
Mabel Barker, Unknown Heroine

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ABSTRACT An account of the life of Mabel Barker, teacher, rock climber and pioneer outdoor educator.

The subject of this short article is Mabel Barker, born on 14 December 1885 in the bustling town of Silloth, Cumberland, on the shore of the Solway Firth. Her full-length biography has been written by educator and author Jan Levi, in a fascinating book with the arresting title *And Nobody Woke Up Dead* (Levi, 2006).[1] The more conventional sub-title, *The Life & Times of Mabel Barker – Climber and Educational Pioneer*, spells out the two very different achievements for which Levi justly celebrates Barker: her exploits in rock climbing, and her life's work in progressive education. As Levi makes plain, these two threads, running throughout her life, are not unconnected.

Mabel Barker herself describes how early she began to climb:

The Solway shore does not seem a very hopeful milieu for the making of a mountaineer, but I suppose the will to climb was there from the time when, a delicate and undersized infant, I walked and ran at nine months old. All children climb, more or less, and by the fortune of circumstance, I never stopped. There are a few trees, even in Silloth, and our house had a very useful roof on it. The understructure of the pier offered a good field for adventure to a young brother and me ... There was also a fine 'sailor's ladder' down the side of the old dock gates. Derelict works provided us with a varied, and as I should now suppose, a highly dangerous climbing ground, but there was nobody much concerned to call us to heel in the holidays, and neither of us ever had an accident.

In her PhD thesis (submitted in 1926), Mabel wrote of her early schooling in Silloth, emphasising the 'almost unbelievable gap' between what she learned out of doors – on the seashore and on the fells – and what she was taught from the atlas and her textbooks:

I learned the definitions of headlands and bays and estuaries with great speed and ease, and I found the examples in the atlas very easily. But at two kilometres from our house was the sandy point of Skinburness, protecting a bay from which two small rivers flow. No one ever explained to me that we had a headland so close by; that we were living in the bay of Silloth; that the Solway was itself a splendid example of an estuary! The [whole area] ... was a wonderful place to play and explore, and it exercised an extreme fascination for me ... but the geography that I learned at school in the text book never seemed to have any connection with all this!

It was the same with Latin, the declensions of which she studied reluctantly, taught by a succession of teachers who seemed unaware that the school stood close to the eastern end of the great Roman wall, between two Roman settlements in one of the richest parts of the country for Latin monuments and inscriptions. The gap between the school curriculum and the living world of history and geography, people and places, seemed to be unbridgeable.

In 1895, when Mabel was 10 years old, her mother died suddenly of pneumonia, and she was sent north to Perth to live with her father's three sisters. Levi imagines these years as austere and unhappy ones for Mabel, whose life until then had been full of outdoor freedom and adventure. Mabel herself claimed that in her school in Perth she found 'not the slightest connection between what I learned and the world I knew as a child'. These early memories were to shape her ideas of what constituted a proper education for children of all ages – an education based on what Rich, Drummond and Myer have described in the subtitle of their book *First Hand Experience* (2014) as 'what matters to children'.

Her father eventually acknowledged her unhappiness, and sent her, aged nearly 15, to a school in Truro, Cornwall, where a relative, Alice M. Morison, was the headteacher. Here Mabel thrived, benefiting from a rich curriculum of first-hand experiences, studying botany in 'proper gardens', and doing experiments in a well-equipped school laboratory. But her own explorations and personal experiences in the holidays were even more important to her; completely alone, she explored the coast and its caves, rocks and cliffs for whole days at a time. She searched for flowers, shellfish and other animals in the rock pools: 'I returned drunk with the beauty of the sea, the sky, all the wild places I had experienced.'

In later life she formulated a clear educational principle, based on those days in Cornwall:

Education in school can be real and effective, according to whether it encourages and increases, rather than hinders, those experiences and personal connections, as well as the dreams and ideals that result from them. It goes without saying that we have never been short of educationists who act in this way, by making use of all they find around them, to widen and bring to life all the abstract things

learned about in books. But, despite this, it is outside the school system that we have found, in the last 50 years, the most lively educational methods.

