

THE LEGACY OF R F MACKENZIE

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When John Darling, former editor of the Scottish Educational Review and at one time Director for Educational Research at Aberdeen University, reviewed my biography of R.F. MacKenzie in The Times Educational Supplement in the Spring of 1999, he suggested that “as a pre-emptive strike against the risk of suffocation by orthodoxy (in education) *The Life of R.F. MacKenzie* should be put on the reading list of every Scottish student without delay and a copy sent in May 1999 (when the inaugural Scottish Parliament was to be established) to every prospective M.S.P.

Unfortunately, Darling’s plea fell, predictably, on deaf ears. The book didn’t prove to be a commercial success and it was subsequently “remaindered” just two years from the time of its initial publication in 1998 and thus rendered “out of print” by the publishing firm that bought over John Donald, the book’s original publishers. It seemed an overly harsh judgment to make on the part of the take-over firm on a book that sought to commemorate the life and work of one of the most idealistic and eloquent dissident voices in Scottish education. After all, MacKenzie made his cause a source of intense national media interest 20 years earlier in 1974, when he was unceremoniously sacked by the Labour-controlled Aberdeen Education Committee for his alleged failure to carry out their instructions for the application of corporal punishment in his school.

Now in 2005, just over 30 years from the controversial exit from his Headship at Summerhill Academy, it is difficult to assess what impact, if any, Mackenzie’s life and work may have had on the way we now educate the pupils in our schools. It is hard to believe that the consumerist doctrine introduced by the Thatcherite government in its approach to education and carried on almost seamlessly by the Blair government in the 90s and beyond, would have been modified to take account of the kind of education MacKenzie had zealously advocated in the many books and articles he had written over the course of his long career as a teacher.

MacKenzie never went out of his way to pander to the “man in the street” regarding his stance, particularly in his willingness to go it alone in his stand-off with the local authority over the question of maintaining discipline in his school. In this respect, the local press in Aberdeen added its voice to the general impression that things were well out of hand at the school, and that MacKenzie was an isolated figure, more concerned with protecting the interests of the “dissident minority” among the pupils in the school at the expense of the more pliant majority.

The strength of the antipathy that MacKenzie aroused among the general public in Aberdeen, particularly among many of the Summerhill parents, is perhaps best expressed in a poem I wrote at the time as a sort of satirical reaction to MacKenzie’s sacking, couched in the local dialect to catch the prevailing mood of euphoria at his demise:

An Aberdonian’s Farewell to R.F. MacKenzie

Whit’s that? They’ve gi’en him the sack?
Nae afore time! Gi’es mair o’ yer crack!
Nae man deserved better tae get the shuv...
Gangin’ aboot sayin’ skweels are places for luv!
Whit next? A’ they young anes need nooadays
Is a gweed skelp, nane o’ yer sympathy an’ praise,
An’ sic like trash. A’body kens whit skweels are for!
Ye’re there tae learn an’ dae whit yer telt
Nane o’ this speakin’ back... that deserves the belt!

Teachers hae enough tae dae in the classroom,
 Withoot fowk haverin' oan aboot the impendin' doom
 O' Scottish education near deid frae a glut o' exams...
 Whaur wid oor lads o' pairts , oor Jeans an' Tams
 Be without their O Grades an' Highers as weel?
 Na,na, oor kids dinna want a holiday camp,they want a skweel!
 Ach weel, maybe things'll quieten doon noo in the Lang Stracht
 Noo that mannie wi' the daft notions been sacked!

My own experience as a headteacher for over 20 years in Dundee, first at a four year school, Logie Secondary School (1971–1976) and then at a new Comprehensive, Whitfield High School (1976–1993) would prompt me to say that the introduction of much tougher legislation with regard to Health and Safety, the imposition of such measures as Exam League Tables and Performance Indicators, rigid year-on-year school planning, target-setting and the complex legislation relating to Child Protection, and, allied to that, the introduction of sophisticated security systems and omni-present C.C.T.V. cameras – all of these changes, singly and collectively, have drastically changed the nature of the education system as we once knew it.

