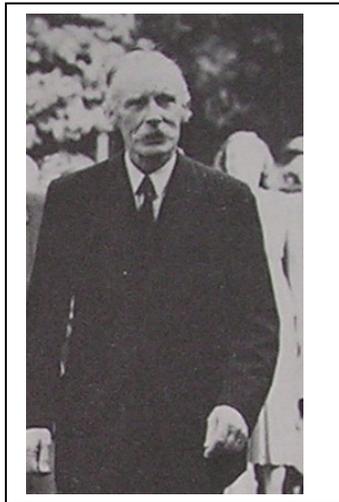


The history of Denman College and its connections with the Folk High Schools



Talk given by Anne Stamper at the Conference of the Adult Residential Colleges Association, held at Denman College, 8th May 2001

Photos: Sir Richard Livingstone, Pauline Brown (Denman Principal 1988) visits Tollare Folk High School; Tollare and DenmanCollege

Rooms Off the Corridor - the history of Denman College and its connections with the Danish Folk High Schools

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For all people life is a mixture of achievements and missed opportunities. It is like a corridor off which rooms open; each filled with treasures - history, art, music, literature, science, handcrafts and much more, all the infinite wealth of human nature and the world. But how many people walk down the corridor and enter few of the rooms?

Those words were spoken by Sir Richard Livingstone when he opened this College on 24 September 1948, and that is why, when I was considering the title of the book which I was commissioned to write to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Denman College in 1998 I chose that title for the book.

Sir Richard continued:

It is the business of education to help them to enter [those rooms off the corridor]. Education is not schools or schooling; its purpose is to assist us to do the things we want to do, and cannot do without help - to read books, enjoy music, grow flowers or vegetables well, decorate a house, do needlework, bring up children, understand engines or the stars, or the laws of health, and much else.

Schools, early education, are not enough for these purposes. Many people don't or won't, or can't learn at school; anyhow we discover new interests and needs in later life and want help to pursue them. That is where a place like Denman College comes in. It gives women the chance of learning and thinking about things which when young they could not study or did not think about studying. One can't do that sort of thing at home. One needs a place like this where one can get away for household duties and worries, and give one's whole time to the business in hand, get the best lecturers and teachers, meet and talk with other people.

Sir Richard Livingstone was the adult education 'guru' of his time, and he was the inspiration behind many of the short stay residential colleges that grew up in Britain just after the end of the second world war - so it is very appropriate that ARCA meets here in the Livingstone Room with the Kathleen Parbury bust of Sir Richard outside¹.

Sir Richard, a classicist, was a Fellow of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, from 1904 until 1924 when he became Vice Chancellor of Queen's University, Belfast. It was his success in building links between the university and the community which

contributed to his knighthood in 1931. It was also during this time that he became committed to adult education; a commitment which continued even after his return to Oxford in 1933 as Master of Corpus Christi.

In his two - very small - books, *The Future of Education'* (1941) and *Education in a World Adrift* (1943) he considered that the most urgently required educational reform was the expansion of adult education. He believed that education should continue throughout life - he wrote "To cease education at 14 is as unnatural as to die at 14"ⁱⁱ. He was a man before his time - advocating life long learning before any government used that term.

Sir Richard was a great admirer of N F S Grundtvig (1783 - 1872), the pioneer and founder of the Folk High School movement in Denmark which later spread throughout Scandinavia, and he became a strong advocate of the conceptⁱⁱⁱ. John Field in his paper *Educating Active Citizens: the contribution of Richard Livingstone*^{iv} suggests that Sir Richard's major contribution to British Adult Education was his connection with the founding of so many of the short stay residential colleges, in which the 'folkhigschool' tradition was reflected.

