

Seekers: A Twentieth Century Life: Memories of people and places 1918-2013

By MICHAEL BARRATT BROWN (Spokesman Press, Nottingham), 234 pp., £18.95 (pbk), ISBN 978 0 85124 825 7

Relatively few adult educators publish an autobiography. The exceptions are usually people whose achievements lie outside adult education; the outstanding cultural theorist and public figure Richard Hoggart, the influential social feminist activist and writer Sheila Rowbotham, and so on. Michael Barratt Brown was an influential figure during the 1970s and 1980s in the movements for Fair Trade, nuclear disarmament and workers' control, who was also known for his writing on the economics of development. His book also alludes to lesser known but equally important roles in emergency relief in the Balkans and Middle East during the closing stages of the Second World War, as well as his part in the British New Left that flourished after the 1956 crisis in the Communist Party. But it is his role in adult education that will most interest readers of this journal.

Barratt Brown was born into the adult education movement. In 1921, when Michael was three, his father became Vice Principal then Principal of Ruskin College, Oxford. As Britain's main residential college with strong ties to the official labour movement, Ruskin was a centre for political and cultural debate, and the family lived on the premises for much of Michael's childhood, when he met such family friends as the philosopher Bertrand Russell and the Anglican primate William Temple (who was President of the Workers' Educational Association). After Quaker boarding school he studied Classics at Oxford, where his college's President was Sir Richard Livingstone, a celebrated classicist who had written and campaigned on citizenship education and became a leading exponent of the Danish folk high school movement. After Oxford he served with the Friends' Ambulance Unit and then the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, then moved to Essex where his wife, Eleanor Singer, had a job.

Michael's career in adult education seems to have started more by accident than design. He started teaching a WEA evening class, and helping make a documentary film during the days. With the film completed, he increased his WEA work and started teaching for Cambridge University Extra-mural Delegacy. In 1958 he joined the University of Sheffield as a full time lecturer in the Extra-mural Department, and became involved in teaching industrial day release courses, which had initially been established in the early 1950s by the Derbyshire miners' union and the newly-nationalised National Coal Board, then expanded rapidly during the 1960s into other industries, mainly but not exclusively under state ownership.

Michael was also involved in founding and then chairing the Society of Industrial Tutors, a forum for adult educators involved in trade union studies. SIT promoted debate about the politics, pedagogy and purpose of worker' education in the UK, and it became a credible lobbying force, at least while Labour was in power. Michael's account is tantalisingly brief; he moves straight from telling the reader that he met a government minister to press SIT's claim for improvements in day release arrangements to a discussion of a book of his which the minister had once reviewed. I could have done with more reflection on SIT's growth and role, as well as its subsequent decline.

Michael largely confirms others' accounts of workers' education in this period. However, he does not address the difficulties that he and some other adult educators faced within parts of the labour movement. According to Geoffrey Stuttard, another founder of SIT, the persistent conflicts included serious attempts to prevent Michael from teaching on some industrial workers' courses – but if this was the case, there is no mention of it here, nor of the reasons (probably in part political) for any such bar.

Today, Michael is best known for his role as the first Principal of Northern College. Situated in an old stately home and former teacher training college, and often known as the 'Ruskin of the North', the college was a long term project for Michael, where personal ambition, political ideals and educational aims came together. He applied unsuccessfully for the post of Principal of Newbattle Abbey, in Scotland, and became involved with others who were lobbying for a residential adult college in the north of England. He is particularly informative about the long campaign to create the College and to locate it in the Labour heartland of South Yorkshire, as well as about some of the curriculum innovations and cultural activities that it adopted in its early years. Once more, his account underplays conflict, whether internal, or (more seriously) external, from the early campaign of Sheffield Chamber of Commerce to have it closed to the more long term economic, social and cultural shifts that undermined parts of its original *raison d'être*.

As a resource for historians the book is flawed but helpful. It is largely a joy to read, enlivened as it is with Michael's rather mischievous eye for the telling anecdote. Apparently he wrote the book from memory, and it shows positively in the fresh and engaging style of the narrative, negatively in a number of errors, though my impression is that these are minor (the chair of the 1973 Committee on Adult Education is wrongly named as 'Sir John Russell', for example). Barratt Brown is particularly helpful in his vivid recreation of the middle class Quaker milieu that has had such a profound influence over nearly two centuries on English adult education. He also shows the importance of networks to the culture of left-of-centre intellectual activism: barely a situation arises without Michael bumping into a cousin or friend, or calling on someone who knew his father, and with this comes what some will undoubtedly find an irritating tendency to name-dropping. And his life history also reminds us that while 1945 marked a point of departure for British adult education, there were also important elements of continuity.

An obvious question for non-historians is whether the movements that Michael describes have left any lasting legacy. SIT is dead, along with the Institute for Workers Control; and both Northern College and trade union education have changed considerably in the last two decades. I will leave that for readers to decide, but his book has considerable value for those interested in post-war adult education, as well as in the wider culture of enlightened social activism in the second half of the twentieth century.

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