As a result, there is no room anywhere in the system for a headteacher with radical views, in the mantle of a “MacKenzie”, to apply his or her own special vision to the way his or her school could be run. There are no longer schools such as Braehead (MacKenzie's first headship, a Fife Junior Secondary school) where alternative ways of delivering the curriculum could be tried out, or six year schools such as Summerhill Academy where new approaches to pastoral education could be undertaken.

There is a rigour in the way education is delivered that leaves no room for deviation or experimentation. Instead, uniformity and conformity are the watchwords. Standards have risen inexorably; exam results are getting better; school uniform has been re-introduced; school prize-giving and prefect systems are the order of the day along with duxes (even in Primary schools) and Head boys and Head girls. And, underlying the system as we have it now, is a vast panoply of form-filling and paper work, a reflection of a much inflated bureaucratic system, epitomised in a story I heard recently of a newly appointed Secondary Headteacher whose preferred method of getting to know his staff is to communicate with them by e-mail! This should not really surprise us in a system which more and more forces Headteachers to assume the role of a chief executive, confined to the inner sanctum of an office.

So, where do we go from here? Is there any room left for unorthodoxy as promulgated by MacKenzie? Strangely, I think there is. Even if it is seen as simplistic and a little nostalgic, I strongly believe the “MacKenzie story” is one that should continue to be told. It encapsulates the career of a man who had a vision, at the centre of which was a concern that children everywhere had a right to be regarded as individually unique and creative, but whose success in achieving their potential lay crucially in the hands of their parents and their teachers. In his view, whatever educational system might be devised for future generations, it had to abide by that central truth which in terms of a school meant a clear emphasis no longer so much on learning *per se* but learning to live.

MacKenzie's long struggle towards trying to fulfil that dream is one that our administrators, politicians, teachers and parents should be invited to reflect upon. It is a struggle that for him eventually ended in the posthumous publication of his final book *A Search for Scotland* in 1989. Superficially, it is a travel book, recounting a journey through Scotland, but under the surface is a strong undercurrent of personal testimony, using the broad canvas of his travels to offer insights into Scotland's character and identity as a nation and to speculate fearfully on its future.

It is in *A Search for Scotland* that MacKenzie outlines what is at the heart of his educational credo. In recalling his days as Headteacher of Braehead School, situated in

the former coal town of Buckhaven in Fife, he vividly describes the treks in the Scottish mountains that pupils from the school regularly went on during the 50s and 60s with Hamish Brown. Brown was the first out-door teacher specialist to be appointed to a Scottish school. He was given the remit of “taking the boys and girls of Braehead into the Scottish wilderness to do what I liked with them” (Brown, 1995).

MacKenzie had become convinced that education for pupils from a deprived urban background needed to be such that it transcended the narrow confines of the classroom and the school buildings and took the children into an environment totally different from what they were used to in the coal town. In effect, the idea was encapsulated in the title of the second of three books he wrote at the time about his Head-ship at Braehead. The first book, *A Question of Living* (1963) formulated his theory of “learning to live”; the second, *Escape from the Classroom* (1965) recounted his belief in outdoor education; the third, *The Sins of the Children* (1967) dwelt on the need for schools to really care for their children, especially the “dissident minority”.

It was in the wilder regions of the Cairngorms and the islands that youngsters from Braehead found a spirit of renewal when they were taken away from the drabness of their coal town environment. In “A Search for Scotland” he traces a journey across Harris and there among the seal-life and the profusion of plovers and pewits, all scattered among the rocks of orange and gold sea-weed, he recognizes “a feeling of community with the animate and inanimate furniture of our parcel of earth”.

