

Margaret Gillett

"That Dreadful Old Man"

Last fall, someone said to me, "Did you hear that that dreadful old man in England has died?" I was highly indignant when I learned that the "dreadful old man" was Alexander Sutherland Neill who, since 1921 when he and his wife, Ena, founded Summerhill, has been both stinging gadfly and clinging Scottish burr on the English educational scene. Neill, when he died last September in his ninetieth year, was an anathema to some and a kind of saint to others. He certainly became a cult hero in the turbulent decade of the 1960s. And his Summerhill was not only a "must" on any educator's visit to England, it was also the subject of an N.F.B. film, the substance of a number of books and innumerable articles, and the model for the free-school movement.

If Neill's approach to education could be summed up in two words, those words would be "freedom" and "love." Four years ago, he wrote in a letter published in this *Journal*:

I have run my small school for forty-seven years, allowing children to be happy and balanced, but the big world with its million schools still indoctrinates, disciplines, punishes . . . 80% of the teachers of England want to retain the cane. But there are signs of progress, of sanity; many primary schools now are happy places with happy faces and a buzz of conversation. Alas, this freedom stops when the secondary 0 levels force kids to sit down and learn in silence and boredom. Things move, but, oh, so slowly. All the individual teacher can do is to drop all silly dignity, all desire for respect; he or she should abolish fear from the classroom, in short, be human among human kids. One snag is that because the rest of the staff may be fear-inspirers the classes of the free teacher will be bedlam. I know; I had

to resign from such a school, or rather, I was sacked. Everyone seeks freedom and everyone is afraid of freedom. . . . in this wicked world, [we] can only carry on doing our little bit to give as many children happiness and love as we can.¹

Many educators agree, at least in theory, that freedom and love are of utmost importance, but Neill's values, goals and methods have been castigated as well as copied. In the new, austere era that seems to be looming up for the '70s in the wake of the "energy crisis" and other world-wide troubles, Neill's critics may find more ready audiences than they did in the '60s. A return to discipline (i.e. externally imposed order) may well be felt in the schools as one of the unexpected and far-reaching ripples of inflation, "post-Watergate morality," and the general belt-tightening that seems in store for all of us. The pendulum of cultural fashion may indeed be moving away from student dissent toward student docility and anti-Neill opinion may gain ground. The new milieu may provide a rationale, or at least an excuse, to support positions like that taken by B. F. Skinner. In a recent paper on "The Free and Happy Student,"² Skinner stated freedom in education is that the teacher should improve his control of the student rather than abandon it. "The free school," he said, "is no school at all."

Skinner began his cogent, controversial paper thus:

His name is Emile. He was born in the middle of the eighteenth century in the first flush of the modern concern for personal freedom. His father was Jean-Jacques Rousseau, but he has had many foster parents, among them Pestalozzi, Froebel, and Montessori down to A. S. Neill and Ivan Illich. He is an ideal student. Full of goodwill toward his teachers and his peers, he needs no discipline. He studies because he is naturally curious. He learns because things interest him. Unfortunately, he is imaginary . . .³

He then goes on to analyze how the "student who has been taught *as if he were Emile*" [his emphasis] is "almost too painfully real." According to Skinner:

- "The Emile we know doesn't work very hard . . . Hard work is frowned upon because it implies a 'work ethic,' which has something to do with discipline."
- "The Emile we know doesn't learn very much. His 'interests' are evidently of limited scope. Subjects that do not appeal to him he calls irrelevant. (We should not be surprised at this, since Rousseau's Emile, like the boys at

Neill's Summerhill, never got past the stage of knowledgeable craftsman.) . . ."

- "The Emile we know doesn't think very clearly. He has had little chance to learn to think logically and scientifically and is easily taken in by the mystical and the superstitious . . ."
- "And, alas, the Emile we know doesn't seem particularly happy. He doesn't like his education any more than his predecessors liked theirs . . ."⁴

Skinner also denies that the contemporary Emile is less aggressive, more kind, more loving, more creative, a more effective citizen, or a better person than the student of yore. He recognizes, however, that he may be overstating the case and that education cannot be blamed for all our social ills, but he considers that the free school (including Summerhill) has failed to create a truly free and happy student.

Skinnerian logic and the new cultural climate combined may well undermine Summerhill, especially now that Neill has gone. Even in more cheerful times, the doleful question was often asked whether Summerhill would survive its founders. Indeed, Neill once raised it himself in a letter to the editor of this *Journal*:

*I don't know what the future is. The Ministry measures with a yardstick that isn't mine . . . so many W.C.s, wash basins, so many cubic feet of sleeping air. To satisfy them will cost a lot of money, but then the snag is this . . . will S'hill survive me? Will the Establishment allow a school where kids can play all day long? My wife is excellent in her work but has no official qualifications. In my pessimistic moments I wonder what chance pioneering has in a world of race hatred and napalm and sick crime. But it's Xmas and I'll park my pessimism until the next visit of the Inspectors!*⁵

The future may still be dubious for Summerhill and the free school movement as a whole, but at least Neill survived that particular visit of the inspectors — thanks in part to worldwide responses to an appeal for funds that enabled him to meet government standards. Though, to my regret, I have never visited Summerhill, I was privileged to have a lively correspondence with Neill.⁶ So, in May '68 he wrote to me:

I think that we'll manage to please the inspectors and their

official standards. We get a full inspection in mid-June but I am not worrying. Shaw said: He who can does; he who cannot teaches. My paraphrase... He who can teaches: he who cannot inspects.

Then in June he reported:

The inspection went well even if it were the wrong one, for they looked for efficiency in lessons while we look for it in living, as you know. I told them that if the criterion were lessons and premises, I had no wish to be "recognised as efficient." But I suppose a govt dept must follow its red tape rules. Anyway we didn't have to worry about the inspectors.

