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Book review. Preskill, S. (2021). *Education in black and white. Myles Horton and the Highlander Center's vision for social justice*. University of California Press.

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> If you ever get to a place where injustice doesn't bother you, you're dead.
>
> (Myles Horton, cited in Kohl & Kohl, 1998, p. x)

Introduction

Stephen Preskill's latest book tells the fascinating history of the Highlander Folk School, which was co-founded by Myles Horton (1905-1990) in 1932. The 'highlander' part of the school's name comes from its location on the edge of the Cumberland Mountains in the U.S., with its inhabitants called 'highlanders', while the words 'folk school' were directly borrowed from the Danish movement that Horton admired. The school (hereafter abbreviated as Highlander) was founded during the depths of the devastating Great Depression that was characterised by hunger, homelessness, and chronic unemployment.

Highlander was to be at the centre of two important social justice movements: the industrial union movement and the struggle for civil rights. It was visited by civil rights icons such as Rosa Parks (who sparked the historic 1955-1956 Montgomery bus boycott) and Dr Martin Luther King, Eleanor Roosevelt (the wife of U.S. president Franklin D. Roosevelt), famous folk musicians such as Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger (Horton, 1998) and revolutionary pedagogues such as Paulo Freire.

Education in black and white's author Stephen Preskill is a renowned expert on American educational history and leadership studies. After a long and distinguished career as a professor, he is currently a writing consultant at Columbia University. I was excited to discover his new book as I have a long-standing fascination with Highlander. I previously read three other books by the author that were co-written with Stephen Brookfield:

- two works about the critically-important method of discussion in adult and higher education (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, 2016) and
- an equally excellent book about *Learning as a way of leading. Lessons from the struggle for social justice* (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009).

Figure 1. Eleanor Roosevelt and Myles Horton in the 1940s. Source: Nashville Public Library, Special Collections.

The latter tome is directly related to the book under review. It contains chapters on what the authors term learning tasks for 'learning leadership'. They relate to Myles Horton himself and other leaders in *Education in black and white* such as Septima Clark, Jane Addams and Ella Baker. Moreover, this review can be seen as a follow-up on interviews with Stephen Brookfield and book reviews of his work in JALT (Brookfield et al., 2019, 2022; Rudolph, 2019, 2020, 2022).

Education in black and white is beautifully written and engages the reader over 15 chapters (and a prologue, introduction, and epilogue) that are largely chronologically organised. The book is a masterclass in historical writing, as its gorgeous prose is paired with endnotes that are very useful for the scholarly-inclined reader. It also includes an extensive bibliography, an index and about a dozen black-and-white illustrations. Refreshingly, Preskill generously acknowledges the previous literature on Highlander and Horton. Rather than providing a chapter-by-chapter summary, I will now focus on five themes that I found particularly fascinating, and that triggered much critical reflection.

The horrors of the Great Depression. Appalachia as a "domestic Third World Country"

The Great Depression was some 90 years ago. Its horrors were fictionalised in novels such as John Steinbeck's classic *The grapes of wrath* (2016) or folk balladeer Woody Guthrie's *House of earth* (2013). Highlander was born in the Appalachian mountains' Grundy County in rural Tennessee during the Great Depression, which hit its inhabitants with particular brutality. Despite all their hard work, most of Grundy County's population lived in huts without electricity or plumbing. Chronic illness and early death were common, and many babies died of starvation. Horton and his colleagues at Highlander set out to do something about the horrors they encountered.

> [He] saw young children with bloated stomachs and oozing sores, adolescents whose growth had been badly stunted, and adults who complained of chronic headaches and persistent fatigue. Having found evidence of debilitating hunger and widespread social despondency everywhere they traveled, the Highlander staff started canned food drives, launched community gardens, organized farm co-ops, and gave away what food they could to stave off the worst and most immediate effects of hunger (p. 69).

Horton (1998, p. 132) has fittingly described Appalachia as a "domestic Third World Country" and Highlander's co-founder Don West called it an "exploited colonial area" whose relationship to "the mother country" was ultimately dehumanising (cited on p. 244). Companies often treated their employees as virtual slaves. To cite a particularly stark example, the owners of Fentress Coal and Coke Company, in response to a strike,

> "retaliated by shutting off the heat in the workers' company-owned hovels and removing their front doors, despite the approach of winter. A few workers were thrown out into the cold. The company store was ordered not to sell food to the starving miners and their families, and most merchants were pressured not to extend the strikers credit" (p. 70).

Horton has described the violence of poverty as something he has been close to all his life. It "destroys families, twists minds, hurts in many ways beyond the pain of hunger" (Horton, 1998, p. 27). In the early days of Highlander, the "staff subsisted almost exclusively on beans and wheat. Wheat sprinkled with a little milk sufficed for breakfast, beans complemented with more beans constituted lunch and dinner" (p. 67). Like many of Grundy County's inhabitants, Highlander's staff was on a starvation diet, and the school's official cash balance was sometimes no more than a handful of dollars.

