



The Reading and Writing Parts of My Life

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by H. Alan Robinson

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My memory has always been bad. I think I was an absent-minded professor at the age of one. In these reminiscences I have tried, more or less in chronological order, to reconstruct reality and hope most of it is more real than imagined. At my age I have few people to consult who know or can possibly remember my early reading and language activities.

My eighty-six year old aunt, who has been close to me all my life, was my second-grade teacher in Palisades Park, a small town in New Jersey near New York City. She gave me a *D* in penmanship and says that my penmanship was illegible, a fact that has plagued me throughout my life. Just ask my doctoral students who often, through necessity, learned to decipher my words when I could not! My rationalization is that somewhere in the first grade I was switched from left to right and was never the same after that. I now write and eat with my right hand; all else is done with my left. Thank God and technology for the advent of the typewriter and the computer with its word processing programs!

My aunt says, however, that I read easily and other than penmanship did well in all language activities in elementary school. She does not, nor do I, remember having had my nose in a book continuously. I did read, and enjoyed it, but I listened to the radio a lot; my oldest living friend, Steve Kiss, says that I was a very social being (difficult for me to understand now since I feel that I am more of a loner), and that--at least in his experiences with me--he didn't remember my reading very much. I don't remember having anyone read stories to me at night, and the household in which I lived--an only child--was not a reading home. I lived with my mother, aunt, grandmother, and grandfather, for my mother had been divorced since I was two. My grandfather did read the *New York Times* daily. My mother, a busy career woman, made sure I experienced a broad spectrum of life. She took me to the opera, the symphony, Broadway plays and movies, varied kinds of ethnic restaurants, museums, sporting events, ballets, a speakeasy, etc.

I believe it was not until my later years in high school in Leonia, New Jersey, that I became a reader. I do remember a social studies teacher who insisted that we read a great deal of fiction and non-fiction related to what was being studied, particularly when studying American history. I have been interested in American history throughout my life. In fact, my son and I have been working on a manuscript about a ship in the War of 1812 for years. We now seem to be approaching the point where we might seek an agent and/or publisher within the next year.

The New York University Reading Clinic

After graduating from New York University and after my discharge from the Army, I came to

the New York University Placement Service to find a teaching position. They suggested that I talk with Stella Center, Director of the New York University Reading Clinic, who was looking for a male instructor since the war had left few men in the classroom. I said I didn't know the first thing about teaching people how to read; the person at the Placement Service said, "You'll learn." So, having nothing better offered at that point, I met with Dr. Center who, in my young eyes, seemed to be a hundred years old and awesome; she gave me a student textbook written by herself and Gladys Persons (her assistant director), and asked me to step outside for a half hour to study a chapter and be ready for a quiz. I almost left at that point, but I decided to see what happened. When I was ushered in to see her again, I went through an inquisition about the chapter. I must have done satisfactorily for she offered to

have me spend a semester at the Reading Clinic as an intern without pay and then I might get hired.

I talked with my mother about the "opportunity" which would mean her subsidizing me for a half year. We decided that it might, indeed, be an opportunity and I became an instructor at the Clinic. Among my many duties was to chaperon students to ophthalmologists for treatment--a most useful avocation as I learned a great deal about vision and reading. At the Reading Clinic, small groups of children away from their home schools for a year went from teacher to teacher receiving varied instruction in aspects of reading. One of my jobs was to give group tachistoscopic exercises, using a tachistoscope called the Flashmeter, in an attempt to help their automaticity in word recognition; to the students I became known as Mr. Flashmeter. I also worked the Metronoscope, a large instrument with stories on rollers, that was supposed to increase the speed of reading. Occasionally, I even worked on lessons in real books!

While working at the Reading Clinic, Ms. Persons put me in touch with Evelyn Dibble, Director of Reading at Central Junior and Senior High Schools, Valley Stream, Long Island, New York. Mrs. Dibble offered me a position as Assistant Director and English teacher. Dr. Center agreed to loan me to Valley Stream. After a half year, having negotiated for the impressive salary of \$2,000 annually, Dr. Center asked me to come back to teach as a paid teacher at the Clinic--a move she felt was an obligation. I came back and also worked on my master's degree in guidance under Dr. Robert Hoppock. I eventually became his graduate assistant and was helped by him to organize and to write. He gave me an opportunity to write with him and for him. My first published article co-authored with Dr. Hoppock was an annual report about job satisfaction. I subsequently wrote a number of job satisfaction articles and short career pamphlets on my own. I am eternally grateful to Bob Hoppock for the chance to learn so much and to "get published."

The Valley Stream Years

By this time Dr. Center had retired and Ms. Persons had opened a reading clinic in Connecticut with which I became affiliated, part-time. Simultaneously I decided to go for my doctorate and was fortunate to find that Dr. Nila Banton Smith had come to NYU and was starting a reading program as well as running the Clinic. I enrolled in her classes and soon found myself working as her assistant on Saturdays. I also was hired back at Valley Stream as Director of Reading. Besides my interest in the job, the salary had jumped magnificently (\$3,600 annually I think), and so I felt ready to marry my Ann. I asked Dr. Smith if she would excuse me from class one Saturday so I might go on my honeymoon. She agreed but gave me an assignment so that I would not miss any work.

