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Book Reviews

The Pendulum Swings: transforming school reform
BERNARD BARKER, 2010
Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books
220 pages, £18.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-85856-468-5

This is a provocative and challenging book by a teacher and educationist whose work I have always much admired. I was inspired by the concept of a 'common education' that he articulated in his 1986 book *Rescuing the Comprehensive Experience*, and I was glad that he went on to develop his views on the aims of a 'comprehensive' education in a chapter he wrote for the first Bedford Way Paper I ever edited for the Institute of Education, *Redefining the Comprehensive Experience*, published a year later. In this new book, he uses a fascinating combination of statistical data, detailed case-studies and personal anecdotes to mount a devastating critique of government education policy since 1988 and to make the case for a set of imaginative ideas for transforming school reform. All this makes for exciting reading; but I find that I part company with Bernard Barker on two issues: the first concerns his views on the limited role that schools can play in effecting social change and enhancing life-chances; and the second relates to his somewhat optimistic contention that we are about to see a rejection of the dehumanising ideas that have dominated education policy-making for at least the last 30 years.

The central thesis of the book is that the following five illusory beliefs have underpinned both Conservative and New Labour school reform policies since 1988:

1. Effective and efficient schools overcome disadvantage and improve life chances.
2. Markets and competition improve school efficiency and outcomes.
3. Central regulation and inspection ensure high standards of quality and performance.
4. Successful leaders transform their schools and change the system.
5. Best practice in teaching and organisation can be transferred from one site to another so that every school performs at a high level.

Professor Barker discusses these 'illusory beliefs' in Chapter One and then reviews each of them critically in Chapters Two to Six.

The author is determined to make a strong case for rejecting each of these propositions, and his arguments are forceful and well-documented; but I have to say that I find his treatment of the first one less than convincing. I can understand the need to reject many of the simplistic criteria by which 'successful' schools are often judged, but I think we need to be careful about how far we go down the road of dismissing the 'effective schools' movement. Bernard Barker and I share a profound admiration for the work of Brian Simon; and, in my case, it was while I was one of Brian's PGCE students at the University of Leicester in 1965/66 that I came to appreciate what the comprehensive reform was all about. One of the guiding principles that underpinned Brian's work was that a comprehensive school that respected each child's right to be educated *could* overcome 'social disadvantage', enhance the life-chances of hitherto deprived working-class children and ultimately transform society. Brian would have totally rejected Professor Diane Reay's contention, quoted with approval in this book (page 5) that 'the biggest influence on educational achievement' has to be 'family background'.

It is now fashionable to cite with approval Basil Bernstein's absurd and highly ambiguous maxim, that 'education cannot compensate for society' – the title of an article that he contributed to *New Society* in February 1970. This can be viewed only as a crude form of 'social determinism' which breeds a dire fatalism and acts as a sort of 'self-fulfilling prophecy'. If teachers can be persuaded that they cannot bring about human development or social change through schooling, then presumably they will simply give up trying. In his ground-breaking 1971 book *Intelligence, Psychology and Education*, Brian argued that to say that a child was the 'victim' of its social background was as dangerous as saying that it was the 'victim' of a fixed IQ – if you abandon heredity for family circumstances or environment, you merely switch from the round-about to the swings, without giving any evidence of an intention to leave the fairground' (p. 22).

Another key principle that underpinned Brian's work – and has remained one of *FORUM*'s abiding concerns – was a belief in the concept of *human educability*, and this is a concept that, somewhat surprisingly, receives no treatment as such in Bernard Barker's book. If the pendulum is to swing in the right direction, surely it has to swing *away from* an obsession with all forms of crude ability labelling. Yet at one point, the author talks about Alan North (the pseudonym for a working-class lad who become Vice-Chancellor of a large and distinguished university in the 1990s), as 'an exceptionally gifted working-class student' – a description that seems to me to send out all the wrong messages about the way we regard human beings.

