

Attingham Hall, Shropshire: the hidden history of a short-course adult education college

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Sir George Trevelyan, Residential Adult Education and the New Age: ‘To Open the Immortal Eye’

Sharon Clancy, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2023.

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This book covers multiple intersecting themes and narratives which are skilfully woven together by Sharon Clancy, who uses immaculate research, intellectual clarity and the courage of her convictions to do so.

Ostensibly the dominant theme is the story of a short-stay Shropshire-based adult education college of a kind which was made possible by the 1944 Education Act. The act increased the powers of local authorities to fund and support post-compulsory education immediately prior to the election of a Labour government committed to adult education in the post-1945 welfare state. Whilst the commitment might not have been as fulsome as that of the 1919 Ministry of Reconstruction, which argued that adult education should be a ‘permanent national necessity’ and not a luxury for the few,¹ Attlee’s government was a serious one with a concern to make the new state work. Labour’s 1945 manifesto, *Let us Face the Future*, set down policies ‘for the consideration of the nation’ and the Attlee period embraced in theory a commitment to an adult education that was not only humane, liberal and lifelong, but would also help to produce an informed democratic citizenry.

Colleges like the Shropshire Adult College at Attingham Hall were an outcome of that ambition and represented, argues Clancy, a period of optimism in Britain when new residential spaces for adult students could provoke and support ‘critical thought, political dissent and contestations about the role of the State’ (p6), as well as deliver learning which explored arts, sciences and humanities. These were spaces for renewal and growth after two world wars, so a further ambition was the foundation of a learning culture that would help to restore a spirit of community and shared citizenship. Most importantly, one stated aim was to seek to include those who were socially and economically marginalised, and who had been traditionally excluded from formal continuing, further and higher education.

Deference characterised how the Labour government and, earlier, the National Trust, were forced to negotiate deals with the powerful in order to progress educational, economic and social policies – whether this was with the owners of land, stately homes or coal mines. This tension and the unfairness of the situation sits aggravatingly in the background of this study. Clancy's research also shows how many of the motives and discussions surrounding residential adult education were not necessarily altruistic but could be riven by snobbery and class discrimination, or driven by a desire to contain or defeat socialist thinking and practice. One of the things this book does very well is keep disturbingly present, throughout the narrative, the ongoing tensions between class, power and learning.

Yet for Clancy, adult education is never about remedying any 'deficit' of compulsory education, or simply developing the skills needed for the future. Rather, adult education 'at its best, is ultimately both a response to and a creator of social change' (p10) and is a powerful conduit to equality, emancipation and liberation. In this she follows Raymond Williams, seeing learning as part of the process of social change and deeply political. In many ways, Clancy tests this proposition throughout her book by considering the life story, curriculum, pedagogy, demographics and purpose of the Attingham college during its relatively short period of existence (1948-1976).

Attingham changed massively on all of these fronts during this time so a second, key theme focuses on George Trevelyan, who was college warden for 23 of the college's 27 years and the prime mover in fostering these changes. In the words of Clancy, Trevelyan was both 'a pioneer and a paradox' (p193), operating in a post-war world which continued to reflect the inter-war tensions of modernism and tradition, country and city. Trevelyan's story is a tangled one, full of ambiguities and profoundly affected by these tensions. He was a disinherited aristocrat and an educational entrepreneur, at times warm, altruistic and democratic, at others, conservative – yearning for an imagined, romantic and heroic past. He was simultaneously a maker, craftsman and enthusiast about experiential and co-produced learning, whilst, at other times, his teaching style was hierarchical and his approach thoroughly elitist.

Trevelyan's inspirations were many, from theosophy and anthroposophy to action learning. The enlivenment approach of the Danish folk high school movement, with its mutual valuing of arts and sciences and commitment to 'speaking from the heart' rather than over-relying on dry instruction, left a lasting impression on him, and this is very well drawn by Clancy.

Trevelyan was clearly a passionate educator and vital critical thinker, and his vision for a holistic education which considered the spiritual as well as the material, as the author shows, was interesting. Yet over time the spiritual and esoteric appeared to totally eclipse ideas, processes and practices associated with democratic and emancipatory education. Today we might say that his pedagogical approach overly focused on lived

experience, which is enormously valuable in identifying and uplifting voices, but which can also tip over into individualism as it fails to include and acknowledge the collective and universal experience.

Clancy describes how Trevelyan, during his time as warden, oversaw the gradual decline of a social purpose curriculum, which was originally open access and which targeted local people, to one which privileged closed, spiritual and esoteric courses for those who lived far away, were affluent and sometimes titled. These later courses initially embraced a spirit of inquiry which explored New Age thinking, but they ultimately offered an education which would fail to speak to most people, and which disturbingly flirted dangerously with many far-right political ideas associated with tradition, history and purity. Although some of the original college courses in arts, humanities and social sciences continued to be delivered, they gradually took second place to Trevelyan's preferred curriculum from the mid-1960s onwards. Clancy's interviews with the 'non-esoteric' students and staff and tutors reveal their frustrations and disappointment.

All of this is robustly researched by Clancy, and she is critical but understandably empathic in her evaluation of both the college and Trevelyan. After all, Attingham positioned itself as a great experiment in adult education and some of the courses were genuinely groundbreaking with Trevelyan 'attempting to create the space for debate about what humanity should be, through collaboration, communication, and discussion' (p236). She also notes how her qualitative interviews with students and staff involved in the non-esoteric courses (those participating in the 'esoteric' courses did not come forward), reveal interesting results which validated much of Attingham's practice. For example, all those interviewed felt they benefited massively from their attendance at Attingham and found the experience participatory, emancipatory and supportive. Many were clearly in awe of the charismatic Trevelyan.