Dr. Smith offered me a full-time position at NYU, but I had to decline for I could not exist, now with son and wife, at the salary level. Nevertheless, Dr. Smith and I became lifelong friends. She was my mentor and had much to do with my career.

There was no registered doctoral program in reading at NYU at that time, so I remained in the Guidance Department with a major in reading. When it came time to think about a dissertation, I wanted to do something with phonics. This was OK with Dr. Smith but when I approached Alvina Treut Burrows to be a member of my doctoral committee, she said, "I wouldn't touch that with a ten-foot pole." It wasn't until years later that Alvina and I became fast friends and, knowing her and more about the field, I understood her reticence. I finally decided to write a dissertation trying to combine the guidance and reading fields.

By now I had been at Valley Stream a number of years directing the reading program, heading up a summer reading program, and teaching in-service courses to teachers in Valley Stream and nearby school districts who needed to take courses to continue their certification and/or to obtain raises on the salary scale. The teachers came from many grade levels and disciplines; some were truly interested; a number were "sitting in" because they had to. I remember one senior faculty member who chose my class each session to clip his fingernails. I finally got up the courage to ask him to stop. I also taught graduate courses in reading at Hofstra University part-time to teachers enrolled in master's programs.

Big decision-making time came once more when Miriam Schleich, director of Hofstra's reading programs, invited me to join the faculty. There was the prospect of a tremendous salary downgrading, but I was disenchanted with my super-visory and administrative responsibilities rather unrelated to reading instruction. Dr. Schleich did offer coordination of the Hofstra Reading Clinic with additional compensation, along with teaching responsibilities. It seemed to Ann and me that it would not be long before I would make up the salary loss, and I would be doing something I loved. We accepted.

Hofstra University and the Young IRA

I learned a great deal from Miriam Schleich and worked in a wonderful atmosphere for four years. During that time and earlier, I had begun to become active in the International Council for the Improvement of Reading Instruction (ICIRI). I remember going to a meeting at Temple University and meeting Nancy Larrick for the first time. She was editor of the *ICIRI Bulletin* and asked me to write an article. At another meeting, although the article had been published, Nancy discussed some of the weaknesses of the article with me. I was devastated then, but now realize its lack of clarity and detail. By the way, Nancy has become a lifelong friend and I can thank her too for helping me think about the improvement of my professional writing.

In 1956 when the ICIRI merged with the National Association for Remedial Teaching to form the International Reading Association (IRA), I took on a number of roles in the young organization. One of those roles was as advertising manager for *The Reading Teacher*. I remember, vividly, the day our first ad came in and Don Cleland, then Executive Director of IRA, writing a note headed by "Whoopee, we're in business!" I was also editor of the *Journal of Reading*, and membership chairman, I think. If I remember correctly, I was among a small group of people who were so anxious for the low-budget IRA to thrive that we contributed \$50 each to help it get organized and became life members of the new organization.

In 1956, Paul Witty asked me if would teach a summer term at Northwestern as he was going

to teach at Columbia. The family moved to a small apartment in Evanston, Illinois where, with Ann's help, I completed a rather unimportant dissertation related to the job of reading consultant in the secondary school. Nila B. Smith was good enough to cite the dissertation in her revision of *American Reading Instruction*. I often wondered whether she felt it made a contribution or was she just giving my career a boost.

The University of Chicago Years

During the years from 1956 through September, 1961, I became president of the Nassau Reading Council, an early council of IRA, taught at Hofstra, and wrote a number of articles. Early in 1961, Helen M. Robinson, no relative, invited me to speak and interview for a position in the Department of Education, University of Chicago. We moved to Chicago (Helen helped us--long distance--to buy a townhouse in Hyde Park near the University) during the late summer of 1961. While in Chicago, through 1967, I organized, directed, and edited the proceedings of an annual summer reading conference and workshop. I think some people never knew there was a change in editorship of the proceedings since the name change was merely from Helen M. Robinson to H. Alan Robinson. I also taught graduate courses in reading and coordinated a Carnegie grant for reading consultants. It was my good fortune to work, not only with Helen Robinson, but with Helen Smith and Sam Weintraub. During one quarter I taught graduate reading courses at the University of Tel Aviv.

During my tenure at the University of Chicago, my initial efforts in professional writing, in addition to the conference proceedings, were focused on reading in the content areas and the roles of the reading consultant. I chaired a Metropolitan School Study Council (NY) committee concerned with reading which resulted in a pamphlet entitled *Five Steps to Reading Success in Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies* in 1960. In 1965 with co-author Sidney Rauch and students from both Chicago and Hofstra, we completed *Guiding the Reading Program: A Reading Consultant's Handbook* (Science Research Associates). And in 1966 Sid Rauch and I compiled and edited a pamphlet on *Corrective Reading in the High School* (IRA).

