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Book Review

Enfield Voices: the birth of the people's universities
TOM BOURNER & TONY CRILLY (Eds), 2018
Privately published, available from Amazon
362 pages, paperback, £10.20, ISBN 978-1-717-55971-5

On the face of it, a book about a 1960s higher education (HE) institution seems an unlikely candidate for a review in *FORUM*. But bear with me, because the particular institution in question – Enfield College of Technology in Ponders End, north London – was the site of an experiment in HE which was rooted in the school reforms of the period – notably, comprehensivisation and the increasing emphasis in primary schools on creativity, innovation and a child-centred approach to teaching.

The 1960s saw a massive expansion of provision in higher and further education: new universities were opened; new colleges of advanced technology provided four-year courses leading to the Diploma in Technology; and local technical colleges offered a wide range of courses.

Enfield Voices: the birth of the people's universities is the story of one of those technical colleges, as remembered by the editors Tom Bourner and Tony Crilly, and by their 28 contributors.

In their introductory chapters, Bourner and Crilly describe how Enfield began life as a Technical Institute in the late 1800s, became a Technical College after the Second World War and, in the spring of 1962, became Enfield College of Technology, with George Brosan as its principal. The bulk of the book consists of contributions from 28 former teachers of the college (some of whom had also been students there), divided into three sections: 'Early Birds' (1962-1965), 'Mid-Time Arrivals' (1966-1968) and 'Later Comers' (1969-1972).

'Early Birds' begins with John Carr's recollections of 'the revolution at Ponders End' (p. 30) and includes chapters by John M. Stoddart, who writes of 'opportunity, vision and change' (p. 38); Bryan Davies, who says the college provided a 'unique educational experience' (p. 73); and Alexander Romiszowski, who writes of his 'fourteen fun and formative years at Enfield' (p. 109).

Among the 'Mid-Time Arrivals' are contributions from Richard Baillie, who talks of his 'mostly happy memories of Enfield days' (p. 132); Ruth Towse, who describes 'how I learned to teach' (p. 147); Brian Evans, who remembers his time at Enfield as 'an experience which shaped my academic life' (p. 176); Thanos Skouras, who reminisces of 'a serendipitous start to an academic career' (p. 206); and Roger Harris, who writes of 'intellectual generosity in a prototype for a new kind of institution' (p. 246).

The 'Later Comers' includes chapters by Tom Bourner, who suggests that Enfield was 'the beat of a different drum' (p. 258); Jeff Evans, who writes of 'interdisciplinarity, fraternity, and a fair amount of freedom' (p. 286); and David Dewey, who arrived 'just in time for last orders' (p. 323).

In 'The Final Chapter – making sense of it all', Tom Bourner assesses the importance of the college. He notes that one of Brosan's first appointments was Eric Robinson as Head of Mathematics. Robinson, vice-president of the Socialist Education Association from 1965 until his death in 2011, effectively became Brosan's deputy. The two men had similar views about HE, and Enfield 'became the site where those ideas could be tested out in practice' (p. 337). Their approach, says Bourner, was

- *comprehensive* – it was open and inclusive, with a particular desire to widen access to HE for students from working-class homes;
- *student-centred* – its primary purpose was to meet the educational needs of students rather than the accumulation of knowledge for its own sake;
- *flexible* – there should be easier transfer between subjects of study, levels of study, institutions and modes of study to take account of students' changing circumstances;
- *rationalist* – reason and critical discussion were seen as more important than tradition in reaching decisions;
- *egalitarian* – those in authority should be willing to answer to those they had authority over;
- *Focused on the young* – because young people usually had clearer ideas of how the world was changing and more energy and ambition to effect change; and
- *socially engaged* – HE institutions could play important roles in their communities and in society more widely (pp. 337-338).

At first, the main focus was on 'making the transition from being a local tech college to becoming a college of technology with a broader remit including a wider area of recruitment'. This involved the appointment of staff who would 'move the college in a new direction' (p. 339).

By 1964, argues Bourner, Enfield 'had big ideas and a disproportionate number of articulate young social scientists, some in surprisingly senior positions' (p. 340). In that year, three key events took place, each of which would have a significant impact on the work of the college: Harold Wilson's Labour government came to power; the Council for National Academic Awards was established; and the Crick report on business studies was published.