With the inspection thus dismissed, Neill went on:

In two days I have to go to Exeter for my LLD but with the rail strike I can get there only by car, about 400 miles. Tempted to send them a wire... "Sorry can't come; influenza." The pomp of degree giving does not thrill me one bit... nor having to dine in evening dress with breeks I used 20 years ago and which won't button on me. The univy is giving me the robe I shall wear and I feel inclined to ask them to include a new pair of breeks. I am delighted with the student revolt. Best wishes, good friend.

Many of the students in the McGill Faculty of Education at that time were enormously interested in Neill, freedom, Summerhill, and the whole protest movement. And so we arranged a special showing of the N.F.B. film on Neill's school and sent the money we raised on to him. We also sent him the current issue of the *McGill Journal of Education* because it included a letter of his and some reactions to his contribution that had appeared in the previous number. In response to all this came the following letter, which is quoted here in full — it shows that though Neill was certainly not a "dreadful old man," he was something of a forthright, vitally concerned, old curmudgeon:

Do thank the folks who paid their movie entrance fees and raised 75 dollars for our rebuilding fund. Warming to have friends even if I haven't met them.

You ask about my L.L.D. I had to wear a tie, even a black one with a dinner jacket, and I like to think they actually thought me a gentleman. My weather conversation

was perfect. Luckily hon. graduates don't have to make speeches.

Thanks for Vol. III No. 2. Now brace yourself, woman. It is all wrong; nearly every page has the words teaching and learning. It simply doesn't fit into a world of war and hate and bingo and trivial TV and universal violence. You can't teach anything of any importance — to love, to be charitable, to be unselfish. True one can teach hate. Vide the white kids in the deep south and their hate of negroes, vide the Hitlerjugend. And outside the placid academic cloister of a university the hate merchants win; they use the academic scientists to invent their napalm and bombs, to make insecticides and poisonous soap substitutes, to find the moon when the earth is full of injustice and hate. The drug merchants make infinitely more money than the doctors do. Sick, Margaret, a sick world and your Journal pages bypass it all with their futile emphasis on learning. This isn't a world of B.A.s and M.A.s and books and thought; it is a world of tawdry surface values. Look at any railway bookstall with its scores of flashy magazines devoted to women and how they can look their best; look at the hundreds of crime paperbacks and sexy magazines. Your university, every university is a world apart from all these. In your pages one or two students raise their voices for freedom but again they think of the damned subjects not of being free themselves. Poor kids, how can they seek freedom since all their lives they lived with crutches... parents, teachers, professors, religionists? Their first demand should be to destroy the gulf between staff and pupils, the stupid "respect" non-human gulf. Is it one whit better than it was 60 years ago? Then, in Edinburgh University Prof. Chrystal died, a great mathematician. I sought Prof. George Sainstbury the prof of English.

"I am editor of The Student, sir, and I'd be grateful if you would give us an obituary of Professor Chrystal."

"Ah," he said, "I am just going into my Honours Class and I mean to say something about the professor. If you are quick at taking notes, you can come in."

"But, sir, I have been in your Honours Class for three years." He asked me my name. I told him.

"Dear me, how you've grown!" I had been six feet for the previous ten years. I doubt if there were a dozen in

the class. I wonder if that could happen today. Students have a large say in curriculum; they should have the power to protest against a dead course . . . e.g. that in psychology, where a B.A. knows all about rats and not a thing about kids.

In Summerhill where lessons are optional a poor teacher has to leave because he or she can get no class. I'd like to see the universities run on those lines.

I could go on for pages, but I have just returned from New York and a TV appearance on N.B.C., returned to find a pile of mail at least a foot high.

Sorry I can't meet you, Margaret. I am sure we'd get on together easily.

I wish you as Happy a New Year as these unsettled days will allow.

Clearly, our times and our society continued to trouble Neill through all his days, but I am glad that the last letter I received from him did not end in despair. He wrote in March 1970:

. . .Pioneering is very, very difficult these days, but things are hopeful; I am overwhelmed with letters from all over the world, Japan, Mexico, America, Germany, Brazil, in fact my life is that of an office boy. It is encouraging to know that so many people are interested in freedom

Early in the Spring of 1972, I planned a visit to England during my sabbatical and I wrote to Neill to see if I might visit him at Summerhill. In reply, I received a printed card which read:

WE ARE SORRY TO DISAPPOINT YOU
BUT THE SCHOOL NO LONGER ENTERTAINS
VISITORS AT ANY TIME.

And an unknown hand had written on the back, "Sorry but Mr. Neill is not now well enough to reply personally."

I knew then, of course, that the end could not be far off for that fine old man who really cared for freedom, and love and kids. News of his death on September 24, 1973 must have brought sadness to a great many people in a great many parts of the world. And whether educators admire or revile him,

whether they believe in his kind of freedom or Skinner's, whether they support orthodox schools or alternatives, most would probably agree that Neill was one of those rare individuals who has helped change the nature of schooling in our times.

notes

1. A. S. Neill in a letter to Joan Haines, *McGill Journal of Education*, Vol. III, No. 2 (Fall 1968), pp. 137-38.
2. B. F. Skinner, "The Free and Happy Student," originally published in the *New York University Education Quarterly*, Spring 1973 and reprinted by permission in the *Phi Delta Kappan*, September 1973, pp. 13-16.
3. B. F. Skinner, *op. cit.*, *Kappan*, p. 13.
4. *Ibid.*
5. A. S. Neill in a letter to the author, dated 23 December 1967.
6. Some of this has already been published in the *McGill Journal of Education*, Vol. III, No. 1 (Spring 1968), pp. 24-28; some of the remainder (covering 1968-70) is included here.