

David Smith

A Memory of A. S. Neill

I first encountered the writings of A. S. Neill in 1961 when a friend gave me a copy of *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing*. This book was one of the few on education that I have ever read from cover to cover without once putting down. I was so excited by the concept of education at Summerhill, that I discussed it with some of my classes at MacDonald College, and I was stirred to write a letter of appreciation and comment to the author. I said that I would like to visit the school one day, if the opportunity ever presented itself. Neill wrote back promptly a witty, scintillating letter, saying that I would be a welcome visitor to Summerhill.

The chance came in 1964 when I spent a year visiting schools in England and Wales. As my travel schedule included visits to just about every type of school, I was able to see Summerhill within the context of the system of education in England and Wales. My schedule included visits to the various kinds of state secondary schools and also to a variety of independent schools from the famous St. Paul's, Charterhouse and Rugby to the lesser known, but more "progressive" ones such as Bedales, Dartington Hall and Wennington.

I arranged with Neill to visit Summerhill on a Saturday at the end of September, just as the school year was getting started there. This fitted in well with my visits to other places in East Anglia. Since it was an independent school, Summerhill began its academic year a little later than the state schools, so I arrived only the day after the pupils had registered.

When I reached Summerhill, the first person I met was a young woman, who, I would guess, was in her twenties and who, I discovered upon introducing myself, was Zoe, Neill's daughter. She directed me to the house where Neill greeted

me at the door. I was not too sure what to expect here but, on the basis of my other visits, the usual routine was to be ushered into the headmaster's or headmistress' study where we would have a cup of tea and talk across a desk.

That was not the case with Neill; for I never saw his study. Moreover, he was dressed very casually in an old pair of jeans, an open shirt, an old jacket and hiking boots. He looked and walked in a way much younger than his eighty-one years. I would have guessed him to be not more than sixty-five or seventy. Without any ado, he immediately suggested that we leave the school and go for a drive to the sea, which was about three or four miles to the east. He called his large dog — I think it was a collie — which leapt into the back seat, and we drove off.

My first impression of Neill was that he was a stolid, stern, unsmiling sort of person but, as we began to banter back and forth, his seeming gruffness vanished, and he revealed himself to be an immensely warm and likeable personality. I soon found that he was one of those people who can tell you a hilarious joke, but who will not crack even the faintest smile himself!

Arriving at the sea, we got out of the car and began walking along a deserted pebble beach. I noticed that Neill had taken a golf iron and a tennis ball from the trunk of the car. He said that these were to help give the dog some exercise.

I remember asking Neill to tell me something of the history of the school. He said that Summerhill had evolved very substantially from the function it had had when it was first established in 1921. In the early days, a good proportion of the pupils consisted of those who had dropped out of, or had been expelled from other schools, or they were "problem children" (of problem parents) sent to Summerhill more or less as a last resort. Hence the concept of education at Summerhill was originally strongly therapeutic — one in which the child would undergo experiences to cure him of his hatred and fear of authority. Over the years the clientele had changed. Now there were more "normal" children who were there because their parents believed in the school's philosophy and practice of self-regulation. Neill now thought that preventing alienation was a far more important function of schools than trying to cure it. He spoke knowledgeably, and a little bit scornfully, of some large schools which by their character create problem children and then hire counsellors to patch up the students' lives.

Occasionally, as we were talking, he whacked the tennis ball with the golf club and drove it out to sea. His dog, panting and jumping, plunged into the surf and swam out to retrieve it. The dog always came back with the ball for more of the same.

I asked Neill about the circumstances of Summerhill now. He stated that there were then forty pupils at all levels of the school — with a good group from the United States. The school had been through a rough time financially, and at one point in the late 1950s he feared that it might have to close. But with the publication of *Summerhill* in the United States, he had made enough money to keep it running for the time being. He said that *Summerhill* had been compiled from some of his recent writings, as well as from material drawn from several of his previous books. While it was being put together, he had not been well enough to revise the manuscript as thoroughly as he wanted with the result that much of the Freudian thought, which now does not inspire his work as much as it used to, was retained. He hoped that its retention would not give a faulty impression of the school as it was operating in the sixties.

We walked for some time — perhaps an hour. In plying Neill with questions and listening intently to his answers, his insightful stories about children at Summerhill and his witty anecdotes about some of the visitors, I had lost count of time. But suddenly, we wheeled around and retraced our steps.

As we made our way back, I asked how much influence upon the rest of the educational system he thought that Summerhill had had. Neill was quite despondent on this matter. He said that he had given many lectures and seminars at universities and teacher training colleges on child psychology, almost all of which were usually well received. But in monitoring developments in the schools, he saw few substantial changes. There was a reduction in the amount of corporal punishment, but still, schools were organized along authoritarian lines. "They make active children sit at desks, teach them mostly useless subjects, and make them into docile, uncreative citizens."