In a couple of articles written for *FORUM* in 1982, Caroline Benn set out to challenge what she called 'the myth of giftedness' and argued that once we have accepted the argument that the search for 'giftedness' is limited to the hunt for a few, we 'give up our commitment to looking for gifts, talents and abilities in the vast majority of children'. Comprehensive education is all about developing and nurturing the unique talents and abilities that each child

possesses and in the process promoting the kind of learning that is free from the needless constraints imposed by ability-focused practices. It is really quite extraordinary that a White Paper of October 2005 should contain the statement that children can be divided into three main categories: 'the gifted and talented, the struggling and the just average'. Francis Galton! Thou shouldst be living at this hour.

Chapter Seven of this book is a beautiful piece of writing which discusses 'progressive' alternatives to the 'elaborate top-down architecture of market-based reform' established since 1988. Bernard Barker argues that the leaders of the early 1960s comprehensive schools, especially, those with 'a background in progressive education', understood the harmful consequences of competitive individualism, and particularly for the less successful members of our society. And he pays tribute to the early pioneers of comprehensive schooling, such as Caroline Benn and Brian Simon who, in his words, were 'deeply committed to social justice and working-class education, and believed that everyone could learn and succeed, whatever their social origins and disadvantages' (p. 127) – a tribute which would appear to be at variance with pessimistic comments elsewhere in the book about education's potential. The author argues persuasively that the community college, with its 'organic conception of people living and learning together', can be seen as a direct challenge to the ideology of education markets, where 'citizens' are nothing more than 'consumers'. And he makes use of a 2007 article by Michael Fielding where Michael insists that schools should be 'a source of optimism and energy in their communities' and where he emphasises the democratic, obligation to provide 'an affirmation of possibility'.

This is all very positive and life-affirming. Yet Bernard returns at the end of the book to what I regard as a very negative view of what today's schools can achieve. Having pointed out on page 171 that 'education is intrinsically valuable', and that 'peoples' lives can be transformed through shared activities and experiences', he reiterates that 'schools tend to reproduce and transmit social and cultural characteristics'. One of his concluding recommendations is that we should 'cease to expect student outcomes that are very different from the social composition of a school intake' – which seems to me to be profoundly defeatist.

Finally, Bernard seems to think that we have reached the point where we can be optimistic about the future; and, as evidence of his claim that 'the pendulum is swinging', he quotes from one of Michael Gove's 2009 speeches in which the Shadow Education Secretary declared his support for the cause of 'greater school autonomy' and wanted us to believe that school freedoms were 'central to Conservative education plans'. This is, of course, sheer hypocrisy; and Gove's attempt to destroy the powers of the local authorities goes along with a determination to see that all schools are organised along lines of which Conservative politicians would heartily approve.

Clyde Chitty

Susan Isaacs: a life freeing the minds of children
PHILIP GRAHAM, 2009
London: Karnac Books
500 pages, £29.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-185575-691-5

Philip Graham's preface begins at the very end, with the obituaries. *The London Times (13 October, 1948)* announced:

> …her teaching has probably influenced educational theory and practice in this country more than that of any living person. Her contribution to psycho-analytical theory ... has also been notable.

The obituary in *Nature* drew attention to 'her exceptional capacity for instantly translating her thoughts and impressions into verbal expression.' A seven-page obituary in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* by a leading psychoanalyst details her 'supreme contribution to her times' by acting as a bridge between the two professions of psychoanalysis and education, 'interpreting the one to the other'. And yet, claims Graham, when asked whose biography he was writing, 'the name usually elicits polite disbelief that anyone could write about someone so obscure' (p. x).

So Graham himself casts this biography as a mission to rescue Isaacs from obscurity, as a re-consideration of her achievements, and as a re-evaluation of her historical significance in the two fields of education and psychoanalysis, a significance 'which can hardly be exaggerated' (p. xii). Those who already know Isaacs' published work, and admire her position as an important progressive thinker in education, will applaud this programme, though not without wondering why Graham makes quite so much of her so-called obscurity.