Indeed, it is outside the mainstream school system that Mabel's own great achievements as an educator are to be found.

So now we fast-forward the calendar, omitting Mabel's teacher training at Cheltenham Ladies' College, her BSc in geology from the University of London, and various early teaching jobs, including a post at Saffron Walden Training College, where she spent several happy years. We pick up her story at the end of the First World War (during which she worked in Holland, in a crowded refugee camp organised by the Society of Friends), when she took up a post at King's Langley Priory, a progressive school in Hertfordshire – a school she declared to be one of the most interesting in the world.

During the eight years she spent at King's Langley, she came to understand more completely the absolute necessity of a close hands-on relationship between the members of a school community and their immediate physical environment. But at the King's Langley school, the dry word 'environment' is insufficient to describe the amazing range of experiences offered to the children (aged from 6 to 18). The gardens provided vegetables and flowers; there were orchards of cherries, apples, pears, plums, walnuts and hazels; there were many animals – ponies, goats, pigs, chickens, ducks and pigeons, bees, a tortoise, an aquarium with fish and frogs. There were two gardeners to help in the gardens and with the animals, but no domestic staff – 'all the work of the community was done by the 35 children and their teachers'. This work included haymaking and harvesting, caring for the animals, filling the lamps, cleaning shoes, cutting wood for fires, helping the teacher who was in charge of the cooking, serving meals, washing up, making beds. The first hour of every day (from 8 to 9 in the morning) was spent cleaning the house; the lesson periods lasted from 9 to 12, and from 2.15 until 4 p.m.; the rest of the day was spent on practical tasks, mostly in the open air.

When Mabel writes about the school, she makes it very clear that it was no earthly paradise: 'in fact it is full of difficult problems'. In particular she describes the difficulty of finding teachers who were willing to work in such an unusual setting, and of finding:

people liberated enough from their own education to study the environment outside school ... it is necessary to find 'intellectuals' prepared to do practical work in their environment. Not everyone will accept looking after the goats, cleaning the stables, digging the ground, or picking apples; and then immediately afterwards, delivering lessons in mathematics or history. Furthermore, few understand the connection between the raising of goats or growing of apples and history, and can show this connection to the pupils, or help them find it themselves.

The curriculum at King's Langley was, to a very great extent, co-terminous with the generous environment in which the school stood – there were indeed regular lessons in history, geography, science and mathematics, but these were not split off from the living world, as Mabel's early lessons had been. Indeed, many lessons took place in the open air, in the ruins of the old priory, in the nearby gravel quarry, by the canal, exploring the old watermill, or at the top of the church tower, after climbing up the dark spiral stairs through the belfry. Map-making – and map-reading – were important parts of all these explorations and enquiries.

History was another of Mabel's passions, and reading her account of how she taught it makes one wish to be a child again, studying with her the Bronze and Iron Ages, the Celtic gods and heroes, with the legends and fairy stories that have endured from those far-off times. Above all, Mabel emphasises that this is history that has meaning for children, not just for historians. She prioritises children's passionate desire to make sense and to understand:

The history that is of true importance to children is the comprehension of the passage of human events, which traverse their environment like a great river, leaving traces that we can still find. We cannot walk but in the direction that our ancestors made roads; we are the products of the past.

In 1923, Mabel's aunt died and left her the (then) colossal sum of £3000. Mabel immediately bought a row of very old houses in the village of Caldbeck, deep in the country between the Cumbrian Mountains and the Solway Plain, and started converting them into her own school, Friary Row, best introduced with words from the prospectus she wrote for the opening of the school in 1927:

The school aims at giving an 'Education for Life' and that by means of living as fully, happily and healthily as may be. Regional study and occupations will be given prominence in the methods employed, for the Principals [Mabel herself, and her old friend and climbing companion, Gertrude Walmsley] believe in the value of real experience as the basis for all education, as apart from mere instruction. They aim at the education of 'Head, Hand and Heart'. [2]

Levi lists some of the children's activities: climbing on boulders, tree-climbing, making a loom, drawing, studying the church architecture, digging potatoes, brambling, staining the cottage floor, making a dam, climbing High Pike, painting the gate, studying quarries and mines, keeping rabbits, digging a pond, constructing a rock garden, making marmalade, building an igloo, making slippers out of raffia and clay modelling. There was also camping, fishing, fell-walking, including trips up Scafell and Great Gable, drama festivals and listening to innumerable stories, thrillingly told by Mabel.