The radical hillbilly's vision of Highlander

Myles Horton, an educator and activist, has been described as a "radical hillbilly" and "local theologian in his own right" (cited on p. 240). He was born in 1905 in rural Tennessee into deep poverty, about one hundred miles from Memphis. He was a voracious reader who read everything that would fall into his hands, from encyclopedias to pornographic novels. Horton said that as a poor person, he felt angry about being excluded from many things: "I was excluded because I didn't have the clothes… I was excluded because I didn't have money… I've been excluded for a lot of reasons... I don't like to be excluded" (cited on p. 25).

In 1931, Horton envisaged his school with astonishing clarity:

> a school where young men and women can come… and be inspired by personalities expressing themselves through teaching (history, literature), song and music, arts, weaving, etc., and by life lived together. These people should be from the South if possible. Negroes should be among the students. Some students should be from mountain schools, others from factories. Such a school should be a stopping place for travelling liberals and a meeting place for southern radicals (cited on pp. 61-62).

The inclusion of racial desegregation was most unusual in the 1930s when lynching continued in the Jim Crow South. In nearly all-white Grundy County, Jim Crow discrimination fiercely held sway. There was a complete separation of the races: it was illegal to have blacks and whites in the same school, illegal for blacks and whites to eat in the same restaurant, travel together, sleep together, and marry. Those who sought to abolish racial discrimination endangered their lives.

Highlander was one of the places where blacks and whites could meet as equals. Horton was a courageous visionary who regarded racial segregation as the root of all evil. He wrote:

> a school like Highlander, that believed in social equality, would have a monopoly on the business [of racial desegregation]. Whenever blacks and whites and Native Americans and Chicanos and men and women got to Highlander, there would be no segregation because we were too poor to segregate. We only had one bathroom for everybody. We couldn't have discriminated if we'd wanted to, because we couldn't afford it; and although we all believed that any kind of segregation was completely wrong, a lot of things that happened at Highlander happened not because we had some high-and-mighty philosophies and theories but out of necessity" (Horton, 1998, p. 86).

Figure 2. Black and white activists meet at Highlander Folk School. Source: Carey, 2022.

At various times during its history, Highlander was accused of having Communist ties. These rumours and accusations "arose directly from the school's unyielding commitment to racial equality" (p. 117). Rosa Parks, one of the leaders of the civil rights movement, describes her life-changing experience while being a student at Highlander:

> [It] was my very first experience in my entire life, going to a place where there were people, people of another race, and where we all were treated equally, and without any tension or feeling of embarrassment or whatever goes with the artificial boundaries of racial segregation… Myles Horton just washed away and melted a lot of my hostility and prejudice and feeling of bitterness toward white people, because he had such a wonderful sense of humor (cited on p. 159).

Highlander's approach to adult education

Despite the many changes the school underwent, Highlander's central idea was unwaveringly adhered to: "the only answers worth having are the ones that come from the people who are themselves grappling with the challenges of everyday life" (p. 62). Highlander avoided issuing credits, grades, and diplomas and was unhampered by the need to rank, examine or certify. It "worked outside any recognized system of institutionalized education and sought to collaborate with all learners equally" (p. 9).

The circle (where learners were non-hierarchically seated in a ring of rocking chairs) constituted Highlander's central practice and tell-tale symbol. In fact, the main meeting room at Highlander was circular in shape (Horton & Freire, 1990). Horton favoured a problem-based educational approach and "fully believed that every person had 'experiences worth learning from' and that these experiences could productively form the basis for important group reflection and learning" (p. 91). Highlander emphasised discussion and using participants' experiences to frame problems and devise possible solutions. Its interactive and open-ended, dialogic methods followed from its democratic goals. Throughout the forty years of Horton's leadership (1932-1972) and beyond, Highlander's educational assumptions remained the same: the best solutions to a problem were the ones that emerged out of a community's attempt to identify and analyse a problem and to enact a course of action that reflected the needs of the community as a whole. In Horton's (1998, p. 152) own memorable words:

> The best teachers of poor and working people are the people themselves. They are the experts on their own experiences and problems. The students who came to Highlander brought their own ways of thinking and doing. We tried to stimulate their thinking and expose them to consultants, books, and ideas, but it was more important for them to learn how to learn from each other.

Figure 3. A Highlander Folk School workshop. Source: Inouye, 2019.

