
Caroline DeCamp Benn and the Comprehensive Education Movement: the biographer's tale^[1]

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ABSTRACT In educational politics, Caroline Benn (1926-2000) played a leading role in the British comprehensive reform. Wife of one of the most prominent post-war socialists in Britain, the aim is to use Caroline's long campaign alongside teachers, trade unions, parents, progressive academics and activists as a starting point with which to explore a particular period of egalitarian policy making in the United Kingdom. Examining her networks, her mix of causes, her interests and her thinking, the purpose of this article is to do justice to the diversity and achievements of the Comprehensive Education Movement as a whole. History is a crucial safeguard against the dangers of myth-making. The article uses history and biography systematically as a method of building on the past in order to understand the present and move forward into the future, to further the educational causes she championed but in such a way that we are not trapped in a 'back to the past' framework.

One thing I've learnt in this business (of politics) just because something is a) right and b) true and c) inevitable, it does not mean you do not have to keep saying it over and over and over. Using every chance there is. (Caroline Benn to Brian Simon, June 20, 1977, Brian Simon papers)

She was a pioneer, not of the Mayflower people who entered America to colonise it, but an American woman who crossed the Atlantic the other way to struggle and to work and to give and help build a better beginning to the lives of millions.
(Chris Searle, 2001a)

In educational politics, Caroline Benn played a leading role in the British comprehensive reform. Focusing on her circles and her times, my study [2] will provide an assessment of Caroline's life, major events in that life, an interpretation of her personality and philosophy, and interpretations of the temporal, physical and cultural contexts in which Caroline lived. Thinking about this biography, I want to capture a particular period of egalitarian policymaking in the United Kingdom to further the educational causes she championed, but in such a way that we are not trapped in a 'back to the past' framework. My objective is to use Caroline's own long campaign alongside teachers, trade unions, parents, progressive academics and activists as a fundamental tool with which to explore broader historical processes and events to increase knowledge and understanding of women's roles in British political history. I start with a personal tribute from teacher and ex-comprehensive school head teacher, Chris Searle, because his words hold possibilities for thinking about the activism and analysis, especially for thinking about the difference Caroline made as an American who lived and worked in Europe.

I did not know Caroline, but her story has value for me because of her commitment to lifelong comprehensive education. My interest lies in Caroline's contribution to politics and policymaking in education, her sense of history and her involvement in a particular set of ideas. In many ways I, too, 'am the child of a dream'. The phrase Caroline's daughter, Melissa, used in reflecting on her parents decision to take she and her three brothers out of the private education sector in order to 'go comprehensive' (M. Benn, 2001, p. 21). Like Melissa, 'I owe my mother a great deal in so many ways. From her, I developed a love of learning ... I also owe to her the deeply unfashionable belief that *every* child is of value, not just my own. Individual achievement and fulfilment are vital but these need not be gained at the unnecessary expense of others' (p. 30).

Hatred of selective schools was a shared generational experience between my mother and me. As a child, I learned of her family's experience of being denied a secondary education that fuelled her class and political consciousness. Growing up in a single parent household in the 1930s and 40s, she passed the scholarship examination making her eligible for secondary school. However, failure in the oral examination meant she did not qualify for financial assistance and family circumstances prevented her achieving this goal. Instead, she went to the local state central school, offering advanced training for working-class children. All of which made my mother an early advocate of egalitarian comprehensive education. Therefore, I was educated at local state schools and attended a garden city comprehensive school in the 1970s, when the educational and political landscape was very different.

Caroline Benn (née DeCamp) was born in 1926 into a conservative upper-middle-class family in Cincinnati, in the state of Ohio in the United States of America (USA). The DeCamps settled in the USA in the seventeenth century to escape from repression in France as Protestant Huguenots. Caroline's maternal grandfather, Dr Thomas W. Graydon, emigrated from Ireland in 1866 and came to Cincinnati in 1876 (Miller, 1968). Caroline was educated privately,

including a spell at a New England boarding school, and then at Vassar College (1946), a highly selective liberal arts college associated with the social élite of the Protestant establishment, and the University of Cincinnati (1948), a comprehensive public research university. The point I want to make is that Caroline was born into a political dynasty active in the new, mobilized city of the Progressive era. Cincinnati has a long history of loyalty to the American Republican party and Caroline had her own personal struggle of consciousness within her own family confines. With great moral courage, she supported the progressive independent Henry A. Wallace in the 1948 presidential election. Besides increased spending on welfare, education and public work, Wallace's platform advocated new civil rights legislation and he refused to appear before segregated audiences, eat, or stay in segregated establishments. My research will examine the activism of family members, exploring their involvement in reconstruction and reform, considering the growth of the metropolis and its civic and political realms in the context of bossism and place-based politics.

