
[62] On these developments see Mark Freeman and Alice Kirke, 'Review of Periodical Literature on the History of Education Published in 2016', *History of Education*, 46 (2017), esp. 838-9, 852-3.
[63] Tom Hulme, 'Putting the City Back into Citizenship: Civics Education and Local Government in Britain 1918-45', *Twentieth Century British History*, 26 (2015), 26-51; Kirke, 'Education in Interwar Rural England'; Sian Edwards, *Youth Movements, Citizenship and the English Countryside: Creating Good Citizens 1930-1960* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).
[64] Helen M. F. Jones and Stuart Marriott, 'Adult Literacy in England: Why Did It Take So Long to Get *On the Move*?', *History of Education*, 24 (1995), 337-52; Lottie Hoare, 'Dons not Clowns: Isaiah Berlin Challenges Richard Cawston's Edit of the Educator', *History of Education*, 46 (2017), 76-93. There is a useful survey of broadcasting in relation to adult education by Brian Groombridge in Fieldhouse and associates, *History of Modern British Adult Education*, 354-75.