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Adult Literacy and American Identity: The Moonlight Schools and Americanization Programs

Samantha NeCamp

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The release of U.S. census data in 1910 sparked rhetoric declaring the nation had a literacy crisis and proclaiming illiterate citizens a threat to democratic life. While newspaper editors, industrialists, and officials in the federal government frequently placed the blame on newly arrived immigrants, a smaller but no less vocal group of rural educators and clubwomen highlighted the significant number of native-born illiterate adults in the Appalachian region. Author Samantha NeCamp looks at the educational response to these two distinct literacy narratives—the founding of the Moonlight Schools in eastern Kentucky, focused on native-born nonliterate adults, and the establishment of the Americanization movement, dedicated to the education of recent immigrants.

Drawing on personal correspondence, conference proceedings, textbooks, and speeches, NeCamp demonstrates how the Moonlight Schools and the Americanization movement competed for public attention, the interest of educators, and private and governmental funding, fueling a vibrant public debate about the definition of literacy. The very different pedagogical practices of the two movements—and how these practices were represented to the public—helped shape literacy education in the United States. Reading the Moonlight Schools and the Americanization movement in relation to one another, *Adult Literacy and American Identity* expands the history and theory of literacy and literacy education in the United States. This book will be of interest to scholars in literacy, Appalachian studies, and rhetoric and composition.

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