

Northern College

Malcolm Ball

*The author was a
Derbyshire miner and
day-release student and,
later, a colleague of
Michael Barratt Brown in
founding Northern
College, Barnsley.*

Michael Barratt Brown will, perhaps, be most readily remembered for his role in founding and establishing The Northern College. There is little doubt that this event has made a considerable impact on the lives of working people in the North of England and stands as a beacon both of what is necessary and what is possible. However, before his time as Principal of Northern College and for many years after he had left the post, Michael continued to influence the world around him.

Michael was born in Oxford on 15 March 1918. His education included the Dragon School in Oxford, Bootham School in York, and Corpus Christi College, Oxford. Following his formal education he served in the Friends Ambulance Unit stationed in London, 1940-41, and stationed in the Middle East, 1942-43. He moved to the Middle East Relief and Refugee Administration in 1944. From 1944 to 1947 he was with the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). He served as Chief of Mission in Sarajevo and as Executive Assistant to Chief of Mission in Belgrade. It was during his time with UNRRA in Yugoslavia that he met his second wife and partner, Eleanor Singer.

Following the war, in 1947, Michael and Eleanor returned to England. They married in 1948 and settled in Colchester, following Michael's divorce from Frances, his first wife. Michael, although an economist, worked in the film industry as Assistant Director with DATA Films, 1948-1950, before moving into teaching as a part-time tutor with the Workers' Educational Association, 1951-1954. He took up a permanent full-time post, as lecturer, at

Cambridge University Extra-mural Department in 1955. It was also during this time that he met and befriended a young printer, William (Bill) Hampton, with whom I was to follow the route of adult student into adult teaching. Michael continued his academic career in adult education with a move to Sheffield University Extra-mural Department (EMD) in 1959 and remained there until 1976, when he left to take up the post as Principal of Northern College (See *The Northern College*, pp.36-69, 2004).

The period working at Sheffield Extra-mural Department was a pivotal period in Michael's career and in his political life. As a teacher of adults, he found himself working with the National Union of Mineworkers in Derbyshire and in Yorkshire, and with the steel industry trades unions. Active members of these unions were able to attend day release courses for up to thirty days each year for three years and the courses were taught by Michael and his colleagues in the Department. This was supplemented with a weekend residential course held at the Coal Industry Social Welfare Organisation (CISWO) holiday camp at Skegness each Easter. As a result of this adult education, large numbers of members moved into further education, including from the pit to university, via the then existing adult residential colleges in Harlech, London and Oxford. One important consequence has been that there are many local politicians and teachers and local state administrators who have passed through the hands of Sheffield Extra-mural Department. The relationship resulted in many friendships with former students and with the union leaderships. Herbert (Bert) Wynn, the General Secretary of the Derbyshire Area of the National Union of Mineworkers, co-wrote a campaigning booklet, *A Plan for the Miners*, in 1964. Michael assisted with the economics research for the booklet. They also collaborated, along with Ken Alexander, Jim Williams, Maurice Bruce and other colleagues at the Extra-mural Department, in developing the idea for Northern College. A product of this collaboration is that in North Derbyshire and South Yorkshire trade unionism acquired a more reflective and cerebral quality, which was harnessed to the willingness and the ability to take collective action.

Michael and Eleanor had been members of the Communist Party, but both left following the Khrushchev speech to the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, in 1956, and the Red Army crushing of the Hungarian revolution. However, they both remained active and committed socialists. They both became ex-communists but never anti-communists. Michael found himself in the intellectual milieu that led to the creation of the *New Left Review* and served on its editorial board. He helped draft and actively supported the May Day Manifesto of 1966,

published by Penguin in 1968. It was, however, his partnership with Ken Coates and Tony Topham, after 1962, which may have had the most influence. It was out of this collaboration that two important initiatives were launched. These were the formation of the Society of Industrial Tutors and the Institute for Workers' Control.

The Society of Industrial Tutors, launched in 1963, was a collegial organisation of industrial studies tutors which promoted the discursive consideration of their professional role. It focused on study issues and avoided terms and conditions issues. Michael was chair and later president of the Society from 1963 to 1983. During those early years, and on behalf of the Society, Michael built up a good working relationship with senior staff in the TUC Education Service, producing a memorable and significant series of TV programmes and books. This project, known as the BBC-TUC-WEA multi-media initiative, made available to tutors and students a core set of texts dealing with a wide range of topics from workplace organisation to work measurement and payment systems. As was suggested by John Holford in his study of the TUC Education Service, this initiative preceded the development of a nationally delivered but consistent model for trade union education by the TUC itself.