The preface ends with the author's frank account of his qualifications for writing the book: he is neither an educationist nor a psychoanalyst. He is, however, 'an academic child and adolescent psychiatrist', with close professional links with the fields of both psychoanalysis and education. He knew very little about Susan Isaacs when he began, beyond what he could learn from the 'only previous account of her life' by a former student, Dorothy Gardner. Her book *Susan Isaacs: the first biography*, Graham rightly classes as hagiography, rather than a considered appraisal, though it is unclear why he dismisses Lydia Smith's 1985 publication (*To Understand and to Help)*. He sets himself the task of searching for original material that was unavailable to Gardner – and here he struck lucky. He has had access to a great many letters to and from Nathan Isaacs, Susan's second husband, some in the Archive in the London Institute of Education, some in private hands. He draws extensively on this secret weapon, as we shall see. In addition, he has met and interviewed Susan Isaacs' niece by marriage, who knew Nathan and Susan well during her childhood and adolescence, and two pupils of the Malting House School in the mid 1920s. He

has even tracked down two former patients from Isaacs' years as a practising psychoanalyst (one of whom is Jonathan Miller, who 'remembers little' of the experience). His biographical resources are thus enviably rich and plentiful.

By and large, this is a very traditional biography. We are marched through the years in strict chronological order, though first we have to endure an extraordinary introduction, an imaginary reconstruction of the funeral of Isaacs' father, William Fairhurst, in 1909. 'It must have been something like this', writes Graham, (not 'might have been', we note) before introducing us to various family members:

> Annie, William's second wife, was in the kitchen, where she had been most of the previous day, preparing food for the guests who were to come after the funeral. Meanwhile Susie Fairhurst ... twenty three years old ... sat in her room upstairs, reading a book that she frequently put down to reflect on the past, on her turbulent relationship with her father …

And so on, for another five paragraphs. Alas, this is not Graham's only excursion into a morass of speculation.

The biography proper begins in Chapter One, as it should, with Susan's birth in 1885 and a picture of middle class family life in Bolton. The main events of Isaacs' exceptionally turbulent and unhappy childhood have all been given by Gardner (1969), and very distressing and shocking they are. But Graham also draws on new material, an autobiographical essay written and sent to Nathan in the 1950s by Susan's younger sister Alice, which is full of vivid details, and some poignant, even painful memories. These observations of Susan at first hand, from within the family circle, give the chapter an extra dimension – it becomes a gripping and convincing account. Graham is candid in recognising the damage done in these years, by the death of her mother (when she was only six), her father's remarriage, her inadequate early schooling, her abrupt removal from school at the age of 14 by her intransigent and domineering father. But he cannot resist embellishing the facts with his own inventions. Noting that photographs of her in adolescence show 'a tragic rather emaciated appearance', he suggests 'she may have gone through an anorexic phase, associated with depression ... It is likely that she took to controlling her food intake as a means of exercising control in an area of her life over which [her father] could not prevail.'

After the chapters devoted to childhood, things can only get better. Isaacs survives, is trained as a teacher by none other than Grace Owen, a card-carrying Froebelian, and takes a first class honours degree in philosophy, both at the University of Manchester, where she also encounters the ideas of John Dewey for the first time (a highly significant influence on her own later thinking), meets William Brierley, a brilliant young botanist, and, in 1912, moves to Cambridge to begin post-graduate study with, among others, the celebrated Cyril Burt. It is during these next years that the chronological convention of biography becomes tiresome. Year by year, Graham takes us slowly through

Isaacs' move to lecture in a teacher training college in Darlington, her marriage to Brierley in 1914, (no trousseau, according to Gardner, but a tramping outfit: heavy boots and a rucksack), their war years together, including the furnishings of their London flat, her introduction to psychoanalysis, her own two early analyses, one in Vienna with Otto Rank, her election to membership of the British Psychoanalytical Society, the start of her relationship with Nathan Isaacs, her divorce in 1922 and, four days later, her marriage to Nathan. All the while, the impatient reader wants Graham to fast forward to 1924 and the opening of the Malting House School, when the story of Isaacs as progressive educational pioneer can at last begin.