Sir Richard's relationship with the WI was a close one and he had a great admiration for the achievements of this 'grass roots' women's organisation. The WI started in Britain during the first world war, supported by the Government as a means of mobilising countrywomen to help with food production. Once the war was over, the WI became independent and spread through rural England and Wales at a phenomenal rate. Two women in particular were hugely influential in the first thirty years; the first Chairman of the National Federation, Lady Denman, and her Vice-chairman Grace Hadow who was also Principal of the Society of Oxford Home Students - later to become St Anne's College^v. Under the leadership of these two women along with a number of others who had also been active in the women's suffrage movement, the organisation grew rapidly. It had the joint aims of educating women to become active citizens and working to improve the conditions of rural life.

In his Presidential address to the Education section of the British Association in 1936 Sir Richard Livingstone said:

No doubt the lamp of wisdom can burn in solitary shrines and even in dismal halls. But for many its right place is in the simple but pleasant building of a Danish High School with its gardens, its pictures, its music its corporate life. Few Women's Institutes are so well housed, but there is in them that social and corporate element, which exists in a residential university which both educates and makes education attractive.

and a few years later, in his book *The Future in Education*, he wrote:

Adult Education, instead of being created from above may grow up from below, as Women's Institutes which were started for very different objects, have developed into an agency of informal education and may further develop residential colleges of the Danish type.

In that same book he outlines the importance of the folkhighschools, their secret of success being that they were for adults, were residential and were a 'spiritual force'. 75% of those who attended had only received elementary education, they came from a rural background - farmers, small holders, labourers - there was no compulsion to attend and no certificates to work for.

Sir Richard said "Education is atmosphere as well as instruction" and these folkhighschools were in pleasant buildings - pictures on the walls, lovely gardens, music and a corporate life.

Every High School is, in a sense, a home. Such is the effect of the common life. Living together, the pupils learn from each other's views and personalities, from contiguity and personal talk.^{vi}

In 1943 the NFWI organised an experimental residential school at Radbrook College near Shrewsbury, with 50 students from 26 counties in England and Wales. The key speaker was Sir Richard and his subject was 'Education in a World Adrift', in which

.....he spoke of the "vision of greatness" without which moral education is impossible. He said that most electors of the next thirty years would have left school at 14. Yet the new government proposals made no provision for adult education. Why shouldn't the WIs...fill that gap and provide their own People's College?^{vii}

This was the catalyst; from then on the WI worked towards getting its own college. Things were not easy in those dark days in the middle of the Second World War, and it is with enormous respect that one looks back to the leaders who showed such faith and vision. One of them, Elizabeth, Lady Brunner, is still alive and recalls how, in 1945, as chairman of the College Ad Hoc committee she set about finding and purchasing suitable premises. She described to members her vision:

.....a big house of your own where you will meet members from all over the country... a place where one can get away from household duties and worries and give ones whole time to the business in hand..... and [where] we should be free to experiment along our own lines in the kind of courses we think would best suit our members' needs.^{viii}

Sir Richard continued to give help and advice; Lady Brunner remembers him as "inspirational - a sort of prophet". He had written in *The Future in Education* about the possibility of introducing folkhighschool-type colleges in this country after the war:

There will be no need to build colleges. All over the country great houses will be vacant, calling for occupation, purchasable for a song. Why should not each Local Education Authority start its own House of Education? It need not follow the exact lines of the [folkhighschools], if that is found impracticable. It might be used for weekends or for weeks, of study, for educational and other conferences. Out of small beginnings great developments might grow.

Indeed Sir Richard was prophetic - Marcham Park had been used by the RAF during the war and was now on the market. Lady Brunner and her committee visited it and as a result, in December 1945, NFWI purchased it for £16,000 which included 100 acres of land, two cottages and walled kitchen garden.

