FORUM
Volume 59, Number 1, 2017
www.wwwords.co.uk/FORUM
http://dx.doi.org/10.15730/forum.2017.59.1.69

Re-reading *Closely Observed Children*

JOHN MORGAN

Introduction

Michael Armstrong's book *Closely Observed Children* was the product of a year that Armstrong spent as a visitor to a primary school classroom in Leicestershire. Though the book was published in 1980, the observations on which the book is based took place in 1976. In what follows, I first want to argue that the book can be read as a product of a series of debates and political developments that shaped the post-war welfare scene. This then leads to a discussion of the ways in which the book took a distinctive take on these developments. Finally, I want to suggest what we might learn from reading *Closely Observed Children* in the present conjuncture, a time when the grain of educational policy and practice seems to be running in the opposite direction from that of the period of which the book is a product.

Cultural Modernism

I don't think it is too much of a stretch to suggest that *Closely Observed Children* should be read alongside the 'classic' texts of the cultural left – Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society* (1958), Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) and E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). These books remain the departure point for many strands of debate in post-war British culture, and their relevance in relation to Armstrong's book on primary school children is their role in the continuing discussion of literary modernism that dates from the 1930s.

If there is a single thread running through these founding texts of the cultural left it is that they recognise and acknowledge the validity of working-class experience. All, in different ways, responded to the work of 'cultural conservatives' such as F.R. Leavis and the Scrutiny movement at Cambridge, and T.S. Eliot, notably his 1948 book *Notes towards a Definition of English Culture*. 'Cultural conservativism' understood the onset of industrialisation and urbanisation as leading to the loss of the organic community and the threat of

mass culture to an 'elite' tradition which preserved the essence of life and vitality.

The terms of this elitist cultural modernism were contested, not least in a form of political modernism which celebrated the socially committed art of the workers' movement in the 1930s. However, the key moment in all of this was 1945 and the election of a Labour government that promised to provide welfare and the 'good things' in life to all. Among the groups that comprised 'the Left', there existed different views as to how this was to be achieved. In education, the main approach was a form of Fabian gradualism which saw the 1944 Education Act as part of the process whereby access and opportunity was to be provided to all children. However, by the mid 1950s, other sections of the 'Left' were raising questions about the pace and direction of change. The welfare society had, it seemed, created a new set of problems. This 'first New Left' was led by figures such as Williams, Hoggart, Thompson, Charles Taylor and Raphael Samuel and coalesced around the *Universities and Left Review*, which, in its five issues from 1957 to 1959 offered important commentaries on the new cultures that were emerging as Britain emerged from austerity and embraced affluence. *ULR* writers were sceptical about the extent of the changes that were taking place in the new welfare state, and particularly how far it was leading to genuine social mobility. They expressed concern about the failures of town planning, and questioned whether the 'classlessness' that was supposed to be accompanying the new capitalism was a reality. Unusually, for the time, *ULR* paid close and serious attention to cultural issues, and carried articles about literature and the arts and what it meant to be politically 'committed'. It published important articles about the extent to which the new schools were really allowing for the expression of working-class values. Michael Armstrong was a contributor to these debates, and the group developed around writers such as Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel. Armstrong went to teach in a secondary modern school in Wandsworth, South London, and Hall and Whannel taught in Brixton, South London, which served as the source of inspiration for their 1964 book *The Popular Arts* (one of the earliest educational texts that sought to grapple with the challenges and opportunities provided by the 'challenge of affluence' and the emerging youth cultures). It is interesting to reflect on the important aspects of this early work, which was always concerned with 'agency': the fact that culture is ordinary and that working people have their own role in shaping history. Armstrong (1957a) wrote about the fact that the vast majority of existing schools were not set up to acknowledge the experience of working-class children, and the new comprehensive schools were supposed to offer a vehicle for this. Elsewhere, in an article on commitment in intellectuals, Armstrong expressed his concern that socialist art and literature had failed to provide a rich account of both the inner worlds and the sociological facts of the worlds in which people lived (Armstrong, 1957b).

