

## **From A to Z (Angler to Zimdowney)**

Bill Fagan

### **Early Years**

My father, like most outport fishermen had little formal schooling. By age 11, he was fishing with his father. However, he had learned to read and was extremely good at math, or then, called arithmetic. Whenever, he had a break from his fishing chores, he read. The Family Herald and Weekly Star was received on a regular basis and books just seem to “pop up”. There was no local library and no such thing as a bookstore. Even if there were, money would never be spent buying books. One of my older brothers loved trout (fishing) and spent a lot of his money on trout equipment. Whereas, most people trouted with a pole cut in the woods and regular fishing line and a hook, he had invested in a bought fishing reel, all kinds of fishing flies, wicker basket, and hip waders. One evening as he left to go trout, my father commented to me that my brother was a real “angler” and then explained it. On another occasion we had a heavy rainstorm and roads were washed out including the road to school and so we had a holiday. My father commented that the road was “impassible”. I asked if he meant “impossible” but he explained, and said, “The road is impassible because it is impossible to get across by the forge (where the road washed out).”

As a fisherman, he sold his catch to the local fish plant. After cleaning the fish, it was weighed in, barrow by barrow. After each barrow, the fishermen were given a receipt of the weight as shown on the scale. My father said nothing at the time but when he came home, he took each receipt and he could remember the weight of each barrow. Often the plant made mistakes and immediately he went back to the merchant to have it corrected.

When growing up, while books would not be bought or given as presents, we always seemed to have books around, usually fables and comics. These were loaned from family to family. There was no library in the classroom (I attended a three-room school), but locked, display cases in the “commercial room”, a room separated from the school where the Nuns taught typing, shorthand, etc., were filled with books. One day, I had the nerve to ask if I could borrow some and I felt I had won the lottery going home with several books. I think this is the first time I had read a novel type book. I knew there was no turning back. I taught the year just after leaving school and we had the “travelling library” to which students and I looked forward. I believe I made it a goal to read every book before that lot was returned and the next arrived.

### **Attending Memorial University**

I soon found myself faced with another kind of reading – factual, academic -from psychology, to philosophy, to teaching methods. However, the learning method, as through my school years, was rote memory. Like my father, I had a good memory and so, did well on exams. I loved Latin which I had studied in school. In fact, in grade 11, the teacher did not teach Latin, and Sister Edwardine, who taught grade 3 and 4 (she

shared a room with the grade 1-2 teacher), made time twice a week when I went to her classroom and she continued to instruct me in Latin. I think I enjoyed the challenge of unlocking the meaning of a different language, a different code. This continued at University, and one Latin teacher there, Mrs. Cochrane made Latin come alive. Even though I was a teenager at the time, Cicero's (I think) essays on aging were interesting. Some fellow students, recognized my ability in Latin and in the free period, after Latin class, they steered me to a vacant classroom and I became teacher in helping with the homework assignment.

The first jolt (and a pleasant one) to rote learning was in my final year when I took a course in European history. We only knew the instructor as Mr. Schwartz. We had a book of documents, such as Child Labour Laws. No memorizing! Our assignment was to go to the library and read the social, political, economic, and religious conditions at the time and then in class argue how these conditions led to the Child Labour Laws and influenced the course of events. Reading had really become challenging!

### **Graduate School**

Mr. Schwartz's class perhaps, best prepared me for learning in graduate school. There, I was to meet a person, of like mind, Dr. Marion Jenkinson. I was enrolled in Elementary Education, with specialization in reading and writing ("literacy" was not popularly used). We studied all angles of reading – history, sociological, political, philosophical, and methodological, including clinical. I think the one thing that graduate school showed me was that learning was a matter of bridging – taking from the academic/theoretical to the practical, and back from the practical to refine the academic/theoretical. Learning and literacy only made sense through use.

In a course on the Psychology of Reading, Dr. Jenkinson approached our learning somewhat as Mr. Schwartz. We didn't just learn from reading a text book. She made up case studies from the Reading Clinic files with key data missing. It was our assignment to try and complete the picture by highlighting what was there (called "loyalty to the given") and then through inference, and questioning, setting out what might be known, or needed to be known to provide an overall picture of the child or adult, in identifying the reading/learning problem and projecting possible solutions. This learning came more alive on field trips. On one occasion, the class of about 20 travelled to the Peace River country. We arrived on Thursday evening. We were paired in teams and had a full day of testing on Friday in one of the schools in the district. A colleague from South Africa and I were assigned to Dixonville – I was fascinated by the main street and hitching posts for horses. We tested selectively – two high, average, and low achievers as identified by the teachers at each grade level. I had a strong outport Newfoundland accent and my friend had her South African accent. I picked up after my friend to administer a spelling test in grade 7. Students kept asking me to repeat a word. Then one student chipped in, "We didn't hear what the other one said either – just guess." We spent Friday night, and Saturday marking tests, discussing outcomes across grades, and across schools, identifying profiles, projecting suggestions for intervention. On Sunday we spent the day in the school in Peace River putting up graphs and charts, and getting ready for the all

day workshop on Monday when all teachers came together in Peace River. We met them by school, and then across school by grade. Literacy, and learning and graduate school was really becoming meaningful.