Preskill provides a particularly fascinating chapter 6 on the role of music in Highlander. Zilphia Johnson came to Highlander in 1935 and soon became Mrs Zilphia Horton. She was an award-winning singer and pianist and greatly influenced Highlander's use of art. Under her leadership, Highlander uniquely emphasised music to inspire confidence and togetherness and printed dozens of plays about union experiences. Highlander was known as a 'singing school' that focused on folk songs that grew out of the stark reality that their creators experienced, holding "great power to foster a sense of unity among people from vastly different backgrounds and cultures" (p. 105).

Highlander's holistic approach to adult education served its key ideas that are well-captured by Preskill:

> Encouraging people to gain greater control over their lives by keeping the focus in their actual experiences emerged as one key idea. Another involved resisting individualism and embracing group learning in a residential setting. Still another emphasized identifying with the needs of the poor, the marginalized, and the discriminated against, employing many modes of expression, including music, dance, and drama, to bring people closer together.

> Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, Highlander embraced applied learning, inspiring people to build on what they had gained from workshops to spark change back in their home communities (pp. 7-8).

Influences and Highlander goes international

Horton was a voracious reader. Amongst his intellectual influences was John Dewey, perhaps America's leading public intellectual in the 1930s. When Horton wrote to Dewey that he was not his disciple, Dewey responded: "I'm delighted that you don't claim to be my disciple. My enemies are bad, but my disciples are worse" (cited on p. 50). In Chicago, Horton also met Jane Addams, the co-founder of Hull House (a space where the poor could gather to learn and envision a better future for themselves) in 1889. Addams had been labelled 'the most famous woman in America' (p. 50; see Preskill & Brookfield, 2009). As a result of reading Eduard Lindeman's *The meaning of adult education* (2020), he travelled to Denmark to learn about the country's famous folk schools firsthand.

Horton's busy 'retirement' in the early 1970s saw him travelling to "places anywhere in the world where educational centers or research programs have been created by people who have been at Highlander, and they want to have a relationship not only with Highlander but with other people who are doing similar things around the world" (cited ¬on p. 255). Horton was initially excited to visit Nicaragua and to see a country during the beginning stages of a revolution (p. 267). At least partially, his excitement soon turned into disillusionment. In Paulo Freire's observation, a new regime often "hardens into a dominating bureaucracy", and then "the humanist dimension is lost and it is no longer possible to speak of liberation" (cited on p. 269).

Horton and Freire

Preskill's final chapter fittingly concludes the book with reflections on Myles Horton and Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and their collaboration that culminated in the 'talking book' *We make the road by walking* (Horton & Freire, 1990). There are many similarities between the two men. Both are widely acknowledged as two of the most important radical adult educators of the 20th century. When Freire's *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (2018) became an instant classic in the early 1970s, many educators saw the similarities between the two pedagogues. Both Freire and Horton had firsthand, painful experiences of desperately craving food while growing up in some of the poorest regions of their home countries (Freire in Recife in Brazil's Northeast and Horton in the western Tennessee Delta). Their student-centric, dialogical approach was built around the problems that students face. They "shared a vision and a history of using participatory education as a crucible for empowerment of the poor and powerless" (Bell et al., 1990). In an apparent paradox, both educators were drawn to Christianity's social aspects and critical readings of Marx. Both educators were instrumental in major literacy campaigns that enabled newly literate adults to vote. This linking of literacy and enfranchisement posed significant threats to entrenched power structures and led to repercussions in their respective home countries. Freire was imprisoned and forced to flee Brazil in 1964, while Horton was jailed numerous times, and Highlander was temporarily shuttered in 1959 during the reactionary McCarthy era.

Figure 4. Myles Horton and Paulo Freire in 1987 at Highlander. Source: Candie Caravan in Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 249.

Despite these remarkable similarities, the two adult educators were undoubtedly far from carbon copies of each other. The prolific Freire was more theoretical in his discourse and writings, while Horton preferred a folksier style, prominently featuring anecdotes and story-telling. They held each other in high regard, and Freire called Horton "an incredible man" whose history and presence "is something that *justifies* the world (cited on p. 287).

Conclusion

It is noteworthy that Preskill's admirable history of Highlander and Myles Horton's involvement is critical of its subject and not a hagiography. Amongst other things, Preskill highlights that Horton gave insufficient credit to Highlander's influential female leaders (like, for instance, Septima Clark – see Preskill & Brookfield, 2009) and that he could have supported them better. In conclusion, I highly recommend *Education in black and white* to all adult and higher education practitioners. Stephen Preskill's book provides a highly commendable, thoughtful and critical history of Highlander. It shows some early examples of successful student-centred pedagogies and how ideas once radical (like desegregation and industrial unions) have since become accepted. However, for instance, the Black Lives Matter movement shows that the struggle continues. To hear more of Horton's unique voice, I recommend Horton's (1998) autobiography *The long haul* and the talking book with Freire (Horton & Freire, 1990) as companion pieces.

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