I was also fortunate to become friends with Ellen Thomas, Reading Consultant for the University of Chicago Laboratory School, who was deeply interested in and successful at helping teachers develop reading strategies for reading in the content areas. I learned a great deal from Ellen, a gifted writer, with whom I collaborated subsequently on two books: *Fusing Reading Skills and Content*, growing out of an IRA workshop presentation with teachers from the Lab School (IRA, 1969); and several editions of *Improving Reading in Every Classroom: A Sourcebook for Teachers* (Allyn and Bacon). The results of some small research studies focused on beginning readers (with the help of research assistants, Allen Muskopf and Earl Hanson) were also published at that time.

We moved back to New York in 1967 so that I might play a role in Hofstra's new doctoral program in reading which I has been helping to plan. I was president-elect of IRA and Hofstra was good enough to support many of my activities related to IRA. At that time the doctoral program in reading was housed in a beautiful, large home on an estate and the environment certainly supported productivity. In fact on that estate, I planned my IRA committees for the next year and invited participants.

Linguistics and Hofstra

Something happened at that time that was to have far-reaching effects on me and, I believe,

the profession. Ken Goodman asked me why there was no committee on linguistics and reading. He spoke of psycholinguists and I said, "What is that?" We established a committee on linguistics and reading which became the beginning of the linguistics-psycholinguistics influence on reading. I began a year-long study of linguistics, psycholinguistics, and sociolinguistics in relation to reading instruction. Eventually, Ken, Dick Hodges, Dick Venezky and I, sponsored by IRA, traveled around the country helping people understand the connections through a series of workshops.

As president of IRA, 1967-68, aside from fine professional experiences, a number of amusing things happened. At a big reception my wife and I planned for IRA officers and committee chairpersons, the drinks flowed but the hotel never came with the food until the reception was almost over--a fiasco. And then to further rain on my parade and ego, when we were standing on the reception line, a woman came up to me and said she had been waiting to greet me for an hour. Then she leaned over to read my badge as she said, "And what is your name?" As though my ego had not been deflated enough, I was invited to give a banquet talk at the National Reading Conference. Tickets were sold and people had planned time to go. On arrival at the banquet hall, nothing was set up. Someone had goofed and money had to be refunded.

Another time, I was invited to speak at a meeting in Fort Worth, Texas; my wife accompanied me. Just before I was introduced, the introducer asked my wife to stand and said that Mrs. Robinson, so well known, was not speaking this evening, but was deferring to her husband. A natural error, I suppose! Helen Robinson and I were often confused by people planning meetings. At one IRA meeting Helen and I were both speaking at different sites. When I entered my hotel room, I found a beautiful corsage which I then delivered to Helen.

In 1971 I became president of the National Conference on Research in English and was delighted to conduct a study with Alvina Treut Burrows, which was published by the National Council of Teachers of English in 1974 entitled, *Teacher Effectiveness in Elementary School Language Arts*. In the latter '70s, '80s, and early '90s, I was involved in a number of studies as well as author of several books aimed at elementary and secondary reading instruction. In the '90s I served as chair of Hofstra's Reading Department and then as Dean of the School of Education. I certainly enjoyed being a Professor of Reading and Education, with time for research and writing, and not so much becoming a chair, and then the administrative horrors confronting a dean.

I was honored to be inducted into the Reading Hall of Fame (RHF) and served as its president/secretary from May 1990 through May 1991. At the present time I am serving as Historian for that organization and have completed a brief summary of the RHF's first decade from 1973-1983. My next professional obligation is a revision of a talk I gave last year at the 1996 IRA Convention in New Orleans for the History of Reading Special Interest Group. I will be presenting at the RHF meeting co-sponsored with IRA at the 1997 Convention in Atlanta. Although I am retired and having fun doing many things unrelated to the field of reading, as you can see I am still somewhat active and enjoying it.

POETRY BEYOND THE SCHOOLROOM

Joan Shelley Rubin, University of Rochester, has written two essays on the poetry recited in American Schools. Her query in the *New York Times* for first person accounts of memorizing, reciting and recalling poetry elicited 479 responses. One respondent wrote, "Many a time I pick up a poetry book and enter the world of my childhood." See "They Flash Upon That

Inward Eye': Poetry Recitation and American Readers," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 106, pt. 2 (1996), 273-300; and her "'Listen, My Children': Poetry Reading in American Schools 1875-1950," in Karen Halttunen and Lewis Perry, eds., *Moral Problems in American Life* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, forthcoming).

Also in the 1996 issue of the Proceedings of the AAS is David Paul Nord's discussion of "Free Grace, Free Books, Free Riders: The Economics of Religious Publishing in Early Nineteenth-Century America"; and 19th-century "Railroad Reading," by Kevin J. Hayes, author of *A Colonial Woman's Bookshelf* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996).



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