This feeling of oneness with “our parcel of earth” is close to the kind of insights that MacKenzie hoped his pupils would also glimpse in their sojourns in the Scottish wilderness – insights inspired by their discovery of freedom and escape. It is but a short step from his sense of spiritual well-being that he hoped his pupils would be able to enjoy, to the kind of visionary statement on the nurture of Scotland’s children that MacKenzie makes in the chapter “The Central Highlands”. Here he invokes the memory of a past school trip:

“In Rannoch I have seen the vision of Isaiah explode into reality. The mountains and the hills broke forth before them singing and all the trees of the fields clapped their hands... After even two or three days at Rannoch, the Fife youngsters became different people. Loud-mouthed, sex-experienced, cigarette-smoking, fifteen-year-old girls lay on the ground, propping their chins in their hands and watching looping caterpillars. They watched the milking of the cows. They saw how Coire Carie had been scraped out by glaciers. Briefly, the age of innocence re-entered their lives, and they became almost unrecognisably different... we began to get glimpses of how a Scottish cultural revolution might be set in motion. It would begin in country places.” (MacKenzie, 1989: 192)

The key to understanding this mystical response can be traced back to MacKenzie’s origins in the heart of rural Aberdeenshire where in 1910 he was born into the family of the local stationmaster. Initially, the family stayed at a small railway station called Lethenty and then moved to a slightly bigger one at Wartle – a branch line of the L.N.E.R., not far from Inverurie. Here MacKenzie followed the well-trodden path of a “lad o’ pairts” who progressed from doing well at the local primary school to Gordon’s College, Aberdeen where he was dux in his final year. After that he did an Honours degree in English at Aberdeen University. Even at this stage in his career he harboured doubts about the efficacy of his M.A. Honours degree.

“Even today I have difficulty in describing how I felt as a university student from a working class home... I was aware of my father’s qualities (he had encouraged his son to challenge the accepted way of doing things) but then, I thought, if he is as I believe, why is he content to remain a village

stationmaster? The current belief was that such people rose, like cream, to the top... the university never repudiated that view... I wanted to know what the university was for, but it wouldn't say. Is the university about giving glittering prizes to those with sharp swords or giving wisdom to ordinary folk?... But little of that was clear the day we graduated. The casual greeting was sometimes followed by the query: what does it feel like to be an M.A.? We replied, "It's no different! What wisdom the university had failed to give us we would have to seek for ourselves." (MacKenzie, 1989: 15)

That is, in effect, what MacKenzie proceeded to do. He felt a strong urge to travel and see the world for himself. So it was in 1932, not long after graduation, he and his close friend, Hunter Diack (another graduate and "lad o' pairs") set off on a cycle tour of Europe, each of them carrying a 30 pound bag of oatmeal as their staple diet. The tour itself resulted in *Road Fortune* (Diack and MacKenzie, 1935), transcribed from the diaries they kept, giving vivid impressions of Fascism in Italy and Nazism in Germany. It confirmed MacKenzie's view, even then, that terrible events were to unfold in Europe. He comments in the journal he kept at the time that he felt a sense of destiny in his being there to record the way in which such events would impinge on the lives of ordinary people caught up in them:

"I want to set down something of this, something about the men and the women I have known, and the events, known or guessed at, that were going on at the back of their minds." (Murphy, 1998: 29)

An enriching experience also came MacKenzie's way in 1934–5 when he taught for two years at an independent school in the New Forest. This experience had a profound effect on his later thinking on education. Put in a situation where he had to teach Botany of which he had no knowledge, he told his pupils so. In that situation Botany became a learning process for both teacher and pupil based on discovery. In those Botany lessons, largely in the New Forest, he and his pupils came nearer, he remembers, to "integrating education into a full enjoyment of life" than he had ever been able to since, and in his journal, he summed up this formative period of his life:

"I was at the Forest School from the age of 24 to 26. It was as if the school had taken me up to a high place and let me see the kingdoms of the world, broadening my horizons. These two years stand out in my memory. Since then, former pupils have written that for them too, their years there were among the best of their lives. There was freedom and, partly because of that, there was what Goethe (in a letter to Schiller) called "tranquil activity". I had been into the educational future and it worked." (Murphy, 1998: 51)

During the next three years, he continued to delay the moment of entry into any fixed employment, but did occasional journalism and topical pieces for the Aberdeen Press and Journal and was the leading light in the North East Review, a magazine run by a group of Left Wing intellectuals who provided commentary on aspects of the North East scene from a decidedly Socialist point of view.