Yet, at the same time, Clancy's research into student attendance records shows that the college had, since its inception, always attracted a relatively professional, middle-class student body and that there was 'little or no evidence that people from the industrial sector, particularly skilled and unskilled manual workers, attended the college in significant numbers' (p102). Students had also been geographically local, with many already committed to notions of 'fellowship' and likely to have been previously involved in social movements such as the Clarion, the WEA, and youth hostels. This is not, of course, to negate their experience in any sense, but it does suggest that Attingham was quite narrow in who it attracted. As Clancy also notes, courses were expensive, despite bursaries, and many of those on offer ran during the week when there was little time off available for most workers. Indeed, rather than courses which critically explored the social order, many of those offered at the college appear to have focused, according to Clancy, on 'shoring up an established order and an elitist culture' (p155) with a strong emphasis on 'highbrow' art, music, literature, architectural studies,

folk revivalism, and building conservation. Clancy's research also shows that as early as the 1940s, innovative pedagogical practice was patchy, with lectures used as much as small group work.

Clancy also uses a critical eye when she considers Trevelyan's role at the college. He was clearly a powerful communicator, persuasive in his dealings with authorities, students and staff. As Clancy says, his 'beliefs and values were the result of a genuine and heartfelt conviction that he had a duty to help people "wake" and to turn away from a materialism which he understood as damaging the planet and the people who inhabit it' (p232).

He may have been, as she says, naive or irresponsible as he found himself increasingly associated with far-right courses and culture, but he was astute enough to skew his reporting of these developments to both his board of governors and the county council, which had become increasingly concerned about the direction the college was taking and its minimal local impact. Esoteric courses were often filled by personal invitation, and Trevelyan simply omitted them (or obscured them as 'philosophical') from his reports and many records.

Clancy is able to show from her analysis of various reports, letters, adverts, scrapbooks, visitor books, printed ephemera and testimony from interviews with ex-members of staff that not only did social purpose and arts and humanities courses diminish in number as the esoteric courses increased exponentially, and that the student body changed, but also that Trevelyan became increasingly remote from the wider concerns of the college the longer he was there. By the time he retired and the new warden sought to open up the college so that it reached out to its adult education constituency, rather than being a special interest college, it was too late. The writing was on the wall for many short-term residential colleges.

For Clancy one of the reasons why Attingham is of particular interest as a subject for historical analysis is because Trevelyan was a warden who practically and intellectually was able to move a college 'beyond the religious, the ethical, and the liberal arts and into the world of the New Age' (p15). She is right, it is both a fascinating but, in some ways, sinister story. Was Attingham a victory for the spiritual over the material in terms of knowledge-making, or at least an experiment to be valued because it sought to do adult education more holistically and differently? Or was it yet another missed opportunity for radical adult education that could challenge existing and unequal power relations? How much can a focus on the spiritual, inner world and the emancipation of the individual lead to the sort of change that is needed to tackle the inequality around us or the existential crisis we find ourselves in? Can this focus truly help us move beyond, in the words of Mark Fisher, the exhausted and sterile paradigm of late capitalism?²

Importantly, where does this leave us in terms of the final important strand in Clancy's research, her legitimate and heartfelt concern with the current state of adult

education and her contention that we must prioritise it at this time of crisis as we have at other, similar times. Our current reality, that funding for adult education has been decimated and the conditions for it to flourish have become increasingly remote, provokes Clancy to describe the research and her book as ‘a call to arms’. Her interviews with contemporary adult educators about the current state of adult education underpins and illuminates Clancy’s plea.

This takes us to a final interesting place. Arguably, for the educator, much of the Attingham story was disappointing and Clancy is scrupulously honest about this. Some staff and students clearly relished being at the college, and massively benefited from the residential experience, despite inconsistencies and frustrations. As someone who attended a two-year residential adult education college at the behest of my trade union, I know how life-changing this experience can be. Yet Attingham often failed to practise what it preached, and Trevelyan, whilst inspiring and motivating for many, was ultimately driven by his own narrow interests and elitist vision of the world. Furthermore, Attingham claimed to be an experiment in terms of pedagogy, processes and curriculum, but as Clancy clear-sightedly acknowledges, despite its being pioneering in spiritual and to an extent environmental education, it failed because it wasn’t an adult education college for everyone, and was only transformative and of relevance for a minority.

But whilst both Attingham and Trevelyan might be weighed and found wanting, the value and critical importance of adult education in a fragmented, unfair and precarious world remains. For this reviewer, at a time of enhanced technology and global communications, the residential element is arguably less essential, but this does not negate the critical importance of coming together, in solidarity and collectivity, learning and unlearning cooperatively. The hope of adult education, as understood powerfully by both Clancy and Raymond Williams, is that it has to be a political project about social change. Unless we are content with the world we are in, then adult education remains central and essential to the world we want, with justice for people and planet the only lens we use.

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Notes

1. Ministry of Reconstruction, Adult Education Committee, *Final Report*, Cmd 321, London, HMSO, 1919.
2. M. Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is there no alternative?*, Winchester, Zero Books, 2009.