The other great impact that Dr. Jenkinson had on me was in a research course which she taught with two other professors. I can remember her talking about the excitement of being a researcher. “Do you realize that when you analyse your data, you and only you, possess knowledge that no one else in the world has. It is up to you to share this. It is up to you to see that the world is better because of it. Savour it while it is private. When it is public, it is everyone’s for better or worse.” I have never forgotten this excitement of research!

After completing my Master’s degree I returned to Newfoundland and taught at Memorial for two years. These were great years, and perhaps best remembered for the great people who were there. But the challenge of learning led me back to Alberta for a Doctorate with studies at the University of Toronto, and the University of Michigan. We were all required take a second specialization outside of the Faculty of Education, and I choose linguistics. At that time “transformational generative grammar” by Noam Chomsky was making the news and for my doctoral research I looked at the complexity of language based on this theory and its implications for comprehension. My external examiner was Dr. Kenneth Goodman, the guru who coined the term “reading miscue” which he used to understand how readers processed text. Reading became rational! My doctoral research won the International Reading Association Dissertation of the Year Award that year and I received the Award in front of about a thousand educators in Atlantic City, a long way from a three room school in Newfoundland.

I was hired by the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta and became interested in the sociology of reading/literacy. I worked with inmates in the provincial jail and after interviews with a few inmates, realized that their literacy was embedded in a very complex world. I enrolled in a Master’s in Educational Psychology (with studies in social psychology and clinical psychology) which really helped me as I tried to understand the literacy world of the inmates. My interest in the sociology of literacy led to my obtaining a major two-year research grant and I came back to Newfoundland to study how people in rural Newfoundland coped with reading and writing tasks. This led to a book, “Literacy for Living” publishing by ISER Books, Memorial University. I studied different age cohorts from high school to age 70+. One finding that stood out was that not being able to read or write was not a stigma. It was not much different in not being able to repair a door – there was always someone to help – that was the culture. I would walk into a house (you never knocked) and a person, writing a letter to a relative in Fort McMurray, would pass me an envelope, saying, “You address that while I finish this.” Or in another case, the daily paper would have arrived, and the person would say, “You’re just in time, tell me what that says today.” One senior, who now had the assistance of home care, said that she had never learned to read, but one of her home care workers was reading books to her. She said, “I can’t wait for the next part. It is so much more interesting than television.” After the home care worker read a section, the senior would talk about it to her and wonder what would come next, to which the worker would

say, “Tell me what you think. ... We’ll have to wait until Wednesday to find out”, and the senior would reply, “I can’t wait ‘till then” (meaning I am looking forward to then.”

### **Back to My Roots**

I returned to Newfoundland and in the new millennium I became an Adjunct professor at Memorial. This overlapped with my getting involved in municipal politics – first as Councilor and then as Mayor. The basis of literacy is obviously reading and writing and its use. But I knew you can only use what you have and I wondered to what extent people were readers and writers. This led to my research on Levels of Knowledge (depth of reading) and decision making. My work has been published in *Morning Watch*. I marveled at how much material elected municipal officials should read – from Committee reports, to Conference material, to correspondence from residents, to theories, treatises, and documents. The power of persuasion is based on the power of argument and argument is based on knowledge. Councilors and other municipal officials operate on different levels of knowledge. Without depth of knowledge there may be superficiality and confusion. For example, reports have been completed on “Regional Government” with one document proposing a two-tier level of government in different regions, the Northeast Avalon being one. Some people confuse this with “Regional Co-operation” and so there is discussion at cross-purposes, on two different topics. No one is against Regional Co-operation, but Regional Government is very controversial in some regions, including the Northeast Avalon.

Municipal involvement did not take me away from my education roots – just the opposite. In addition to my research on depth of knowledge, I was the liaison from the Town Hall to the local elementary school, and a Community member of the high school Council. As a member of the Town Council, I realized that involvement of the students as citizens was crucial to their becoming good citizens and good learners. Providing state of art recreational facilities is important. Providing for community supports through volunteer groups is important. Children should be citizens first, and students second.

### **From A to Z**

How I learned the meaning of the word “angler” stays with me. I became a reader too. I can’t imagine not having reading material available. Waiting at the dentist’s office or getting my car serviced is easier with a book. I read a myriad of newspapers and magazines. Two kinds of books dominate my reading life: fiction and non-fiction. My fiction is mystery, particularly British mystery, which is more than “who-done-it” – it is exposing insight into the social and psychological conditions of the crime. Non-fiction depends on the latest publications. I am just finishing “Empty Nets” by Gus Etchegary, who is a good friend as well. This is a poignant account of what went wrong with the fishery. But a small bit of literacy trivia that fascinated me was that the Company, Fisheries Product Ltd. for which Mr. Etchegary worked, named their trawlers beginning with Z so they would be easy to locate in the Department of Transportation Registry – Zenava, Zebrula, Zipper, and Zimdowney.