MacKenzie was called up in 1940 to serve in the War and trained overseas in Florida and South Africa as a navigator in the R.A.F., subsequently flying many missions in Lancaster bombers over occupied Europe. He was impressed by the fact that those citizens like himself who had been called up, the vast majority of whom were of working class origin, could master the most intricate of navigational concepts and by the extent to which class barriers were broken down by the need "to muck in together".

In the diary he kept of his everyday life in the forces he remarks, "The clerk of the Gas and Coke Company found he was making as many marks in meteorology as the university graduate. Traditional skills were universally described as "bullshit". Questions half-formulated themselves in drilled minds... old values were in suspension,

and there was a generosity of outlook which made us more accessible to new ideas. It was ironical that these potential generations of a new society were too busy dropping bombs to apply generosity to a wider purpose (Murphy, 1998: 32).

MacKenzie's early thinking on education was clearly influenced by what he had seen in the R.A.F. where the untapped potential of ordinary working class servicemen was released by exposure to the training they received for skilled jobs in the services. As a result, he wondered if, in effect, their school education had let them down, being as it was, based on a curriculum that had no relevance to the lives of the people involved and going through a ritual of cramming for exams at both Primary and Secondary stages. After the War, despite having thoughts of joining the B.B.C. as a writer and broadcaster, he decided to go into teaching, initially at Galashiels Academy where he was frustrated to find that the sort of education that was being offered was no different from what he himself had experienced and had found wanting as a pupil at Gordon's College 20 years previously.

When, eventually, he was promoted to the Headship of Braehead Junior Secondary in Buckhaven in Fife in 1957, he had already formulated in his mind the sort of school he would like to run. Braehead provided him with that opportunity. It was a new school, even if it was in an old, dilapidated building. Here, with the backing of an enthusiastic staff, he was able to pioneer a fresh approach to the curriculum, particularly in areas such as art, music and technical subjects. He also introduced a school newspaper (*The Braehead News*) that was years head of its time in regard to the standard of its contents and in the role it performed as a vibrant reflection of the inner life of the school.

This new approach eventually led to the developments in out-door education under the leadership of Hamish Brown. The pioneering work that Brown did in exploring the opportunities for introducing town-based pupils to the Scottish mountains, as a key part of their education, became part of a much wider vision that MacKenzie developed with the Inverlair project as its centre-piece. This involved converting a former shooting lodge in Lochaber into an out-door centre with a grant from the County Council. This centre would house, on an all-year round basis, large groups of pupils whose education while they were there, would revolve around opportunities that could be gained from their living together as a unit and exploring their native land. It would be, if it came about, a radical programme of learning by discovery. Even though the Inverlair project came to nothing — the County Council decided against it on the grounds of expense and the poor state of the building — MacKenzie kept the dream alive in his inner thoughts:

“The Welfare State had produced the fittest generation of Scottish children who had ever lived and we wanted to resume where the Welfare State had stopped. It might, after all, be only a dream, but the school had a distinguished staff capable of translating the dream into reality, and the goodwill and tenacity to overcome the obstacles and we decided to encourage the dreamers.” (Murphy, 1998: 64).