Then began the long tedious job of getting permits to convert the house into a suitable place for a WI college. In July 1947, whilst waiting for the necessary government permits and licences, Elizabeth Brunner and fellow committee member Joan Yeo went, at the suggestion of Sir Richard, to visit some of the Danish Folkhighschools. They visited seven, and Lady Brunner remembers them as "very bleak, but it gave Joan and I an experience that influenced our view of life at that time"^{ix}

Joan Yeo reported on this visit to the NFWI general education committee

We had heard of the Danish People's High Schools, their prophet Grundtvig and his cryptic phrase "the living word", their origin in Denmark's difficult nineteenth century.The first People's High School had been opened in 1844. Between 1862 and 1881 76 were established. So much we knew, and that the schools are for country people, residential, teaching the humanities, handicraft and music. Not technical and not vocational. But what are the schools really like? Their staff? Their catering? Their cost? Questions pressingly relevant to our own need. We decided to go and find out the answers for ourselves. ^x

She then reports that on the boat going over they enjoyed "rashers and two eggs for breakfast" - a treat in those austere times! Later she comments that this breakfast was just a dream interlude between the austerities of both countries. The first three Schools they visited were for workers who were given leave of absence - three months in the summer for women, five in the winter for men - but at Hong, a school for small holders, they found

....at last short courses of four or five days for older women - practical courses to refresh their household economy. From this, the obviously practical, directly to Antvorskov where we heard Mr Nissen reading a poem to the students - Grundtvig's "living word" in action.^{xi}

They came back full of ideas of how the new college should develop. Looking at the early records and listening to those who remember the early days it is possible to see how the ideas of the folkhighschools were reflected and how Grundtvig's "living word" became interpreted in the Denman College context. Most of the women who came to the newly opened college had left school when they were young, some as young as 12 years old. They came from rural communities; many were farmer's wives, for many it was their first time away from home. A very popular course was *Country Housewives* - but, as Lady Brunner reflected, in all the practical courses "we slipped in a bit of culture", and on the walls around the College were picture on loan from the Victoria and Albert Museum.

On the last evening of every group of courses there was a gathering in the sitting

room and often a recital, perhaps Margaret Deneke had come over from Oxford to play the piano. There is a photograph of one of those evenings, and you can see that one of the members is doing her knitting whilst listening. This must have brought back memories to Joan Yeo and Elizabeth Brunner of their last night in Denmark, at Askov *"there were games on the lawn in which the Director joined, a piano was playing while the young women sat round with their embroidery"*^{xii}

Many of the ideas behind the Folkhighschool movement were incorporated into the newly opened Denman College, and it would seem as though Sir Richard approved because when he spoke at the 5th birthday celebration said

I have always regarded Denman College as, in many ways, the most inspiring of all adult colleges since the war. Since I retired I have travelled.....and I have always urged my audiences to come and see Denman College....and 'go and do likewise'^{xiii}

Is there anything of the folkhighschool tradition left today? Would Sir Richard Livingstone recognise anything of his vision? For one who claimed that 'atmosphere is as important as instruction' he would still find that living in beautiful surroundings and being apart from the world is still important to the students who come to Denman. Walter Drews, an ex Chair of ARCA and principal of Wansfell College and a Denman tutor, reflects:

The view of Grundtvig and Sir Richard Livingstone was that the residential Adult Education College should have the atmosphere of a big house, or country mansion, to which you came as guest, and having a host and hostess was all part of providing this atmosphere. Denman College has all the right ingredients for this with members being the hostess to 'our' college'.^{xiv}

When I was writing my book I carried out an extensive survey of students who had attended the college, and the atmosphere of the place was something so many commented on, for example:

Denman offers so much; very good tutors, good varied company who also contribute, peace to study, wonderful surroundings, accommodation and food. What more could one ask?^{xv}

But what of the 'living word?'. The high culture is less obvious; on the final evening there is still a get-together of all the courses, but now the students provide their own entertainment which might include reading poetry, but this is most likely to be a humorous poem written by a group of students. There are still works of art on the walls, indeed the changing exhibition on the staircase is a much admired feature, but now the work is usually that of one of the tutors.