Both these ideas – about schools as institutions that could validate ordinary experience and about the need to recognise the vitality of children's minds – are evident in *Closely Observed Children*. It is significant that Armstrong

went on to see comprehensive schools as the potential site for transformation, a place where a new 'sociological pastoral' might be achieved. The idea of a 'pastoral' is useful in relation to *Closely Observed Children.* Armstrong's text draws upon the romanticism of Blake and Coleridge – the tradition of child-centredness. The effect, presumably deliberate, is to construct an image of innocence and the gradual emergence of self. Indeed, the very setting of the learning described in the book appears idyllic – the classroom as a tranquil space removed from the harsh realities of an industrial and urban world. This resonates with the ideal of the pastoral as suggested by Raymond Williams (1973) in *The Country and the City.* Just as Williams suggests that the pastoral portrays a landscape in which the social relations that created it (the hard graft of the labourers, the property relations that allow some people to own land, etc.) have been rendered invisible, *Closely Observed Children* presents a view of the classroom in which the labour, the home relations, the administrative mechanisms and bureaucracies are largely hidden from view. Learning is simply that.

A Literary Study of the Welfare State?

So far, I have attempted to describe something of the intellectual context which shaped the writing of *Closely Observed Children.* But what of the book itself? In order to provide a sense of what Armstrong achieved in his book, it is worth quoting some sections at length:

> After Stephen had finished another chapter of the book he is reading to the class, I settled down with three children who were engaged on writing: Simon, William and Debra. Simon was continuing a story he had begun about a rabbit. He suggested the same idea to William but William preferred to write about the wires he had been experimenting with a week ago. Debra chose to write about going mushroom picking on Saturday, having already told the story excitedly to Stephen and me and several others – how she'd gathered over 4 pounds of mushrooms (she'd told Mary Brown the exact weight, 4 lb. 6 oz.) while her brother's group had found no more than ten mushrooms all told.
>
> Whether or not Debra would have chosen to record this incident in writing had writing not been suggested to her that morning I don't know. She may or may not have had a spontaneous urge to write about her experience. But once the idea of writing something was mooted she had no doubt about what it was that she wanted to write. She had been full of the Saturday's mushroom picking from the moment she arrived at school; now she wanted to record the events she'd regaled us with. Throughout the hour or so between the end of Stephen's reading and morning break she sat and wrote and sometimes spoke and stopped writing and thought or daydreamed – and by the end she had written some 15 lines. And

> then she turned to me and said, 'Can I have a rest now?' It was hard, she said, adding that she'd only got up to the point at which they were about to set off on the mushrooming itself. What, I wondered, had been hard? Not, I think, the process of writing itself since Debra is usually a pretty confident writer. I think it was, rather, the whole business of remembering just what had happened – she kept going over for me the various complex comings and goings between her gran's and her great gran's that had preceded the mushrooming – and then getting it into a succinct enough shape to write down; this is what had been hard. As Stephen pointed out at morning break, Debra was so captivated by her experience that she was determined to get it down just right, just as it had happened. And then, having begun to reflect back on it, she'd realised how much there was to say even before she got to the crux of it all, the mushrooming. By the end of the hour she may well have been saying to herself, 'Oh dear, all this thinking and remembering and writing and I've still hardly started. I've still got all the exciting bit to come'. (pp. 11-12)

Here is another example, this time concerned with a child's artistic development:

> It was an important moment in Paul's development. From now until the end of the school year most of his art grew out of similar life studies, however fantastically the life study might be transformed before a particular painting was completed. The decision to draw direct from life introduced a new tension into his work and was the cause of much satisfaction, and not a little dissatisfaction, to him as the term progressed. It was also, as we shall see, a vital source of intellectual growth. (p. 184)

There is so much in this writing to admire. The clarity of the prose, the close attention to the ebbs and flows of children's activity, the everyday tone of the writing, and the efforts to understand what the child might be experiencing and how. Armstrong's goal is 'to understand the understanding of children' (p. 206) and to study the early 'life of reason'. For Armstrong the observations reveal the 'seriousness of purpose in children's thought and action: their high intent':

> It is this seriousness of purpose that makes of children's practice a significant performance rather than a course of training; it is this that justifies us in ascribing to children a creative and critical imagination. (p. 206)

What might seem at first sight the mundane and everyday products of activity in classrooms are treated as a series of complex transformations as children start, get frustrated with, come back to and finally realise in words, pictures, and models the concepts taking shape in their minds. Armstrong is attentive to these

sudden or gradual shifts, and gives us a sense of the temporal and spatial rhythms of the classroom.