Neill referred to the public criticism of his friend, Michael Duane, headmaster of Risinghill School, located in a crowded, multiracial, and impoverished area of London. Within the community, murder, larceny and prostitution were commonplace and within the school, gang warfare, vandalism and

truancy were serious problems. After Duane had been appointed headmaster in 1960, he had gradually introduced policies designed to change the ethos of the school. Corporal punishment was abolished; a house system was introduced to give the pupils a sense of belonging; and programs were set up to allow for more creative kinds of work. Efforts were made to reduce inter-group hostilities and to improve pupil-pupil and pupil-staff relations. Although the school had received much support from parents, resistance to the new program developed among some of the staff, and the Local Education Authority feared that the school was not projecting the "proper" image to the public. (Unknown to us then, the school was to be closed the following year.) Neill cited Risinghill as an example of the way in which political considerations often take precedence over educational ones.

We crunched our way over the pebbles back to Neill's car and made the return trip to Summerhill. There, Neill immediately took me on a tour of the school.

The tour began in the residences where the younger children lived with their respective house mothers. I noticed that the senior girls, however, lived separately from the boys who were accommodated in converted railway coaches away from the main residence. I expressed my surprise to Neill, since I knew at schools, such as Dartington Hall, boys and girls lived in co-educational residences. Neill said that Summerhill had evolved along its present lines in the days when prudish parents frowned upon co-educational residences, and now, the students themselves, as a whole, had not expressed any strong preferences to change the existing arrangement.

We moved to the main lounge, which was a comfortable room containing second-hand, but serviceable, armchairs and couches. Most of the furniture here would be completely worn out by the end of the school year, said Neill, when it would have to be replaced. This replacement was part of an annual routine. One could see how not making a fetish out of care for the furnishings was another example of the way in which the school was built around the children and not the children around the school.

Near the lounge was a library — a modest-sized room containing several high shelves of oldish books, many of which Neill said were given to the school by former students and other supporters. The door to the library was kept locked, but children could use the room when they wanted to by asking a teacher for it to be opened. Neill pointed out that

books generally did not play as important a part in the education of Summerhill children as they did in other schools.

There were no classrooms in the usual sense in the school, but there were a number of well-used work areas. I recall vividly the generous space given over to painting, pottery, woodwork, and crafts, the compact science workshop and a very new, bright and attractive room for primary children. On the walls, benches and work tables were some stunning examples of the children's creative work. Neill was convinced that under the conditions of personal freedom at Summerhill, children were far more imaginative, original and creative in art, crafts and drama and their other subjects than their counterparts in the state schools.

At this point Neill wanted me to go my own way in the school saying, "If you want to understand how Summerhill works, you must see the kids." As it was a Saturday, there were no classes that day, but it was interesting to see what the pupils were doing in their leisure time. I wandered through the residence where some were chatting among themselves, or listening to records, or, in the case of the younger ones, running around. The children were friendly and open, although I believe they would not have been had my visit been later in the school year when large numbers of curious visitors descend upon the school.

I went into the playing field where youngsters were stalking each other, Indian style, in the grass. At the famous giant beech tree I stopped to watch two American boys who were taking turns climbing half-way up and then swinging on a thick rope through a long, breathtaking arc. To me, this activity, more than any other, typified the freedom of the children there.

On my way to supper, I passed through Neill's vegetable garden. At one end was a tree bearing large rosy apples just at the point of harvesting. Below, a young boy was plucking those within reach and hitting them, like baseballs, in every direction. I think that I was the only one to see him. Then one good pop fly soared in the direction of the residence and crashed through an upper window. I expected to hear at least a little commotion from within the residence after the tinkle of shattered glass had ceased, but there was none.

Neill invited me to stay over after supper to attend a general school meeting which was held in the large downstairs lobby of the main residence. On the bulletin board, there was a list of about twenty rules — more than I have

seen posted in some state schools. I skimmed over the list quickly and remember reading that students were not allowed to walk barefoot because of the danger of picking up infections and that students were forbidden to swear in Leiston because swearing was offensive to the village people. Neill pointed out that these rules were not his, but those of the total school body which had agreed upon them at the general meetings.

Arriving in the lobby, the children sat on the floor, or on the stairs, leaned against a wall or draped themselves over the bannister. Neill himself stretched back on a wooden chair, puffing at his pipe. During the first item of business, which was the election of a chairman, and on subsequent issues, I observed that Neill, his wife and the teachers were relatively inconspicuous participants and they voted individually on the issues along with the children.

I watched carefully to see whether the broken-window episode would come up and it did. It was raised by a teacher who reported that a window had been broken in her room. The boy who had done it remained silent, but was visibly uncomfortable as charges and countercharges were made among the other pupils. After a few minutes, he claimed responsibility for the damage and volunteered to pay for the repairs. Neill talked to me about this incident, saying that the boy in question was a new pupil this year. If the incident had happened later in the year, the lad would probably have admitted right away that he was the one who had broken the window. He may have held back because of the fear of punishment that children often bring with them from their former schools.

Neill walked with me to my car. I thanked him for the visit which was a long hoped-for opportunity to see Summerhill "live." Neill said that our talk had given him both a chance to reminisce and to look forward. "I have run this school," he said, "for forty years. I just wish that I could run it for another forty." At this point I could not help but feel my admiration for Neill's tremendous courage of conviction, for his great devotion to children in the continuing work of the school, and for the more permanent contribution he had made, and was continuing to make, to educational thought. When I said good-bye, I was already experiencing what a pupil of his later put so well, "In Neill, there is a golden flame that makes you feel warm when you're near him."