

# Interim report on the Beacon Hill School materials now in the International Institute for Social History in Amsterdam

by *Katharine Tait*

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THE PAPERS OF Beacon Hill School kept by my mother and moved over the years from house to house were stored in files, in boxes, in envelopes, in trunks and tea-chests in the attic, in old drawers in various rooms, even in an enormous laundry hamper. Many were damp, mouldy, rusty, crumpled, even nibbled by mice, and they were no more than part of the enormous quantity of material she had preserved—everything from the diary of her 1920 visit to Russia to a summons for leaving her car lights on in 1938. My mother's secretary and I made a rather feeble attempt to sort the papers as we packed them into fifty boxes in which they could be safely kept until they were removed and properly dealt with. They are now in Amsterdam, but whether sorted and catalogued or still in the original boxes, I do not know.

Twelve of these boxes (12 × 15 inches) are filled with school material of varying degrees of interest, *very* roughly sorted. About two and one-half cartons are taken up with the school accounts throughout the years of its existence. One is filled with children's exercise books and another with exercise books, art work, charts of history, etc., made by the children, and school timetables. Four contain school correspondence, unfortunately rather jumbled up. Letters were filed alphabetically and chronologically in large ring binders, with holes punched in both letters and carbons to hold them in the files. These binders had grown rusty over the years and we had to break them apart to rescue the letters. We found many personal and non-school public letters mixed into the files and did our best to weed out the most sensitive, though not in any systematic way.

There are school prospectuses from various years and places, cards of invitation to an end-of-term open day, copies of some of the school plays (later than those in *Thinking in Front of Yourself*, the book of 1934), newspaper cuttings, an envelope of miscellaneous stuff marked "Education, not Beacon Hill", a large typescript: "What was Beacon Hill?", which was probably material cut from *The Tamarisk Tree* at Virago's request. There is a whole box of financial and legal material, a quantity of correspondence to do with the school's appeal for money in 1935-36, and a vast number of health forms, which were apparently required by the bureaucrats every time children came and went from the school.

That is the bulk of the material and it is interesting, but in no way earth-shaking. Much more interesting are the mountains of correspondence: parents to school and vice versa, teachers' applications, prospective parents' enquiries and their answers, letters to and from a great variety of people about the aims and practices of the school. Also, of course, the children's end of term reports. Let me give the contents of one box as an example: an envelope of accounts; an envelope of prospective staff, 1935-37; two envelopes of prospective pupils, 1933 and 1934-36; an envelope of visitors, 1936-37; one of requests for a prospectus, 1935-37; one of applications for science master, 1931; one of reports, autumn 1934; miscellaneous envelopes of reports, menus, some files on individual pupils. All of this will be of interest to students of progressive education, but it is hardly revolutionary; a field for research rather than for argument.

Much more interesting to me, what I consider the heart of the collection, are five daily notebooks kept during the first years of the school and folders and notebooks for each child in the place. The careful detail is astounding, both for what it tells about the school and for what it shows about the way it was conducted. The daily diary, sometimes filled out by Bertrand Russell, sometimes by Dora Russell, usually by one of the teachers, recorded the weather, the temperature, the menu for the day, the health, behaviour and comments of the children: who was restless at naptime, who was bored in class, who didn't go to class, who had to be restrained from unkindness. The diary also recorded visitors to the school, parents, prospective parents, possible teachers, admirers. Besides this general record, each child had a folder containing about seven printed forms printed for the Montessori Method by Philip and Tacey Ltd., a big school supply firm. (I say "about seven" forms because not every folder has the same number or the same forms; some have obviously been mislaid over the years.) I might add, as an aside, that I have gained the impression from all this material that the

Montessori schools were more influential in setting up Beacon Hill School than Bertrand Russell's autobiography might suggest. Not in the running of the school, for which Montessori methods were too rigid, but in the choosing of supplies, the forms, books, toys and other equipment with which they started.

These folders are, to me, quite remarkable for what they tell of what it was thought necessary to know about children in a school. Nowadays, I should think, such forms must be quite different. The first page gives the child's name and birthday, parents' ages and occupation and address(es), personal antecedents, general appearance, remarks on the family; these last three not always filled out. On page 2 we find the child's "biological history": parents' age at marriage, whether they are related or suffer from any disease; then details of pregnancy, breast-feeding, age of cutting teeth, walking, talking. Page 3 is devoted to physical development: monthly height and weight, illnesses and comments, such as "feels cold and dislikes outdoors", and also "anthropological notes" about head measurements and other proportions. There is a double sheet for psychological observations, mostly empty, and a sheet for bowel movements, always carefully filled out. (These reappear in the daily school diary too, being considered in those days an infallible guide to both emotional and physical health.) One of the American children, incidentally, had a father who was a "real estate operator" and a mother who was an "astrologist"; we had all kinds in our school.

The psychological sheets are mostly empty because each child also had a notebook, likewise provided by Philip and Tacey, called "Diary of Psychological Observations". These notebooks give copious details of the health of each child, carefully noting each minor illness and dose with cod liver oil or other vile medicament; but also, again in detail, reports on the behaviour and attitudes of all of us who were in the school. Occasionally the prejudices of the recording teachers show through, suggesting a rather Spartan atmosphere, as in the comment on the poor boy who felt the cold, and in a certain admiration for the tougher participant in a fight, even though we were not supposed to fight, being free and enlightened and above that sort of thing.

These elaborate records were not maintained after the first year or two, and I suspect they were bought and begun simply as a proper part of the paraphernalia of running a school. Neither of the Russells had ever run a school before, or had anything to do with the running of one, so everything had to be learned from scratch, from the amount of food needed to the most efficient way to keep necessary records. Frequent IQ tests (records of which are among the papers here), careful

observation of health and energy, diligent recording of the conversations of free children: all these seemed at first equally necessary, though not equally congenial. They soon found that careful financial records and annual accountants' inspections were essential, whereas recording of bowel movements could be dispensed with. So the records here are fascinating for the first years, but gradually diminishing in volume and excitement as the years go on and the day to day work becomes more demanding. They were, after all, in the business of educating their children and others, not conducting an experiment to be recorded for posterity.

This is, as I said, a mere interim report, a menu as compared to a meal. The meal, however, will have to be provided by someone with more energy and dedication than I possess.

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