

Dartington revisited

by Katharine Tait

Michael Young. *The Elmhursts of Dartington: The Creation of an Utopian Community*. London & Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982. Pp. x, 381; 38 illustrations. £15. US\$29.95.

The Elmhursts of Dartington must have been a difficult book to write. Not for lack of information; quite the reverse, in fact. Michael Young tells us there were 800 boxes of written material in the Dartington Records Room, enough in itself, I should think, to discourage any but the most dedicated author. Add to this the memories and memoirs of all those still living who were a part of the experiment at one time or another, and then Michael Young's own personal involvement going back fifty years, and one might expect an abundance of trees with very little sense of the forest. Yet the author has managed to discipline his facts into a coherent portrait of this unusual couple and their lifelong experiment with Utopia. Even more remarkable is his tact and fairness in describing the conflicts which arose between the many talented people at Dartington, whose ideals and ambitions could not always be harmonized. Both sides of every dispute are given with scrupulous objectivity and the results reported without partisanship, yet without tedious detachment.

The book is called *The Elmhursts of Dartington*, suggesting perhaps a pious account of a fine country family rooted through the centuries in its own rural domain. Dartington was indeed an old country estate, going back to the time of Richard II and in the same family since the sixteenth century, but that family was not the Elmhursts. The Champernownes, who had owned Dartington, had fallen into poverty and were unable to keep up their estate; indeed, the hall itself was half in ruins when Leonard first came to look at the place in 1925. The transformation he and his wife wrought over the years of their possession suggests that *The Dartington of the Elmhursts* might be a more appropriate title.

Who, then, were the Elmhursts and what did they achieve?

Leonard Elmhurst, born in 1893, was the son of a Yorkshire clergyman, one of a large family brought up in the brisk and almost brutal style of the time. He was sent away to school at the age of eight, then on to Repton, where he was equally miserable, and thence to Cambridge, destined for the church like his father. This destiny, together with less than perfect health, saved him from service in the First World War and he went out to India with the YMCA instead. Conventional enough in

outline, yet he never managed to accept the underlying assumptions. He cared too much about the poor, he had lost his Christian faith, he wanted to do something practical for humanity.

After the war he went to study agriculture at Cornell University, an unusual thing for an English gentleman to do in those days: one didn't actually study agriculture, just got on with it, and one certainly didn't go to America to learn anything. But that was what Leonard did, though he was almost too poor to manage it, and it was through Cornell that he met his future wife, Dorothy Whitney Straight.

Dorothy Straight was something quite different, born to wealth and prestige in Washington, D.C., where her father was Secretary of the Navy in Grover Cleveland's cabinet. Her father was forceful in politics, expert at making money and devoted to entertaining; he and her mother both came from "good families" and Dorothy belonged by right to the top level of New York society: balls, parties, travel, endless entertainment. Before she was twenty-one she owned a house on Fifth Avenue, another on Long Island, and eight million dollars. Yet she was always serious, always felt an obligation to use her money for the good of others, perhaps because all her wealth had not protected her from losing first her mother and then a beloved stepmother at an early age.

Leonard and Dorothy met in September 1920, when he went to ask her for money for a foreign students' club at Cornell. She was then a widow with three young children, and about six years older than Leonard. Her first husband, Willard Straight, with whom she had founded *The New Republic* and *Asia*, had died in Paris in the influenza epidemic of 1918. Leonard decided almost at once that she was the woman for him, but it took him five years to convince her that he was the man for her. They were not married until 1925.

In the interval, he finished his studies at Cornell and went to India with Rabindranath Tagore, whom he much admired, to help him with a farm and school on his estate at Sriniketan. Tagore wanted to give the boys in his school a practical as well as an intellectual and artistic education, and he also wanted to improve the wretched state of agriculture in the neighbouring villages. Leonard went out as agricultural supervisor, then became Tagore's personal assistant in all his work and travels. Tagore's school was called Shiksha-Satra, the seat of learning, and its ideals were those of Dartington: to let children learn through play, through practical work, through imagination; to allow them to *live* and not merely to prepare for adult life. Leonard, remembering his own miserable school-days, was wholeheartedly in sympathy with these aims. When at last he persuaded Dorothy to marry him, their first project was to start such a school in England, and the words "Shiksha-Satra" run through all they

wrote about it, as well as through Michael Young's account. It is indeed remarkable how much the whole Dartington project resembles Tagore's enterprise in such totally different surroundings.