It was inevitable that MacKenzie would, sooner or later, come into conflict with the authorities, given the position he had taken on issues such as discipline, when he tried, unsuccessfully, to abolish corporal punishment in his school and when he appeared not to give the preparation of pupils for presentation at “O” Grade a high enough profile in line with the expectations of the school's parents. As a result, he was not included in plans made by the local authority for the introduction of Comprehensive education in the County as Braehead was earmarked for closure. However, in 1968, he successfully applied for the vacant post of headteacher of what was to become Summerhill Academy in Aberdeen. Here at the age of 58 he had one last opportunity to reaffirm his image as a progressive headteacher. Unfortunately, in a tragic sequence of events, that has been well documented elsewhere (MacKenzie,

1976; McPherson, 1989; Young, 1997; Murphy, 1998; Northcroft, 2005), his tenure as headteacher at Summerhill ended six years later with his much-publicised dismissal.

His own book *The Unbowed Head* about the events which led to his downfall was published in 1976. It was a book his own publishers, Collins, are reputed to have rejected. It is widely accepted that only the intervention of the then Rector of Edinburgh University, the youthful Gordon Brown, that persuaded the Board of the University Press to go ahead with the book's publication. In the book MacKenzie concluded that what had been at stake at Summerhill had been more than just the relationship between himself and the majority of his staff whose unrest had precipitated the crisis; it had been their understanding of what they were educating young people for. This, he saw, was particularly vital for those pupils — the dissident minority — who, in every school, just don't fit into the system but for whom MacKenzie argued, an appropriate education was as vital as it was for the more pliant majority.

In this sense, MacKenzie could be described as a social revolutionary who publicly sided with the minority, and in so doing, wished to show up the fundamental flaw at the heart of a public system which, in his view, cynically uses the schools as an agency of state control. In his unpublished "Manifesto for an Educational Revolution", he puts forward an alternative strategy for education that, although it is characteristically prophetic in the tone of its final conclusions, yet is grounded in his intimate knowledge of the traditions of his native North East:

"Long ago the fishermen on the Aberdeenshire coast would go off to the headland and look over the sea and the face of the and out of a gut reaction, announce, "There is a change working." I sense such a change working in the thoughts and feelings of men... The educational revolution has to do with the whole nature of our life on earth. Its sources of inspiration, the deep springs from which it draws its life are the inner promptings of the human heart, the vague questions, the doubts, often unspoken, that have troubled humanity throughout its tenure of the planet... the change that is happening is that more human beings are becoming aware that they have the freedom to bring these private doubts into their head and put words on them!" (MacKenzie, 1989).

A.S. Neill, founder of the world-famous Summerhill private school in the south of England, with whom MacKenzie shared a long-standing correspondence, confessed in a letter to MacKenzie that he "ran awa' frae it" — the State system — conceding that he did not have MacKenzie's bloody-mindedness to go it alone in running a school the way he wanted to — no matter the consequences. In this respect, there is no gainsaying MacKenzie's courage in adversity and his unshakeable belief in his own destiny as a man with a mission.

If we believe, as many of us do, that present-day education has become overwhelmed by the current preoccupation with consumerism, centralism and political correctness, allied to testing in all its variations for all children from 5 to 18; then a case for alternative scenarios, desperately needs to be made. A strong case, for instance, could be made for exploring how leadership skills among our headteachers can best be deployed to promote an ethos in schools conducive, not just to promoting good learning and teaching, but to good relationships between all of the people in a school and with the parents and the community that the school serves. The character and personality of the headteacher and his or her sense of vision in all of this is paramount.

Finally, it behoves us, in the interests of our young people, to engage our politicians, both at Westminster and at Holyrood, in a debate about the future of education.

In the expectation that, one day, in the not too distant future, Gordon Brown,

who reputedly crucially intervened 30 years ago to rescue MacKenzie's *Unbowed Head* from oblivion, might well be our next Prime Minister, hopes of a reprieve for MacKenzie's ideas and his influence should not yet be abandoned!

NOTE

Former Braehead colleagues and pupils of R.F. MacKenzie run a website,
www.braehead.info

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