Of course, the conditions for this have to be nurtured and themselves created, and, although the book is not about teaching, in the background is a particular classroom: the notions of choice about how children spend their time, the division of time in the classroom to allow significant blocks, the opportunities to spend time walking along the river banks, a teacher who seems to wonder and wander with children: all of these are features of the classroom pedagogy.

In the attention it pays to the inner lives of one small group of children, *Closely Observed Children* is reflective of what Bruce Robbins (2007) calls a 'literary biography of the welfare state'. The welfare state, Robbins argues, was (and is) more than a set of formal relationships in which wealth is transferred from one class to another and services (such as health or education) are provided to those who need them. There is also, Robbins argues, a cultural relationship: the formal mechanisms are accompanied by a benevolent relationship between a mentor and a recipient. The welfare state acknowledged that privilege tended to accrue to particular social groups and that this was unjust. There was a need to make amends for this, and this was to be achieved often through the idea of the mentor, someone who takes it upon themself to act as a sponsor. Robbins traces the resulting 'structure of feeling' through a range of literary texts in the USA and Britain. The important thing is that it is not simply a matter of educational organisation or the provision of buildings, but a focus on relationships. This was, of course, a feature of the caring professions, the health care workers, social workers and teachers. This literary 'structure of feeling', I think it can be argued, pervades *Closely Observed Children*. The focus of attention, the preparedness to act as a guide, to listen, to suggest, to gently direct, but ultimately to trust the process of growth, and above all, to give one's time to things that may or may not emerge or come to fruition, is very different in many accounts of teachers' working lives.

Of course, the strength of this benevolent 'mentor' relationship was also its Achilles heel, since it could lead to the sense that the state perhaps delved too far into its clients' lives and affairs, and that the state was an intruder. This concern is expressed in Carolyn Steedman's (1986) *Landscape for a Good Woman*, which explores working-class subjectivity and dwells on welfare. Steedman is acutely aware of the material benefits of the 'welfare state' on people like herself, the free milk and orange juice that was handed out to children at school, and the health care that allowed them to grow up stronger, taller and fitter than their parents. However, this came at a cost, represented by the truancy officers and health visitors who policed working-class lives and social behaviour.

Mention of Steedman reminds us of her important book *The Tidy House*, an account of a story of that title written in a classroom in South London. The year was 1976, just when Armstrong was observing in Leicestershire. Steedman's text can be put alongside Armstrong's. It too is part of the literary

biography of the welfare state. However, by focusing on the wider social relations it adds another angle or dimension – in effect it upsets the pastoral vision of *Closely Observed Children.*

The centrepiece of *The Tidy House* is a story – 'The Tidy House' – written by three eight-year-old girls, which appears to be a semi-fictional account of life as they know it. It catalogues the life of two young mothers bringing up noisy and demanding children in the dreary wastes of a council estate. As Steedman states:

> In the summer of 1976, three working-class eight-year-old girls, Melissa, Carla and Lindie, wrote a story about romantic love, marriage and sexual relations, the desire of mothers for children and their resentment of them, and the means by which those children are brought up to inhabit a social world. (p. 1)

Steedman was the teacher in whose class 'The Tidy House' was written, though she was soon to leave, and begin her career as a distinguished social historian. *The Tidy House* is an analysis of the girls' story. Steedman discusses the story in terms of theories of children's language, what it tells us about childhood socialisation and working-class culture. Although Steedman does not deal at length with the teaching and learning approaches that operated in the classroom, it is clear that as a teacher she sought to develop a way of working that allowed the children to articulate and represent aspects of their social worlds.

The social world that the girls depict in 'The Tidy House' is the home. The girls are experimenting with representations of gender. They are aware of the tensions between adult couples and that it is women who are responsible for caring for and bringing up children. They are also aware of how new babies disrupt the existing patterns within households. The idea of 'The Tidy House' is that it is no longer tidy when a demanding baby boy arrives.

