

**T. D. Burridge**

## **Who's Afraid of A. S. Neill?**

Neill, as he was called by all who knew him, was an odd character, a stylite among modern progressive educators. Indeed, although he was professionally concerned with education for most of his long life, Neill can hardly be called an educator at all, in any normal sense of the word. Instead, or so it seems to me, he is best described as a psychological therapist — perhaps one of genius, certainly one of very great innovation. His intellectual stock-in-trade consisted almost entirely of two ideas, both fixed and both open to an educational Pandora's Box of questions, but both of undeniable value in the treatment of the maladjusted. Simply stated, and Neill was a great simplifier, these ideas amounted to two propositions: "Set the child free" and "Do not frustrate his emotional development." They are, of course, closely related and there is nothing very new in them. In many ways, they can be said to have received their penultimate formulation in the hands of Jean-Jacques Rousseau — although Neill attempted at one point to embellish them with notions drawn from the new-fangled psychology of his day. What distinguishes Neill from everyone else in the field, however, was that he was the first man to apply them, totally and exclusively, to the rearing of children.

By far the greater part of Neill's experience, it must be emphasized, was with "difficult" children. This applies just as much to the largely American contingent at Summerhill in later years as to the earlier, mainly British, intake. The American kids and/or their parents were usually traumatized to a marked degree by the cultural upheaval consequent upon the Vietnam war; the British were often the psychologically shell-shocked victims of peculiar family experiences compounded by unimaginative treatment at public or private schools. Indeed,



Neill himself was just such a case having, it would appear, a permanent hang-up about sex as a result of his boisterous, Calvinist-derived upbringing in Scotland.

How then can Neill's influence in the wider field of education be accounted for, and what is the character of that influence?

In the first place, it should be noted that Neill himself, except in some unguarded moments, was extremely circumspect about the extent to which his ideas and methods could or might be generally emulated. He would not have been surprised in the slightest at the recent statement by Herbert Kohl<sup>1</sup> that

The free school movement sometimes elevated the young to the role of saviors of the old, and indeed of society itself. The teachers would be inspired by their students if only they would let the kids alone. But it didn't work that way; the young people interpreted the hands-off attitude of grown-ups as helpless or rejection....<sup>2</sup>

For Neill was nothing if not paradoxical. Though anti-teacher, he was in fact a superb one; though anti-authoritarian, his influence dominated Summerhill; though professing suspicion of the education professors, he wrote book after book on their subject; apparently a libertarian, he was entirely self-controlled; and, totally dedicated, he was not without a sense of humor. Indeed, his elevation in the last decade of his long life to the status of North American educational *guru* is really a bit of a joke which almost certainly gave him a last, wry chuckle or two. His ideas apart, Neill's practical success owed a great deal to the fact that he was an utterly self-confident and old-fashioned strong "character," who was able to attract respect as well as love from his pupils.

At the same time, Neill was also an astute propagandist for his ideas and his school. There is an artful simplicity in his anecdotal literary style which has not been sufficiently recognized. Like Rousseau in his time, Neill has been widely read — in Britain between the wars, and in the U.S. during the troubled 1960s. In both cases the time was ripe. In Britain, Neill was very much a part of the generation which reacted against the Victorians, whose strictures achieved widespread popularity after World War 1. That he proposed not to teach his children anything struck home, not solely because of his psychological views, but also because his proposal was associated with the moral and cultural revulsion against the civilization that had produced industrial hells and total war.



Much the same may be said concerning the impact of his book, *Summerhill*, upon the U.S. and Canada in the past ten years.

Cultural moods, however, tend to be transitory; already there are indications that the glow of the current brand of educational romanticism is beginning to fade. Daily exhortations to the effect that our life-style is changing, must change, are being shrugged off. Historically, most people in a time of confusion tend to go on living more or less as they did before. Neill's ideas — in their totality, that is — were eventually rejected in Britain. Moreover, it is abundantly clear that Neill, again in almost identical fashion to Rousseau, underestimated the intelligence of the child and the need for this intelligence to be cultivated.

Nevertheless, Neill's influence on educational practice, if indirect and partial, must be reckoned as formidable. His books are a superb storehouse of case histories in the complexities of childhood and growing-up. If he raised more questions than he solved, then they remain important questions. He was a masterful deflator of educational pomposity and jargon. He loved children but never forgot that each one was as unique as himself.

Neill cannot be categorized; in any spectrum of educational theory or practice he stands alone. It is doubtful that he will ever have any successful imitators. Even so, there is one way in which he may be readily identified, for essentially Neill was an eccentric and eccentricity occupies a respectable place in British tradition. Custom makes two points about the phenomenon: first, that the eccentric should be tolerated if at all possible; and second, that some of his more curious notions or practices may be worth unbiased examination. Neill would have neither wanted nor expected more than this; he was, and is, nothing to be afraid of . . . .

## notes

1. Author of *The Age of Complexity*, *36 Children*, *Teaching the Un-teachable*, *The Open Classroom*, etc.
2. *The New York Review of Books*, December 13, 1973, p. 48.