The Institute for Workers' Control evolved out of a meeting of adult tutors and ultimately shook the ground of national politics, influencing the Labour Party and the TUC. At its height it convened working conferences of thousands of trade union convenors, shop stewards, active members, and full time officers, including trade union national committee members and general secretaries. Under its aegis, a large number of workplace groups across the country, in a wide range of industries and occupations, produced detailed and costed plans for the transformation of their industries or their companies (see *The Spokesman*, no. 116, pages 47-53, 2012). During the 1960s and 1970s, Michael was heavily involved in the IWC's activities and in writing for its publications. It was perfectly understandable that, with the number of experienced adult tutors among its founders, the IWC would have an approach to its activity which was rooted in the experience of trade union adult learning. This was explored in some detail by Ken Coates in an essay on 'Education as a lifelong experience' (*Workers' Control: Another World Is Possible*, 2003). The approach is to encourage learning from experience as a tool for further development. Of course, this learning is aided by tutorial guidance in the form of lectures, recommended reading, research and discussion, but the overall aim is to equip the learner, singly or in collaboration with others, to discover and to learn from this discovery. This approach seeks to

develop self-activating and lifelong students and researchers and to imbue trade union activists with a reflective and thoughtful dimension to their collective activity.

Michael left Northern College in 1984, and proceeded to add to his long list of activities and publications. Most significantly he was the founding chair and director of Third World Information & Twin Trading, 1985-97, and continued as a trustee and director after 1997, a role he maintained until recently. It was natural for Michael to contribute to building an initiative such as this because it combined his interests as an economist and adult educator along with his commitment to others with roots in his socialism. During a tutorial session with NUM day release students in 1965, he raised the question and challenged the students to reflect on ‘why was economic growth necessary?’ This reflected the attention he was giving to the environmental impact of industrialisation and the unequal distribution of the benefits of economic activity. The ensuing discussion embraced the quite different experiences of living in the ‘first’ world and living in the ‘third’ world. The constellation of issues raised by that discussion continue to dominate our lives, probably more so in 2015 than in 1965. This work was supplemented with publications on ‘fair trade’ and global trading relationships and reprised his much earlier study, *After Imperialism* (1963).

Parallel to his work on fair trade, Michael was also a director of the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation. The Russell Foundation takes a global approach to its mission and recognises that enduring ‘peace’ can be built out of global mutuality and respect for each other. The Foundation offers a connection that unites Michael’s life’s work as a socialist economist and adult educator. A sustainable world requires that we treat each other with fairness and respect, and our daily experience offers the material evidence for our learning.

The Northern College for Residential Adult Education was formally opened for students in Autumn 1978. It has endured for thirty-seven years, against formidable odds (See Ball, M and Hampton, W (2004) *The Northern College*, NIACE). During this time, Newbattle Abbey, Coleg Harlech, the Catholic adult college in Oxford, and the LSE Adult Residential Programme have withdrawn from residential adult education. The Northern College currently has its fourth Principal. However, Michael’s task was to build a new college. He recounts the amazing story in his contribution to the 2004 volume dedicated to the success of the first twenty-five years. Each of the four Principals has contributed to the continuing success and reputation of the College, a new college built on

the foundations of mutual respect and a faith in the ability of working class adult women and men to refresh their lives with the aid of learning and to refresh their communities and their neighbours' lives. Those values were established in the foundation of the College and find a faithful reflection in the mission of the College in 2015.

Michael Barratt Brown
Select Bibliography

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Africa's Choices: After 30 Years of the World Bank (1995) Penguin

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In addition, numerous articles and reviews are to be found in:

New Left Review

The Spokesman

Oxford University Institute of Statistics Bulletin

Yorkshire Bulletin of Statistics

Review of African Political Economy

Capital and Class

The Industrial Tutor

Institute for Workers' Control Bulletin

See also: Ball, M and Hampton, W. (Eds), (2004) *The Northern College: twenty-five years of adult learning*, NIACE



In the classroom