One of the strongest bonds between the Elmhursts from the beginning was their joint desire to do good, to improve the world and to help people in quite specific ways. (I cannot help thinking how exciting it must have been for Leonard to realize that with Dorothy's help and money he could actually put into practice his educational ideals.) They wanted first of all to start a school whose classrooms would be "a farm, a garden, workshops, play grounds, woods and freedom" (p. 98). Not an academic institution in a mansion in a park, cut off from all "real life", but a group of children living in a working community of adults and sharing in its work. A large estate, therefore, in beautiful surroundings, but including farm, village and perhaps local craft workshops as well. (We must remember that Dorothy had three children and that this school would be for them as well as for others. It is interesting to compare its outline with the far more academic—dare I say conventional?—plans of Russell for the education of his children.) Dartington, hidden away in the woods and green valleys of South Devon, seemed the perfect place to begin the experiment.

Michael Young lists five "myths" which in his view shaped the development of Dartington, myths of a possible future rather than a lost golden past. They are:

Mankind can be liberated through education.

A new flowering of the arts can transform a society impoverished by industrialization and secularization.

A society which combines the best of town and country combines the best of both worlds.

A pervasive concern for the individual human being and his right to self-determination can be combined with the efficient operation of agriculture and industry.

The scientific spirit can be a continuous spur to progress. (P. 100)

Young goes on to say that

the underlying hope was not that one or other of the myths might be realised but that they all would be realised together in one place in an environment of

mutual support. New men would not be evolved except through the reform of education; they would not be able to fulfil themselves and express their feelings without the arts; they would not be whole without the beauty of nature near at hand to nourish them; and all would fail unless based securely on the foundation of a sound economy which did not sacrifice the individual to the machine or the organisation, and which was guided by science. (P. 101)

He then proceeds to devote a chapter to each of the myths and their attempted realization at Dartington. (The book is, incidentally, admirably well arranged: first a brief introduction to Dartington today; then we meet Leonard; then Dorothy; then we get them together; then a chapter on the setting; then one each on the five myths; finally a brief retrospective on the two protagonists and the course of their experiment.)

The school began with total informality, mixed up with the Elmhirsts' living quarters and relying on the children's initiative to determine its activities. Much of what went on at first was "learning by doing": keeping chickens to sell the eggs, growing and selling vegetables, visiting caves and hut circles, absorbing science and maths and history in the process. It was a wonderful relief for regimented children, but gradually even they began to find the need to make all their own decisions oppressive, while the adults found it difficult to come to any kind of decisions with nobody in charge. It became apparent that some kind of structure was necessary after all. It was then that W. B. Curry arrived, kind, rational, liberal, devoted to "progressive education", but also determined that the children should learn, should go to class, should be able to compete in national exams and go on to universities without embarrassment. His hero was Bertrand Russell, particularly the Bertrand Russell of *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, which became almost Curry's Bible. He never tired of quoting Russell and did his best to put the principles of that book into practice. It must have given him great pride to have Russell's children in his school—though I suspect some problems also, when he discovered how many principles our parents found to quarrel over. Speaking from personal experience of both schools, I would say that Curry's Dartington was more successful in putting Russell's ideas into practice than the author's own Beacon Hill. Curry was a remarkable man and I owe him more than I can say for the five years I spent at Dartington. It has made me sad to read in this book of his later difficulties and final departure from Dartington.