The Malting House School in Cambridge, the brain-child of the eccentric and sometime millionaire Geoffrey Pyke, was the experimental setting in which Isaacs carried out the close, systematic observations of children's learning for which she is so rightly famous, observations richly documented and rigorously analysed in the two sturdy volumes that appeared in 1930 (*Intellectual Growth in Young Children*), and 1933 (*Social Development in Young Children*). Graham does his best to locate the school within the progressive tradition but his account is highly selective and, in places, downright dodgy. Froebel's gifts, for example, were apparently designed 'to demonstrate that children learn by playing' (p. 101).[1] But the real weakness of the two long chapters that cover the Malting House years, and the publications that they generated, is that Graham fails to appreciate what Isaacs achieved there, in terms of children's learning. He does not seem to have noticed that her copious, vivid, detailed observations do not simply sit inertly on the page; they are all put to work in her groundbreaking, analytical account of the development of children's intellectual and emotional powers. Indeed, without these observations, generations of educators would know little or nothing worth knowing about what children think and feel. As Isaacs herself says 'The actual interests and the everyday experiences of our children offer us the only direct way into their hearts and minds' (1932, p. 117). Whereas Graham considers that 'Susan Isaacs described intellectual growth largely without recourse to theory, except insofar as she used her observations to refute the theories of Jean Piaget' (p. 228). In my view, Isaacs did so much more than write what Graham sees as 'a polemical tract' against Piaget. She built her *own* theories, from her *own* data, working out her *own* arguments, applications and conclusions – and everyone who cares about children's learning is still in her debt.

There is one possible reason for Graham's apparent indifference to children's learning, and Isaacs' achievement in helping us to understand it; he appears to be much more interested in other matters entirely, contained within his secret weapon, the treasure-chest of letters to and from Nathan Isaacs. From these we learn, first, that Susan Isaacs and Geoffrey Pyke were, for some months in 1925/6, in 'a full sexual relationship'. Graham quotes at length from a 68-page (sic) letter that Nathan wrote to Pyke's wife, Margaret in 1927, 'an extraordinary and not fully coherent document' which describes the relationship between Susan and Geoffrey 'in considerable and specific detail' (p.135). We

also learn that at the time Nathan wrote the letter he had himself begun a passionate affair with Evelyn Lawrence, a psychologist who was teaching alongside Susan Isaacs at the school. More copious quotations follow, including letters to Evelyn from a former lover of hers, and a selection of others between her and Nathan.[2]

These sexual revelations tempt Graham into egregious flights of speculation. He poses himself a barrage of questions, including: why, when and how did these relationships begin and end? Why did Susan have no children? Why did she not seek a second divorce? 'We do not know the answers', asserts Graham, and promptly provides some: 'It seems likely that Susan had a serious psycho-sexual problem that prevented her from ever experiencing a satisfying, full sexual relationship over a period of time'. But this is only on page 150. By Chapter 8, where we meet the key figures in psychoanalytic circles in the 1920s and 30s, notably Anna Freud and Melanie Klein (whose various love affairs are given as part of their histories), Graham has moved on in his diagnosis. Commenting on the course of Isaacs' third analysis with Joan Riviere, a hard-line Kleinian, Graham concludes: 'If as seems probable, Susan suffered from frigidity, it is likely that her Kleinian analysis would have pointed to unresolved grief for her mother…' (p. 188). Two pages later, the conditional mode has given way to a more settled conviction, and Susan Isaacs has become 'a woman with significant psycho-sexual problems'. By page 224, Graham is ready to conclude that in the absence of any other reason, 'sexual incompatibility may have been the main or the only reason for the breakdown of her first marriage', and continues by suggesting that 'there were sexual problems in her second marriage too'. He is prepared to admit that the experience of psychoanalysis had been valuable to her, but 'it is unlikely that psychoanalysis would have resolved her sexual problems. Evaluation of the treatment of frigidity has revealed that psychoanalytic approaches in themselves are generally ineffective…' By now Graham has clearly established to his own satisfaction (if not to mine), that Susan Isaacs suffered from irresolvable sexual problems, including, horror of horrors, frigidity. Can this be something important to know – or imagine – about her?