Caroline first met Tony Benn in August 1948, when she visited Oxford to attend a summer school. A week later, she accepted Tony's proposal of marriage. This was a meeting of minds besides a tremendous love story. After her return to the USA, the couple began what they called 'the Great Correspondence', in which she told him: 'I will try to be interested in the things you are because I do want to know about them and because I do not want to let you down in any way, but the key to the world to me lies in literature and art and philosophy, and that is the only route I can ever take to really discover what this life is all about' (cited in T. Benn, 2005, p. 146). For Tony, Caroline was his socialist soul mate, the person who had the greatest influence on his life. His *Diaries* offer a testament to her love and support, showing both his love and pride in her achievements and the high regard in which she was held by others. We learn, for example, of Caroline's being voted 'the best wife for a leader of the Labour Party' following a dinner party at Richard Crossman's house (in 1957), of how Dora Gaitskell touched his heart 'by saying how devoted she was to Caroline and admiring her for the way she ran the house and brought up four children without any fuss' (T. Benn, 1994, pp. 48, 61).

Caroline is both a part of British labour history and its chronicler. Writing a biography of Keir Hardie (1992) who became a founder of the Labour Party, she brought her own experience as the wife of a leading Labour politician to bear, to interweave the vicissitudes of political life with the personal narrative, providing incidental insights into everyday detail. In common with the radical suffragists of the 1900s who learned that 'no cause can be won between dinner and tea' (Liddington & Norris, 1978), Caroline's generation suffered from the narrow parameters of marriage and motherhood. Writing on the politics of motherhood from the perspective of 1990s Britain, Melissa Benn recalls her mother 'did not believe that children were a woman's destiny: she spoke instead of her *great enjoyment* in us, often quoting the French writer Colette on how pregnancy was like one long holiday'. At home in Holland Park, London, she remembers how Caroline pursued her own projects in 'all of the moats of time

in between' (M. Benn, 1998, pp. 31-32). Seemingly doing things society's way, but actually doing things her way (including an MA at University College, London in 1951 when expecting her first child). Besides politics and gardening (she remodelled the grounds of the Benn family home at Stansgate), Caroline's activities included being engaged by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) to read E.B. White's American fairy tale *Charlotte's Web* on the children's programme *Jackanory* (in 1966), and making a film on comprehensive schools (in 1980).

A tutor at the Open University, Caroline was a lecturer at Kensington and Hammersmith Further Education College from 1970 to 1996. In the field of education politics, she was President of the Socialist Education Association and a member of the Inner London Education Authority (1970-77). Her contribution to the comprehensive reform was enormous, first as founder of the Comprehensive Schools Committee (subsequently Campaign for Comprehensive Education) and secondly, as parent and governor at Holland Park comprehensive school, one of the first in the country (becoming the chair of governors at Holland Park for 13 years and at 35 years, the school's longest serving governor). Across three decades, she contributed numerous articles for education journals (e.g. *FORUM*, *Socialism and Education* and *Teaching London Kids*). Other roles included service on a committee to investigate the death of President Kennedy, appearing as a dangerous 'red' in the Economic League's list of subversives before her husband, although she was much less of a public figure. She was also a member of the UNESCO Commission. Contemporaries lauded her energy and her indefatigable campaigning, as evidenced by her husband's comment that she did more evening meetings than he did, a remarkable testimony to her capacity to say 'Have speech; will travel', to quote Labour politician Tam Dalyell (2000).

As a feminist historian I am interested in women's continual struggle for entitlement. As a social historian I am interested in research on currents in history, particularly left-wing politics. As Caroline's biographer, as much as I can I want to get to know Caroline through my research. I want to systematically map and assess her life, career and agenda through the use of (a) oral history techniques with interviews, and (b) archive and documentary analysis. A number of questions suggest themselves:

1. What was the relationship between Caroline and the politics of her time?
 - What were the causes she championed?
 - What were the kinds of political activism that developed through alliances with local and national cultural and social movements? How did resources, power, place and identity interact?
 - What was the role of the desire to address social inequality through educational reform, especially the Comprehensive Movement, in this?
2. How did Caroline inhabit the role of politician's wife?
 - What were Caroline's distinctive qualities – personal and political?
 - How did she carve out time and space for her own career?
 - What was her contribution to Labour Party education policy?