Besides the school the estate was home to the Jooss Ballet, the Chekhov Theatre, Bernard Leach's pottery, numerous musicians and a procession of gifted Americans, Englishmen and German refugees. It was a true cultural centre, but that was not all. It was also a centre for scientific

agriculture and forestry and it had its own building company and its own sawmills, both of which sold their services to the outside world. All these and many other projects are described in detail in Young's book, with an analysis of their varying successes and failures. To the Elmhirsts' regret and surprise (surprisingly), their project was not greeted with enthusiasm by the local people. Too many newfangled notions, too much free love and nudity, too little attendance at church, too little interest in hunting, the wrong kind of politics. It would have been astonishing if they had been welcome, coming in with all their foreign money and doing things the locals could not afford and would never have considered doing anyway. But gradually, over the years, their essential goodness and the solid worth of the projects overcame local suspicions and by the end of their lives both Leonard and Dorothy were accepted as local grandees. From my own perspective as the child of two permanently unadjusted radicals, I find this remarkable. But the Elmhirsts were never really rebels. As Michael Young points out more than once, they were always practical and ready to compromise, never fanatically devoted to principle at the cost of people.

The bulk of Young's book is devoted to a careful detailing of all Dartington's projects and experiments, the part the Elmhirsts played in each of them, and the ultimate fate of those projects. This is the book he set out to write and he has done it admirably. My only regret is that he does not include a map of the estate, which would be most helpful. If you want to know what was done in experimental agriculture, or how the hall and gardens were restored, or who among the famous came and went there during the Elmhirsts' life (almost everyone!), it is all here, together with a careful assessment by a participant of the lasting value of the whole. Society has changed in Dartington's direction, he thinks, specifically in education, in the mingling of town and country, in the involvement of people with the arts, and in the ever-increasing informality of morals and dress. But he is too cautious to claim influence, except in the immediate vicinity, where neighbours have gradually come to like what they see. Beyond that, who is to say whether Dartington led the way to the future or simply moved with the tide?

Having grown up in the shadow of madly optimistic Utopianism, I find myself almost allergic to its manifestations. It was difficult for me to read this book all the way through, particularly the long and hopeful quotations from the Elmhirsts themselves. They did not after all manage to change the world; it is far more stubborn than we thought in the twenties. But they did influence many people in many ways and those people went out and influenced others and that's the way it is done.

The Dartington experiment did not create a local Utopia (though it

might have seemed so to some of us there), but it did create a model: a flourishing centre for education, agriculture and the arts deep in the impoverished English countryside. It was a place where people could expand their ideas, be themselves, enjoy themselves, grow up (both the adults and the children). Not without conflict, of course. The ballet school felt that the theatre school got an undue share of attention; the traditional farmer resented the facilities provided for the experimenter; the “managers” felt the estate budget should balance, while the “artists” considered creative freedom the main thing. Leonard and Dorothy, the patrons, were constantly appealed to to decide for this and against that, and no doubt there was bad feeling, as in any small community. But the place itself was so beautiful and the ideal so lovely and the patrons so truly good, surely nobody could be there without being uplifted and made happier.

“Uplifted”—a curious, old-fashioned, rather absurd word, but appropriate here. Dartington was a noble experiment, pervaded by the benevolence of the Elmhursts. There was, after all, no reason why they should have devoted their lives and her money so completely to the welfare of others. Not many people do. No doubt it made them happy to do so, but that is part of the mystery. How could two such different people, from such totally different backgrounds, arrive at such agreement about the right way to use their talents and their opportunities? Michael Young describes this, but he does not explain it. Perhaps nobody can. Those of us who benefited from their goodness can only be glad that it was so.

I look back on the five years I spent at Dartington as some of the happiest and most fruitful of my life. It was so lovely, so peaceful and civilized, so filled with fantastic opportunities I can only now appreciate: music, ballet, theatre, the cider mill, the textile mill, the wild woods and the freedom to explore them, not to mention the admirable teachers in the school. During Curry’s years, when I was there, the school was somewhat cut off from the rest of the estate and I did not quite realize until I read this book what a fantastic enterprise the whole thing was. It can almost reconcile one to the amassing of immense personal fortunes. Michael Young deserves a vote of thanks from all who knew Dartington and the Elmhursts and would like to see them better known to the world at large.

Cambridge, Mass.