The college expanded, enabling Brosan and Robinson to realise more fully their aims and changing the culture of the college from that of a technical college to that of a 'proto-polytechnic'. In 1972, it became part of the newly created Middlesex Polytechnic.

The special significance of Enfield, says Bourner, is that its ethos was based on 'a set of dominant values and guiding beliefs' that underpinned course development, so that:

> Critical discussion was valued as the basis for decisions and actions. Student-centredness was valued above subject development and the accumulation of new subject-based knowledge ... Youth was valued for its fresh ideas and energy ... Difference was valued at Enfield even to the point of eccentricity. (pp. 348-349)

The college, he argues, challenged three traditionally held views of HE: that it was, for the most part, synonymous with university education; that the involvement of technical and other further education colleges was 'at most peripheral'; and that such HE as took place in the colleges was 'only possible by association with a local university or the University of London External Programmes' (p. 350).

Enfield did not attempt to replicate university education 'in either of its two archetypal forms, broad-based liberal HE or specialised single-subject degrees'. Instead, it constructed its degree courses 'from scratch' (p. 353).

Finally, Bourner suggests that there were two other noteworthy consequences of Enfield: it led to the production of the book *The New Polytechnics: the people's universities*, by Eric Robinson, which was 'very influential in the non-University sector', and there was the effect of the 'Enfield Diaspora' as 'many of the more active players at Enfield went on to influential posts in HE in Britain, including Directors of at least four polytechnics, three of whom became Vice-Chancellors of universities' (p. 355).

Enfield Voices will appeal particularly to two audiences. First, for former students and teachers of the college, it will undoubtedly bring back many happy memories. A sense of excitement, of doing something new and important, is clear in many of the contributors' accounts. Bryan Davies, for example, who joined the college in 1965 as a lecturer in history, remembers the first meeting for new staff addressed by Eric Robinson:

> He expressed brilliantly, and with great passion, the creative future which lay ahead for the college. It was to promote the comprehensive principle in further and higher education, widening access for students, replacing the London University external degrees in favour of degree courses which would have strong vocational relevance. (p. 74)

For Roger Harris, who taught philosophy at Enfield from 1968, the college was memorable for 'the exhilarating collective intellectual generosity of my colleagues' (p. 246). And Julie Ford, who taught research methods on the Bachelor of Arts Social Science degree course, remembers the college with obvious affection. Its location at Ponders End – 'Yes, really' – was 'a great source of amusement to colleagues in "proper" academic institutions', as was its 'ramshackle collection of ill-matched buildings'. She found herself at Ponders

End, she says, because she was 'too appallingly deviant to fit in anywhere else ... an outrageously dressed barefoot twenty-two year old hippy with a PhD' (p. 305).

Inevitably, not all the contributors' recollections are entirely happy ones. Roger Harris, for example, recalls that there were 'serious constraints', some of which were externally imposed, such as the inability of the college to award its own degrees, some of which were 'of our own making' (p. 254). So, there is an honesty here, and memories are certainly not filtered through the proverbial rose-tinted spectacles. Nonetheless, Enfield clearly played an important and positive role in the lives of all the contributors.

For the second audience – readers with an interest in the history of the period, especially that of the development of further and higher education – *Enfield Voices* provides much useful information. The post-war development of higher and further education and the political and wider educational context are covered in some detail, and there is a useful timeline of key events.

But, as I hope is now clear, the book will also appeal to *FORUM* readers, because the college shared the journal's commitment to the comprehensive principle and to progressive education in general. *Enfield Voices* is well written, without too much jargon or too many acronyms. It is full of interesting and sometimes amusing anecdotes, is well presented with an attractive cover, and at £10.20 is remarkably good value. But most importantly, it is an inspirational book, full of hope and possibilities.

Derek Gillard

ANOTHER WAY OF LOOKING: Michael Armstrong's writing for *FORUM*

Edited by PATRICK YARKER, SUE COX & MARY JANE DRUMMOND

2019 224 pages ISBN 978-1-910744-05-5

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