The Folkhighschool ideal underpinned the short-stay residential college movement in Britain. How does the comparison stand up now? In 1988, partly funded by a British Council Travel grant, the then Principal of Denman (Pauline Brown) and I (then Chair of Education at NFWI) went on a study tour to Sweden arranged by the Swedish

equivalent of NIACE. Part of our visit was to look at Swedish Study Circles but we also visited one of the Swedish Folkhighschools, Tollare Folkhogkola, not far from Stockholm.

There are 120 Folkhighschools in Sweden, half owned by 'municipalities' the others by voluntary organisations. Tollare is owned by the Temperance Association. The Temperance movement was started in the nineteenth century to fight alcoholism but its aims have now widened to include education and awareness of all substance abuse, and all the courses have to include a core module on this subject. Tollare's main buildings are in a beautiful old house in a wooded valley looking down to the sea, furnished more like a home than a college, comfortable, friendly, relaxed - we found it not unlike Denman. Similar too are the modern residential and teaching accommodation in the grounds. The programme however differs, two thirds of the courses are full time leading to qualifications, only one third are short courses. Staffing also is different with 25% of the staff employed by the college full time. We were struck by the open and democratic nature, with close contact between staff, including the Rektor, and students who share meals and free time.

The spirit of the original Danish folkhighschools that so inspired Sir Richard Livingstone could be detected at Tollare, just as it can be detected here at Denman College, and in many other short-stay colleges - the beautiful surroundings, the comfortably furnished houses, the respect for the individual and the shared values. There are however considerable differences - in management, in funding, in curriculum - over the last 50 years Denman, like all these colleges, has had to change and adapt to different times and different needs, but I still think that if Sir Richard Livingstone came back today he might still be able to say, as he did at the College's fifth birthday :

I am certain that anyone who sees this place - its grounds, the house, the furnishings, will know what Aristotle meant when he spoke of 'magnificence' - the sense of a magnificent thing done in a magnificent way.

Notes

i.
After the death of Sir Richard (in 1961) the College Management Committee discussed a memorial at the college. The first suggestion was an appeal to raise money to establish a fund for holding a memorial lecture at the college in memory of Sir Richard Livingstone. This was turned down in favour of an appeal to raise £500 to buy the Kathleen Parbury bust, which had been completed not long before his death. It was also agreed that 'hereafter the mural room to be known as the Sir Richard Livingstone lecture room'

The bust was unveiled in the garden of Denman on Nov 2nd 1962 by Sir Richard's old friend Sir John Christie, the Principal of Jesus College, Oxford.

A Memorial lecture, entitled 'Sesame and Lilies' was finally

given in 1993 by Richard Smethurst, Provost of Worcester College, in the Oxford Examination Schools.

ii. The Future in Education - Sir Richard Livingstone Cambridge 1941 p4

iii. 'Educating Active Citizens: the contribution of Richard Livingstone' - paper delivered to :Personality and Biography: proceedings of the 6th international conference on the History of Adult Education by John Field, Professor of Life long learning Warwick University - 1998

iv. *ibid*

v. Grace Hadow was the sister of Sir Henry Hadow - of the 1926 Hadow Report on 'The Education of the Adolescent'.

vi. The Future in Education - Livingstone - Cambridge 1941 p51

vii. Report in Home and Country written by Cicely MacCall

viii. extracts from 1945 AGM verbatim report of Lady Brunner's speech proposing the formation of a WI College

ix. author in interview with Lady Brunner , quoted in 'Rooms off the Corridor' p77

x. Report of a visit to the Danish Folk High Schools, July 1947 written by Joan Yeo - in the Yeo archive at Denman College.

She refers to Grundtvig's phrase "the living word"; Grundtvig believed in the "necessity of the spoken word for the awakening of life and the transmission of the spirit"

xi. *ibid*

xii. *ibid*

xiii. from Sir Richard Livingstone's speech on the 5th Birthday of the College. In the Denman College archives

xiv. Walter Drews in interview with author when researching Rooms off the Corridor

xv. respondent to questionnaire circulated by author when researching for 'Rooms off the Corridor'