To be fair, Graham covers a lot of other ground in these later chapters; the turf wars between the followers of Anna Freud and Melanie Klein (who was stoutly and successfully supported by Susan Isaacs) are given extensive coverage – in my view, over-extensive. Here Graham is writing primarily for readers from the fields of psychoanalysis and psychiatry, and readers with an educational background may well weary along the way. In any case, much of Graham's material is taken from published sources, notably King and Steiner (1991). But I cannot avoid the conclusion that Graham is far too interested in Susan Isaacs' sexual activity (and indeed Nathan's) for the good of his biography. Re-reading earlier chapters to see where this dominant theme first appears, I find that on page 91, even before Susan entered psychoanalysis, but after 'the breakdown of her first marriage ... she was confronted with the need to consider her own sexuality'. On the following page she is referred to as a woman 'who was

herself apparently so sexually repressed'. And in the penultimate chapter, describing her last years of illness, up to her death in 1948, Graham moves swiftly from a description of her cremation to an excerpt from a love letter written by Nathan to Evelyn Lawrence three months after Susan's death. Moreover, the letter concludes the chapter. Why?

The final chapter 'Legacies' is a good deal more balanced; here Graham sets out to paint a rounded picture of Isaacs' achievements. It does not do justice to much of her writing, especially to the short book *The Children We Teach* (1932), which I see as her most enduring and accessible work. It contains some very big ideas, which I have examined elsewhere, and some very shocking ones too, discussed briefly below.[3] There is a superficial account of developments in nursery/primary education since Isaacs' death – from the Plowden Report, Callaghan's 1976 Ruskin College speech, the 1988 Education Reform Act, and the stream of centralised directives that ensued, all the way up to New Labour and the Literacy and Numeracy hours. The strength of this chapter is Graham's scrupulously fair analysis of Susan Isaacs' persistent belief in ' the importance of heredity in determining the level of [each child's] intelligence and in the use of intelligence tests to assess children's innate ability' (p. 316). He balances this against her equally sturdy belief in education as a force that can 'change the fate of individual children regardless of their level of intelligence' (p. 318). He is respectfully appreciative of her 'conduct of qualitative studies', and gives her full credit for her early invention of what would now be called an ethological approach.

Graham goes on to assess Isaacs' legacy to child psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, concluding that she was at least 'partly responsible for the primacy of Klein theory and practice in the half-century after her death', and that this may have had far from beneficial effects. On the other, more positive hand, Isaacs' insistence on 'listening to children, observing them attentively and carefully' (p. 326), her commitment to trying to understand what children are saying, accepting that children are alive with the desire to understand and to be understood, have certainly made an important contribution to the work of many mental health professionals – and, we may add, to many educators too.

However, Graham's admiration for Isaacs is always guarded, hedged about with reservations; it is important to recognise that those on the subject of her belief in inherited intelligence are both well judged, and well deserved. It is good for Isaacs' admirers, such as myself, to be forced to remember her pronouncements on inborn intelligence:

> Of all the differences between one child and another, inborn intelligence turns out to be the most stable and the most permanent ... The best teaching in the world may prove barren if it fall on the stony ground of an inherently dull and lifeless mind. (Isaacs, 1932, p. 27)

It is too easy to dismiss this extreme view as a sign of her – unreconstructed – times; it is more important to be able to recognise the same mind-set, alive and

well, in our current education systems. The power and permeation of the concept of inherent ability – seen here even in the writings of Susan Isaacs – should make us ever more determined to carry on the good fight for the principle of the essential educability of every child. Not all of Graham's remonstrances against Isaacs are so well argued – a comparison of her with Margaret Thatcher, for example, accusing them both of a grossly authoritarian attitude to those who disagreed with them, is totally unconvincing.

