

Resources

***Review of* No small Lives: Handbook of North American Early Women Adult Educators, 1925-1950**

Trenton R. Ferro

Imel, S., & Bersch, G. T. (Eds.). (2015). *No small lives: Handbook of North American early women adult educators, 1925-1950*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing. xvi + 304 pages; \$85.99 (hardcover), \$45.99 (softcover).

This book is a gold mine for all educators of adults who are (or should be) interested in the history of the field. It is a book that introduces us to, and covers, a segment of the field's history that has, unfortunately and inexcusably, been overlooked by many. Further, it is a book chock full of names—names with which we should be familiar but, unfortunately, often have not been.

First are the editors, who are eminently qualified for the present task. For many years Susan Imel directed the ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education at The Ohio State University, for which she wrote many informational publications. She has served since 1996 as editor or coeditor-in-chief of the Jossey-Bass sourcebook series, *New Directions in Adult and Continuing Education*, and contributed to two *Handbooks of Adult and Continuing Education*. Gretchen Bersch spent her entire professional life in Alaska, much of it at the University of Alaska, Anchorage. She has been the consummate professional, establishing programs for adults both within and outside of higher education. She is probably best known for her extensive video series, *Conversations on Adult Learning*, which currently includes 48 in-depth, reflective interviews with renowned leaders, past and present (including Susan Imel!), in the field of adult and continuing education. Both Imel

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and Bersch are inductees into the International Adult and Continuing Education Hall of Fame.

Second, Imel and Bersch have gathered a “who’s who” of women—and one man—to write the brief biographies included in this book. These 30 individuals mirror the adult educators covered in the various chapters: historians, librarians, organization and association leaders, public educators, and university professors, among other professional pursuits and contributions. Further, they reflect the racial diversity represented in the biographies (see more below).

Third, and most importantly, is the remarkable list of 26 women whose contributions have been highlighted in this volume. These women were born in Canada, England, and the United States and come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds: Native American/First Peoples, Hispanic/Latina, Black, and White. Their contributions took place in wide varieties of settings, including community education, leadership in civic (including women’s) organizations, education for democracy, editing and writing for professional journals and publications, extension education, governmental service and policy work, labor organization and worker education, librarianship, museum education, direct involvement and leadership in professional adult education associations, public education, religious education, organizing and operating social service agencies, and teaching and organizing programs at the university level. What is almost as remarkable as their range of involvement is their general obscurity in the literature of the field—no matter how extensive and far-reaching their contributions.

After an introduction that, usually, summarizes the content to follow, each chapter describes the educator’s origins and early life and then moves on to a presentation of her major contributions. The chapter then discusses her impact on the field and outlines major literary contributions (as appropriate to each woman). Each chapter concludes with a reference list, which provides a wealth of material for further reading and research.

Following a forward by Carolyn Clark and a preface by the authors, the first two chapters provide historical background to the volume. Beginning with the premise that “the history of adult education is an understudied area, and the role of women within this history is also understudied,” Amy Rose asserts that “so far there has been little effort made to understand the totality of women’s contributions to the history of professional adult education” (p. 3). She then goes about exploring “the early days of professional adult education . . . through the lens . . .

of the American Association for Adult Education” (p. 4). Then, building on an earlier work (Hugo, 1990) on the issue of gender in adult education history, Jane Hugo revisits her “earlier analysis in light of the intervening years of scholarship” (p. 19). She concludes that “though improved slightly, our mental maps of our field remain incomplete and distorted, due in part to gender-blindness and gender bias and the lack of a critical mass of historical research” (p. 30).

In the concluding chapter Juanita Johnson-Bailey and Elizabeth Tisdell assess women, gender politics, and adult education in the contemporary world by considering the status of gender discussions in 2013 North America (the date of writing for the chapters in the book) and by sharing their own experiences as participants—as students, professors, researchers, and writers—in university-level programs of adult education over the past 20 years. An appendix includes brief biographies of an additional 17 women who made important and meaningful contributions to the field during the 25 years covered by this volume. The addition of an index would add greatly to the value and utility of this volume.

A quick examination of some of the best known histories of adult education confirms that this volume fills an immense lacuna in the field: Knowles (1983) mentions just two of the women discussed in Imel and Bersch (one as a citation; one in a table); Stubblefield and Keane (1994), four (one of them, Hilda Smith, more extensively; two as citations); and Kett (1994), three (repeating Hilda Smith). Consequently, all who have any interest in the history of adult education must include this volume among their resources.

References

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