3. What were the (ex) participants' and political opponents' perceptions of the contribution she made, including national and international links?
 - What was the general and overarching sense of Caroline's personality and philosophy at various stages of her life?
 - What were Caroline's hopes and dreams for state education?
 - What did the different participants see as her influence?

This project is urgent because the 'survivors' who worked with and against Caroline are now old, or ageing. The archiving and availability of previously unknown and underutilised materials, alongside access to family members and key participants from politics, administration and educational practice, offers an unprecedented opportunity to step into the spirit and nature of the Comprehensive Education Movement to safeguard against the dangers of myth-making and provide an alternate view of the comprehensive ideal that is relevant to education professionals and of interest to policy output today. The learning that can be found by aggregating biographical and archival work interconnects the ideas of an important social figure with the socio-political analysis of educational governance and change.

In Caroline's obituary for the *Times Educational Supplement*, education reporter Mark Jackson (2000) told the reader of routes covered over and routes not taken. He said she could have had a career as an academic or politician, but 'may have influenced British society more than the members of the political dynasty into which she married'. The eventual production of a full-scale biography of Caroline Benn will educate the education community and beyond with regard to the democratic deficit resulting from the continued marginalisation of women, to inform knowledge and understanding of women, politics and policymaking in education. At the time of writing, having just embarked on a period of intense research, it is anticipated that this biography will be published in 2015. The timing is deliberate. It is intended to mark the 50th anniversary of the issue of Circular 10/65, when Tony Crosland's Department of Education and Science requested local education authorities to prepare plans for comprehensive reorganisation.

To return to the quote with which I started. In *A Tribute to Caroline Benn*, Chris Searle writes of a practice that he calls 'the Pedagogy of Story' which, he says, 'carries an even greater urgency when the lives that it embraces have a remarkable story to tell – for this was a classroom method primarily dependent upon eliciting stories, creating narratives and then building discussion and debate around them for the purposes of the procreation of more' (2001b, p. 208). I hope that my biography will become part of the dialogue. To reconstruct the life and work of Caroline Benn is to offer new ways of seeing the educational past and present. In this spirit and to continue the conversation I very much welcome comment, thoughts and the opportunity to talk with anyone willing to share their memories of Caroline and/ or participation in the Comprehensive Education Movement (by email, letter or interview-conversation). Do get in touch with me. I look to Caroline for the final word.

'Just because it is difficult', she said, 'does not excuse us from the obligation of attempting to build into the education system practices that support different types of learning as well as all learners in ways that demonstrate to them that they have equal value' (C. Benn, 1997, pp. 214-215).

Caroline Benn (née Decamp) time line

1926 Caroline DeCamp born October 13, Cincinnati, Ohio
1937 Ohio River flood
1946 graduates from Vassar College
1948 meets Tony Benn, completes second degree at University of Cincinnati
1949 marries Tony Benn June 17
1951 Stephen Benn born, Caroline completes University of London MA
1953 Hilary Benn born
1957 Melissa Benn born
1958 Joshua Benn born, Holland Park comprehensive school opened
1962 publication of Caroline's novel *Lion in a Den of Daniels*
1965 co-founder of the Comprehensive School Committee
1966 read *Charlotte's Web* on the BBC children's television programme, *Jackanory*
1970 publication of *Half Way There: report on the British comprehensive school reform* (with Brian Simon)
1973 President of the Socialist Educational Association
1980 television film, *Carry On Comprehensives*
1982 co-author *Higher Education for Everyone*
1987 editor and contributor to the National Labour Movement Inquiry into Youth Unemployment and Training
1992 publication of *Keir Hardie*
1996 publication of *Thirty Years On: is comprehensive education alive and well or struggling to survive?* (with Clyde Chitty)
2000, Caroline dies, Charing Cross hospital, London, November 22

Notes

- [1] I 'borrow' from A.S. Byatt here and her book *The Biographer's Tale*. I also wish to acknowledge the help and support I have received from Clyde Chitty and the Benn family in starting this project.
- [2] The working title is 'Caroline DeCamp Benn (1926-2000): a comprehensive life'.

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