Book Reviews

Michael Van Cleave Alexander.
THE GROWTH OF ENGLISH EDUCATION 1348-1648:
A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL HISTORY.
University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990.
xiii & 286 pp.

The subtitle of this book, *A Social and Cultural History*, is perhaps a more accurate description of it than its primary title of *The Growth of English Education 1348-1648*. It is indeed a survey of the history of education in England during this period, inevitably, given the three-century span it encompasses, based primarily on secondary sources, but its frequent digressions from strictly educational history give it its cultural dimension. Thus we are told at great length about the difficulties the English religious reformer, William Tyndale, had with the authorities although this seems to have little bearing on the development of education. Moreover, much detail is supplied which distracts the reader. Our knowledge of educational history, for instance, is hardly advanced very far by the information that the diocese of Winchester during the fifteenth century was rated for tax purposes at £2,977. The book could have been improved by the excision of such unnecessary detail.

This is not to say that the work lacks a serious thesis. Its "fundamental premise" is that "as educational institutions grew in number and educational opportunity widened, a steady growth of literacy occurred." In view of this position, Alexander is "perplexed" by the findings of David Cressy as stated in *Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England* (1980). Cressy studied surviving wills and by noting how many were signed and how many were not concluded that a very high proportion of the English people could neither read nor write during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Alexander rightly points to the deficiencies of this type of

technique. Wills tended to be written late in life, and thus some of those deemed to be illiterate because they signed with a mark may have been able to write earlier in their lives, but had become too infirm to write their names as their wills were drawn up. More questionable still is the assumption that those who signed wills with a mark were unable to read. As Alexander points out, many men and women in Early Modern England who could not write were able to read. Moreover, we cannot be sure how many there were who could read but left no will.

The difficulty is that while the use of wills in this manner may lead to an underestimation of the literacy of the English during this period, as Alexander admits, those who eschew such statistical methods and disagree with their conclusions have little to put in their place because "it is far easier to suggest an advancing literary rate than it is to prove such a phenomenon conclusively." Yet, at the same time he asserts that the literary evidence confirming a rise in literacy is of a "compelling nature." In fact he and Cressy are not as far apart as he implies because Cressy's graph on **illiteracy** in the population from 1500 to 1900 (p. 177) does indicate a twenty percent decline for males in the period 1500 to 1650 and a smaller, but nonetheless significant, decline in illiteracy for females. This decline in illiteracy must, therefore, have been the consequence of the improvement of education which Alexander maintains was taking place. Where the difference between Alexander and Cressy lies is in the assessment of the size of the illiterate base of society. Alexander estimates a literacy rate among adults in England on the eve of the Reformation of twenty to thirty percent, as opposed to Cressy's figure of ten to fifteen percent for males. By the end of the period (1648), Alexander gives a literacy rate for poor females (the most disadvantaged group) of twenty to thirty percent, whereas Cressy only detects ten to fifteen percent literacy among all females at the mid-century mark. Alexander may be correct, but the truth is that we do not know how many people could read, and his conclusions based on speculation about how those who went to school taught those who did not do not inspire confidence. Cressy's figures at least provide us with minima below which we can be sure illiteracy did not go.

Not all the evidence that Alexander presents reinforces the argument he advances. For instance, he describes the dissolution of the monasteries at the time of the Reformation as a "staggering blow to education" and a "devastating blow" to the education of women "from which it took generations to recover." This perception of events in the middle of the sixteenth century is hard to reconcile with the picture of substantial improvement of education for both men and women during the period. Indeed, in order to explain this apparent contradiction, Alexander has to modify his first assessment of the effects of the Reformation and we are told that the dissolution "was not a complete disaster for education." The problem here seems to be that what was happening to education has to be interpreted by what was

happening to educational institutions because we simply do not know who was learning to read and who was not, and the short-term fate of these institutions may not always be a good guide to an understanding of the distribution of primary education to the population as a whole. Many monastic schools were closed at the time of the dissolution, but both the evidence derived from wills and the literary sources indicate these closures did not have a lasting effect on the level of literacy, in part, of course, because new schools were endowed.

These criticisms aside, my expectation is that this book will be used by many in the future to obtain information. It brings together a vast array of secondary material, and if some of this is imperfectly digested, the service in bringing it together is nonetheless considerable. Of particular value are the two sections on the education of women and the description of the foundation of schools specifically designed to meet the needs of women in the early seventeenth century. Alexander argues that the education of women was improving and becoming more widespread despite the disparaging remarks being made about them by James I and others. Indeed, the conclusion is that by the eve of the civil war, "literacy and education were more widespread in England than in any other major European country." Moreover, by examining a long period, which is not bound by dynastic periodization, Alexander shows the continuity in attitude of the ruling element towards education from the middle of the fourteenth century to the middle of the seventeenth century. Schools and colleges were founded throughout this period, and both men and women devoted much effort and considerable sums of money to the patronage of education both before and after the Reformation. This serves to warn us against making simplistic connections between social attitudes and major political and religious changes. No doubt the Reformation changed the type of education provided, and Alexander provides an interesting section on the teaching of science, but the motivation to help learning existed independently of the movement to separate the English church from Rome. Moreover, it is evident that the value attached to learning was not limited to any one class of people. Only the wealthy could endow schools, but men and women at many levels of society evidently desired to expand their intellectual horizons by learning how to read.

M. Perceval-Maxwell
McGill University