Philip Graham's book impales this reviewer on a painful dilemma. I have spent many years of my professional life arguing for the significance of Isaacs' contribution to our understanding of children's learning; I therefore feel obliged to welcome and endorse any publication that takes her life's work seriously. But this biography, for all its new material and sexual revelations (and those taken from private letters I could happily be without) is weakened by so many flaws that I also feel obliged to utter cries of warning. There are not just flaws in presentation (though there are plenty of those) but also crucial oversights, misplaced priorities, and minor factual errors. For all Graham's occasional explicit admiration of Isaacs' achievements, he also exhibits more than a little glee in identifying her failures, her errors of judgement, and the supposed defects in her personality and sexual behaviour. Maybe the completed work reveals as much about Graham's ambivalent response to his subject as it does about Susan Isaacs herself. Readers, you have been warned.

Mary Jane Drummond

Notes

[1] No wonder that Professor Tina Bruce, reviewing the book recently, takes Graham to task for his misleading presentation of Froebel's significance and his influence on Isaacs (*Early Education,* Summer 2010, pp. 10-11).

[2] This relationship continued, with Isaacs' knowledge, until her death. Eighteen months later, Nathan and Evelyn married, reportedly at the urging of Susan herself during her final illness.

[3] For a fuller account of Susan Isaacs' enduring legacy to teachers of young children, see Drummond 2000.

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The Staff Room
MARCUS ORTHS, (translated by Mike Mitchell), 2003/2008
Cambridge: Dedalus Books
102 pages, £6.99, ISBN 978-1-903517-55-0
www.dedalusbooks.com

The front cover should have given me enough of a clue. It shows a multi-layered intersection of stone viaducts, wooden stairways, towers with barred windows, and balustraded walkways etched in shades of grey. Here and there people stand or make their way, dwarfed by the structures. Piranesi has rendered the scene, crowded with ropes and pulleys, struts and bricked arches, so that it seems a corner of some giant room rather than a place open to the sun and sky. Looped chains, dark shadows, an iron lantern and a double-spiked capstan add to the oppressive atmosphere.

But I turned quickly past so unsettling a picture, one that works to locate me in mid-air, unsure of my ground or my place in the grand scheme and overshadowed by what's been built around me, to read the book.

Or rather, to not-read it. Margaret Meek, reflecting on what it is to learn to read, says:

> As we become more experienced in reading so we can become less and not more skilled. In some ways we even make one kind of reading do for all…. How often do we… give ourselves reading lessons? (Meek, 1998, pp. 35-6)

The first few pages of this short novel certainly gave me such a lesson.

The Staff Room is a best-seller in the author's homeland. It is less than a hundred pages long, comprising twenty bite-sized chapters sandwiched between a Prologue and an Epilogue. Markus Orths was a teacher before writing full-time. This, his second novel, presents the first-person narrative of an NQT, Martin Kranich, whom we follow through the waking nightmare of his initial week in a secondary school in Goppingen, the South German town where Orths himself taught. Several other characters have names beginning with the letter K, but along with the broad hint of the cover-design and the arrant absurdity of the narrator's actions in the Prologue, this nod to the Kafkaesque nature of the text I also contrived to miss, so skilled was my reading.

Those early pages irked me. Here seemed to be a novel intent on getting easy laughs by presenting teachers as abject and spineless, cowed by authority and bureaucracy. I judged the novel a mere caricature of the profession, and so laid the text aside, face down. Which meant that when I came back to it I met the blurb, and the penny could finally drop. 'A grotesque satire… absurd and extremely funny…a nightmare Kafkaesque world…' The joke was on me. I had made one kind of reading do for all. In a way I had become a minor character

in *The Staff Room* by Marcus Orths: not unlike the teacher Kranich meets who is for ever comparing the German education-system unfavourably with that of Bali, and who never quite manages to complete a coherent sentence.

