

Second Eutopy: Summerhill Unschool

It should be understood that the play of children is not child's play. Their games should be seen as their most serious-minded activity.

Michel de Montaigne (1533-92)

The greatest thing in this world is to know how to be [at ease with] oneself.

Michel de Montaigne

There was never a tutor that did professly teach Felicity, though that be the mistress of all other sciences... [At university] we studied to inform our knowledge, but knew not for what end we so studied.

Thomas Traherne (1637-74)

*When the voices of children are heard on the green
And laughing is heard [in Summer]hill...*

[mostly] William Blake (1757-1827)

The object of human life is, above all, to be happy

Robert Owen (1771-1858)

Making children happy now will make them happy twenty years hence

Sydney Smith (1771-1845)

An extract from the 'educational supplement' to the 'Newspaper from Nowhere':

[Time Traveller]: *"I was engaged in questioning one of the members of this 21st century on how life was conducted two centuries on from my own. I want a word with you about your education. I... gather that you let your children run wild, and don't teach them anything. In short, that you have so refined your education that now you have none."*

[Denizen of 'Nowhere']: *"In the nineteenth century... real education was impossible. The whole theory of their so-called education was that it was necessary to shove information into a child... Or else he would lack it lifelong. Hurry... forbade anything else. All that is passed. We are no longer hurried. The information lies to each one's hand until his own inclinations impel him to seek it. In this, as in other matters, we have become wealthy. We can afford to give ourselves time to grow."*

News from Nowhere 1891, William Morris (1834-96)

Summerhill: “...Giving Ourselves Time to Grow”

‘Eutopic witnesses’

The Educational Inspector

“It would be difficult to find a more natural, open-faced, unselfconscious collection of boys and girls...”

“The children are full of life and zest. Of boredom and apathy there was no sign. An atmosphere of contentment pervades the school. The affection with which it is regarded by its old pupils is evidence of its success.

“The children’s manners are delightful. They may lack, here and there, some of the conventions of manners, but their friendliness, ease and naturalness, and their total lack of shyness and self-consciousness made them very easy, pleasant people to get on with.”

HMI Report on Summerhill 1949

A Clergyman’s-Eye-View

“It’s a wonderfully happy bunch of children you have here, Mr Neill... What a pity they’re pagan”.

Student Visitor in 1963 (the creator of this website)

So distorted has the image of Summerhill become by the sensation-seeking press that, as one who has been able to acquire a broader perspective of the school by living in it for a while, I would like to state, in conclusion, that I consider Summerhill to be a community where the sane priorities of social living are implicit in its daily life. Far from considering Neill an extremist - much less a crank - I regard him as a middle-of-the-roader, whose presence in a saner world might well have passed unnoticed, but whose published findings of his little educational laboratory in East Suffolk may contribute to the understanding of the proper basis of psychological health in our schools of the future.

*My visit to Summerhill at an end, I left by the front gate, beside which stood the wall whereon was written the inscription which not only identifies the school, but, with a warning to motorists, accidentally defines its ethos: **SUMMERHILL - CHILDREN PLAYING***

From: College thesis 1963, published by **The Educational Heretics Press** as **A.S Neill - Bringing Happiness to Some Few Children**, by Bryn Purdy 1997

Staff-member, (extracts from letters to the above student, 1962-3)

As you foresaw, I liked the atmosphere of Summerhill very much and was very impressed by the old man... Consequently I’ve arranged to give up my job and start at Summerhill at the beginning of next term . . .

You were right when you said that this was real education. I've never seen a bunch of kids more natural and uninhibited as these are. Their frankness is wonderful to observe... It's a little sad too, to think that so few children are given this chance of self-expression and that the majority must spend their life governed as it is by a repressive environment.

It seems to me that it's all well and good protecting children from parents and society but the system of fines [here] is just not adequate to protect children from other children. The root of the trouble is that there are too many problem kids here and too many new kids. As Ena [Mrs. Neill] says, 'It's just not Summerhill any more'.

Are you interested in my observations after spending a term at Summerhill?..I'm rather perturbed at the behaviour of the old pupils who came down at the end of the term. They are a really decent lot but without exception they all trooped off to the pub and quite a few of them came back having drunk too much...

We don't know enough about child psychology We have problems with the children and we just have no idea how to cope with them...

The kids are wonderful. I've never met kids as sincere, as loving and as well-balanced (integrated) as our kids are. For all its shortcomings the school is doing a wonderful job and this sort of education must be... the basis of future education.

Thirtyfive years later, after attending the seventieth anniversary of the opening of Summerhill, May 14th 1997

Ay! Summerhill! What an effect that place has on people! I spent a mere 18 months there, and it has affected the rest of my life. Looking back over the years of a not uneventful life, [meat porter in Gateshead, civil servant in Durham, vendangeur in France, butcher's boy in Geneva, wire-factory worker in Germany, Spanish telephonist in Seville, headteacher in Vermont, U.S.A., restaurant proprietor in Barcelona, and a Europe-wide travel courier] if I were to pick out any period that was the most fulfilling in every respect, it would have to be the time I spent at Summerhill.

Going back to it last year was like a dream... Such pleasure just to be there again! Such emotion at meeting old friends who were young when I knew them! It was as though I'd never been away. And I suppose it was because Summerhill has never been far away from my thoughts over the years. I've lots of fond and vivid memories I'll never forget.

Wilf Blakeley

Three Summerhillians:

First: “I preferred the reality to the book”

Albert Lamb [who read the book as a child in America, where he was also a pupil of John Holt, telephoned on the evening of the presentation of this paper at New Lanark in 2004.]

“I had a rude awakening as I realised that [Summerhill the school] was very different from the book... By the time I had fully awakened, I realized that I preferred the reality to the book”

*“It didn't **always** [pause] **feel** like Utopia.”* [in response to to a question whether he considered Summerhill a true Utopia]

Albert Lamb [who was editor of Summerhill, published by Penguin, 1992]

Second:

“I was talking to my mum yesterday and she said something like: ‘I didn't do a very good job with you when you were little.’ So I told her she did the very best job she ever could have done by sending us to Summerhill – all my childhood memories are like some fantasy adventure – for years after I left Summerhill I kept dreaming about Summerhill and not being able to figure out whether it was real or not!”

Mim – ex-pupil

Third: “Summerhill is just happiness.”

I perorate with an outstanding ‘eu-testimony’. It was spoken to microphone by a child who was not a native English speaker. To some it may not be considered ‘good’ English, but I cite it as a perfect example of ‘eutopian’, the language: simple, concise, spontaneous, gender-free, and sublimely internationalist.

Summerhillians are Summerhillians, no Japanese or English or French or American or anything else. No. We are Summerhillians.. Summerhill is the best school I never been. All the boys my boyfriends; all the girls my girlfriends. I love dem. Summerhill is just happiness . . .

Japanese girl, ITV program 1985.