

Dartington Hall School

Maurice Punch. *Progressive Retreat: A Sociological Study of Dartington Hall School 1926-57 and Some of its Former Pupils*. Cambridge University Press, 1977. 195 pp. £4.90.

Progressive Retreat was written in 1970-72 as a doctoral thesis for the University of Essex by Maurice Punch, now Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the State University of Utrecht. It is based on research done in 1968 and 69, research sponsored and financed by the Elmgrant Trust of Dartington in the hope that "an outsider and a sociologist trying to see the school through the eyes of people who had been at it would have something fresh to say about the past which could influence its future" (p. vii). Since the trustees were reluctant to expose the lives of former pupils to the public curiosity of sociologists, they restricted Punch's analysis to the years 1926-57 and asked him to make sure none of the interviewed individuals could be identified. The professional sociologist was further handicapped by Dartington's lack of alumni records: no address files and old boy associations to be tapped for raw material. His research is consequently based on interviews with sixty pupils, twenty who spent at least three years in the school during the 'thirties and forty from the 'fifties. This is a small sample out of some two thousand former pupils and any conclusions based on it must surely be tentative; the more so as the questions asked and replies given deal more with opinions than with facts.

When the research was written up, the results so displeased the trustees that they insisted on an Introduction stating their disagreement with Punch's conclusions. "His general conclusions," they claim, "are not justified by the 'facts' he has collected" (p. vii). "Research," says Punch, "with its sceptical and even debunking tone, tends to document the gaps between ideals and practice and to confront the participants with their failures and ambiva-

lences.... But it can also be illuminating for the impartial observer" (p. 2).

Punch is by no means an impartial observer. (Let one example stand for many: "Several parents exhibited Bohemian symptoms" (p. 41). Is Bohemianism really a disease?) He approaches Dartington as a sceptical outsider, predisposed to more "normal" methods of education, and some of his measures of success are inappropriate. In particular: how well did Dartingtonians fit into the conventional world when they left school? For most of his sample, as for myself, the transition was extremely difficult, but the school did not intend it to be easy. Progressive schools exist to shake up the conventional world, both by what they do in school and by the men and women they send out into it. To have their alumni settle comfortably into society as it is would be to them a sign of failure.

I should here acknowledge that I am by no means an impartial reviewer, being a loyal and grateful alumna of the examined institution. For me the real meat of the book is in the quotations from former pupils, the material from which readers can draw their own conclusions. They say much what I would have said had I been asked, and what stands out is their affection for the school and loyalty to its ideals. Most of them seem to have absorbed the devotion to tolerance and reason which were the passion of its headmaster, William B. Curry. The book, which covers only the years of his headmastership, is in fact as much an evaluation of the man as of the institution. Punch considers this a criticism of Curry; the school should, in his view, have been able to run without the constant intervention and inspiration of its head. Perhaps it should; now, certainly, it must. But a great headmaster is always the life of his school during his tenure and I doubt that many alumni would have wanted him less in evidence. My own life would certainly be poorer without the memory of that tanned Humpty Dumpty with his jolly laugh and his passion for letting people alone.

Two of Punch's criticisms do seem to me, as a former pupil, to have validity. One is that the children did not learn as much or as methodically as they could and should have. This is the weakness of progressive education, which presupposes a greater eagerness to learn than most children seem to possess. Learning is easier when one is young, on the whole, and it is a pity to waste the years when facts are easily acquired. Information and mental discipline are essential ingredients of education and a school which cannot provide them is failing in a basic function. (I should add that I myself managed to acquire both at Dartington; like all schools, it was more successful with some children than with others.)

The second criticism is more general. Like Bertrand Russell, whom he much admired, Curry hoped to educate changers of society; but, again like Russell, he taught

the children a kind of rational scepticism that made it difficult for them to become crusaders. The role of drop-out or outward conformist seems to have come more easily to most of them. But we are not all called to be agitators. Their assimilation of Curry's ideals and practice of them in private life may be a necessary second stage in the changing of society.

This is more an argument with the author than a review of his book itself that it is a prime example of specious sociology. Using a small sample, asking leading questions, getting responses which are opinion rather than fact, it then goes on to quantify the results and to base conclusions on the quantification. It has been carelessly proofread and is inaccurate about details: Beacon Hill School appears throughout the text as Telegraph Hill, but in the index only as Beacon Hill. Punch knew what he thought before he started and the evidence has not changed his mind; for him a progressive school is still a place which produces ill-educated misfits. Nor has it changed my mind; for me, as for most of those interviewed, Dartington is still the provider of stimulating education in an atmosphere of beauty and tolerance. So much for the persuasive power of fact, which both Punch and Curry respect so highly.

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