Most of the characters in the novel would qualify as 'minor'. Arguably they are not 'characters' at all, and a thorough probing of the human heart is certainly not what Orths has undertaken. Intent on distilling the essence of an education-system which is simultaneously inhuman and all-too-human, Orths has us meet a score of types, readily recognisable by anyone who has spent time working in school. We also encounter, through Kranich's deadpan narrative-voice, the classes he must teach, members of the Inspectorate, someone dressed in red, and an old man playing the accordion. It is the Headmaster himself who tells Kranich the truth about the system he has sworn allegiance to. 'One could, he said, speak of four pillars on which the whole education-system rested. These pillars were fear, moaning, pretence and lies.'

As the capstone of a hierarchy in which it transpires everyone is required to spy on everyone else, and where possible to do them down, the Headmaster is a cynical and scary figure. Warden-in-chief, he has a thing about keys. He is the man, as he at once makes clear, who will write Kranich's annual appraisal, the document on which Kranich's career depends. But even a Headmaster has to serve higher powers, as is revealed towards the end when Inspectors arrive in their white suits and Agent Smith-style reflective sunglasses.

So, newly-employed, Kranich drops a coin in the Tyrolean hat of the old accordion-player singing about the hills of home and enters his first school with its sinister picture of teachers on leads. Across his sole week here he will meet not only the staff but also their conditions of existence. After a night preparing in minutest detail the aptest lesson for one class, the Deputy Head gives him at the last moment a different class to take. Reliant on the photocopier, he finds it without paper, and then jammed. Blithely he agrees a room-swop, before realising he has no key to the new room…

Orths uses many of his short chapters for set-piece presentations of the absurd realities of school-life these days, or to take satirical sideswipes at a range of education's contemporary targets. To ensure Germany's education-system achieves a higher place in the international rankings there must be more creativity in schools. But how to assess creativity? By drawing up 'a detailed catalogue which sets out the assessment criteria'. How will such criteria be drawn up? How else but through a 'commission for the establishment of creative assessment criteria.' Teachers scheme to avoid being taken to court by ever-litigious parents. We meet a historian for whom the subject is without narrative interpretation, only facts, facts, nothing but facts. Kranich (mischievously? humanely?) supplies her addiction. We learn of a textbook-company prepared to win orders by bribing staff, and a department fully prepared to be bribed. One chapter demonstrates brilliantly the power (and commercial role) of the latest cant about how children learn, as mobilised by the textbook-sales-team.

Among Kranich's colleagues a disaffected trio talk about undermining the system. But 'not really' since to actually do so would risk their careers. They form the hard-core of the Conspiratorial Group, membership of which is however decided by the Headmaster. One of the Group is the teacher for whom Bali represents perfection. Another never prepares a lesson for his Philosophy and Religion class, arguing that it is only possible to teach successfully through the spontaneous and unrehearsed encounter, 'the immanence of the *ad hoc* moment.' Facing a visit by the Inspectorate, he hits on an inspired way to avoid being sacked.

Orths strikes his targets accurately and doesn't linger. I liked especially the moment when the Headmaster requires Kranich to memorise all his students' grades from the previous year:

> How did I expect to find out how good or bad my pupils were? If I were unaware of their previous marks I might come to quite different assessments from my predecessor. Deviations… were only allowed to a limited degree. In effect the pupils' grades in the school-leaving exam were already determined in the first year of secondary school. You only had to look at the statistics.

Does Kranich escape the imaginary prison Orths has built for him? The ending is ambiguous. In this translation the jokes and puns work (surely no mean feat), the grotesque depiction of the school carries an insider's conviction, and the story moves smartly along. That the school and what transpires there may be read as a metaphor for wider society is never laboured. Better readers than I will draw parallels with the way things are in their own staff-rooms, and be glad to have discovered Marcus Orths, and Dedalus Books.

Patrick Yarker

Reference

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