The opening pages of *The Tidy House* are concerned with the role that education plays in the reproduction of social inequality:

> A deep and hopeless sentimentality about the educability of working-class children has been fostered among teachers during the last decade ... the end of the compensatory education boom ... and by the dissemination of shabby theories of social, linguistic and cultural deprivation. (p. 4)

Steedman insists that this sentimentality has a long history. Teachers inherit a history of psychology that tells them that intelligence is largely innate and that education can do little more than keep children moving in their allotted ranks. Steedman experienced the emotional burden that this history places on teachers. She notes that, 'It is, quite simply, depressing to teach and to produce so little change in the educational performance of many children' (p. 4). Steedman's position as a teacher in all of this is interesting and contradictory. She is very

aware of the way in which the children's social worlds are closing in on them. Unlike her, they will not escape to the 'golden city':

> In the last weeks of the summer term there is frequently a specific concern added to the general anxiety of many children in working-class primary schools: they do not know what is going to happen to them in September. It is the policy in some schools not to tell the children which class they will be in next year, nor which teacher will be theirs, until the last day of term ... So when Lindie asked me which class the three of them were going to be in next year and I replied, 'I really don't know', I was, quite simply, lying. (p. 9)

Putting *The Tidy House* alongside *Closely Observed Children* is, I think, productive. Both are focused on closely observed classrooms at the same point in time (though geographically different), and both emerge out of the concern of the 'cultural left' with the meaning of ordinary children's experience. Together they pose the 'problem' of what it means to inhabit state classrooms, and offer clues as to why, at the time they were conceived and published, the social democratic consensus that had held since the end of the War began to lose legitimacy.

Closely Observed Children Now

Michael Armstrong's *Closely Observed Children* repays reading today. In many ways, the descriptions of individual children struggling to fashion their experiences into coherent intellectual shapes stand for a whole class of children being brought up under the wings of the benevolent welfare state. As such, the progressive education they were offered was one part of a wider progressivism which sought to shape the experience of successive generations of children. That progressivism was coming under pressure as Armstrong wrote his book. Not least, feminism had challenged the assumptions about the normal child and the family that seemed to have underpinned the educational expansion of the post-war period, and the same arguments were being made in relation to ethnicity, as Britain struggled to come to terms with a population changed by immigration just as the economic conditions of the post-war boom had come to an end. There are, too, fascinating glimpses to be found of a changed social geography in Armstrong's text: what, one imagines, has happened to the landscape of the school in which the action takes place: one imagines suburban expansion, the enclosure of rural space, the dominance of the motor car, and the increased grip of a consumer culture?

Closely Observed Children can be seen as a 'text of the break': at around the time of its publication, educational writing on the left took a harder edge. The anthropological gaze we see in Armstrong's writing was replaced by a more sociological approach. Indeed, *Closely Observed Children* with its studied 'naturalism' seems almost 'atheoretical' in its approach. A few years later, and one suspects the book would need to have paid due deference to concepts such as 'social structure', 'cultural capital', 'discrimination' and 'ideology'.

Armstrong's naturalistic view of childhood would have had to acknowledge that English childhood is a historical and social construction.

Finally, *Closely Observed Children* reminds us that children's learning is at one and the same time simple and complex. It is simple in that, over the centuries, it is natural that adult generations have taught the next generation, and that this always involved careful, close attention to 'experience', what is in the minds of children at any one time. It is complex in that the act of teaching and learning involves an initiation into culture, the ways in which we inhabit places, learn to understand the bonds that link us to each other. In the end, it is Armstrong's ability to convey, in words, what this process entails that makes *Closely Observed Children* such an important and valuable book.

References

Armstrong, M. (1957a) Schools, Class, Society, *Universities and Left Review,* 1(1), 63-65.

Armstrong, M. (1957b) Commitment in Criticism, *Universities and Left Review*, 1(2), 65-66.

Armstrong, M. (1980) *Closely Observed Children: the diary of a primary classroom.* London: Writers and Readers.

Hoggart, R. (1957) *The Uses of Literacy.* Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Robbins, B. (2007) *Upward Mobility and the Common Good: toward a literary history of the welfare state.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Steedman, C. (1982) *The Tidy House: little girls writing.* London: Virago.

Steedman, C. (1986) *Landscape for a Good Woman.* London: Virago.

Thompson, E.P. (1963/1980) *The Making of the English Working Class.* London: Penguin.

Williams, R. (1958) *Culture and Society.* London: Chatto & Windus.

Williams, R. (1973) *The Country and the City.* London: Penguin.

JOHN MORGAN is currently Professor of Education at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. Prior to that he worked at the University of Bristol, and at the Institute of Education, London. His interests are in the cultural politics of schooling and he is currently writing a book – *Culture and the Political Economy of English Schooling* – to be published by Routledge in 2018. *Correspondence*: john.morgan@auckland.ac.nz