Mabel responded, rather dryly, to enquiries about children's progress from prospective parents, by explaining:

We are in an area of woodlands, fields, commons and numerous streams; and within easy reach of the great fells. Excursions by motor are made at intervals to these, and to whatever of interest and beauty is necessary as illustrative of, or as a starting point for, some aspect of the work. The value of this interplay of manual occupations and 'bookwork' is proving itself by the rather surprisingly rapid progress of the group of little boys who have been with me from the beginning; and in the zest with which they enter into everything.

More telling, perhaps, is the testimony of one of the pupils, Mabel's nephew, Lindsay Barker. When he left Friary Row and arrived at secondary school at 11 years old, he remembers that he was top in French, top in Latin, third in art, but bottom in maths: 'Mabel didn't have much time for it!'

During all these energetic years, education was only one part of Mabel's life – the remainder was spent on fells and mountains, rock climbing, at that time a very unusual pursuit for a woman. Levi's biography closes with a conventional bibliography, including Mabel's unpublished PhD thesis (written in French), 'The Use of the Geographical Environment in Education', but this is preceded by a mind-boggling 'List of First Ascents' – an extraordinary testament to this extraordinary educator's achievements in a very different world, where women were rarely seen. The list consists of 27 first ascents, some marked 'first female ascent', dating from 1923 to 1937 (when she was 52!).

This closeness to the mountains of the earth, to the crags and buttresses of the Cumberland hills, and to the Black Cuillins of Skye was no mere idle pastime. It was the lived expression of Mabel Barker's deepest belief, the big idea at the heart of her life-long philosophy: the intense connection between humanity and the earth on which we all dwell.

Mabel Barker is far from a household name in educational circles – indeed, I had never heard of her until I was given Levi's book.^[3] It is a compelling and inspiring account of a hitherto unsung heroine, who certainly deserves to be better known. Levi locates Barker securely within the tradition of twentieth-century pioneers, tracing connections between her approach and those of others, more well-known, including John Dewey, A.S. Neill, Bertrand Russell and Jean-Ovide Decroly. But Barker's insights are distinctively her own; her words speak freshly to us across the years, almost as if she had foreseen some of the constraints within which we currently work:

Here is another idea: the education of a child is always for the future. Why is this? One must not forget that children are already vibrant beings with a life of their own which is complete in the moment ... It seems to me that it is a mistake that we do nothing for children now, but only for what they will later become. It is a shame to spoil such a period of life ... that during this part of their life when they want to be so active, and are so full of beauty and joy, that they should be

shut away for so many hours each day, sitting still on a bench,
having nothing but books and paper to deal with.

For all her enthusiasm for her subject, Levi does not idolise or sentimentalise Barker; instead, with absolute clarity, she calmly elucidates the principles at the heart of Barker's approach, the principles through which the school at Friary Row achieved her aim of offering 'an Education for Life' by 'experience of the earth itself, by practising the essential occupations needed to live'. But the last words in this brief appreciation must surely go to Mabel Barker herself:

It is the experience of the earth that gives us the comprehension of life. It is a truism to say that we are children of the earth. We all say it; we know it; but it is still necessary to fully understand that this is so; it is necessary to believe it literally ... We return, for the moment, to the one real and simple fact, that there exists *nothing* but 'The Earth'.

Notes

- [1] All quotations in this article are taken from this book.
- [2] This last phrase comes from the writings of Rudolf Steiner, with which Barker was familiar. Indeed, between the two world wars, the staff at King's Langley became interested in Steiner's educational philosophy, and today it is a well-established Steiner school.
- [3] My grateful thanks to Robin Duckett, director of Sightlines Initiative, who sent me this wonderful book out of the blue.

References

- Levi, J. (2006) *And Nobody Woke Up Dead: the life & times of Mabel Barker – climber and educational pioneer*. Bury St Edmunds: Ernest Press.
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