

**UNPUBLISHED TALK GIVEN AT UK HISTORY OF EDUCATION CONFERENCE
NOVEMBER 2012**

'Drunk on all this companionship':¹ Leila Berg and her rebel networks (1917-2012)

Image of Leila Berg at her desk

I'm going to start this talk by telling you the story of how I come to be speaking to you about Leila Berg - not only to set the scene but as a good example of the travel of ideas and the development of networks - which is the subject of my talk.

About five years ago, I was working with the philosopher and historian of radical education Michael Fielding, emeritus professor at the Institute of Education, who earlier in his career worked in two pioneer radical comprehensive schools – Thomas Bennett Community School, Crawley and Stantonbury Campus, Milton Keynes. He was working on Alex Bloom, a remarkable head-teacher who ran a radical state secondary school in the East End of London 1945-1955. I was working on a dissertation for a MA in the history of education about the Peckham Health Centre (1935-1950), an anarchist learning environment. We met (and continue to meet) often in the Quaker Friend's Meeting House near Euston to share ideas, sources, references. Michael Fielding told me about what he considered an important chapter in a book, which linked the Peckham Health Centre and Bloom's school as part of a tradition of radical education. The chapter was called *Towards Self-Government* and was published in 1972 as part of a book called *Children's Rights - towards the liberation of the child*.² The chapter was by a woman called Leila Berg. I found myself underlining most of the text and wanted to follow up all her examples of the 'unofficial people' who, as she put it, demonstrated the possibility to 'open the cage of our systems'.³ Michael Fielding had met her and thought that we would have much to talk about.

I contacted her and we agreed that I would come to visit her in her cottage in Wivenhoe, Essex. I visited her there twice. She was already an elderly lady, aged 93, without much mobility and with limited ability to take on new ideas and information. But she could talk about certain events in the past with great lucidity. And it is perhaps revealing the events which a ninety year old still considers important. She told me about her self-education in the bookshops and record shops of Manchester in the 1930s, her friendships with radical educators, her work as a writer for children, her work as a writer about radical education, the play-group which she ran at her house in South London. And as a recurring theme, she told me about her rebellious character so that 'she could never accept anything being done to her'.⁴ The stories she told me were sometimes lifted word for word from her books. It was as if the writing had fixed the events in her mind. And the content of her stories (written and verbal) was almost always drawn from her personal experiences and observations. On my first visit, she sent me up the steep staircase of her cottage to look at her book-shelf on radical education. It was an absolute treasure-trove of titles reflecting the range of her

¹ Berg, L. (1972) 'Moving towards Self Government', in *Children's Right: Towards the Liberation of the Child*, London: Panther Books, 8-53, at 49.

² Berg, L. (1972) 'Moving towards Self Government', in *Children's Right: Towards the Liberation of the Child*, London: Panther Books, 8-53.

³ L. Berg, 'Moving towards Self Government', in *Children's Right: Towards the Liberation of the Child* (London: Panther Books, 1972), 8-53, at 10.

⁴ Conversation between Leila Berg and Emily Charkin in Wivenhoe, 10th March 2010.

interests - books on how children learn to read and write (not phonics), books on educational experiments, books on home education. Berg generously lent me a number of titles relating to the Peckham Health Centre. I felt that I would like to read everything on her shelves.

The next time I met her was after her move to a nursing home in Suffolk. Her cottage had been cleared: correspondence and other materials relating to her work were distributed to archives (Michael Fielding secured some valuable documents about her educational work for the Institute of Education archives in London while materials about her books for children went to Seven Stories, Centre for Children's Books in Newcastle): her books about education were sold: personal objects were claimed by friends and neighbours, as Leila had requested. I visited her twice in the nursing home. Once, I took in my 7 year old and 6 year old. She took a gentle interest in them – asking them to sit with her and write their names – which she looked at intently. To my children, Leila Berg is 'a very old writer friend of mum's'. And then in April 2012 she died. I did not hear about her death for a few days. And in the course of those few days, this book arrived in the post. I had ordered a copy of David Will's account of *The Barns Experiment*⁵ from an on-line second-hand bookshop. David Will's was a Quaker who ran hostels for troubled 8-14 year olds based on principles of love, freedom and shared responsibility. I opened the package with pleasure - it's always good to receive a second-hand book in the post. It was a hard-back. Second Impression from 1947 - written and published while the experiment was still on-going. I went to the title page. And neatly at the top of the page, Leila Berg had marked this book as her own in her small, neat hand-writing.

And as I immersed myself in the archives at the Institute of Education, I became more familiar with that hand-writing. I realised that I was just one person at the end of a long line of people who have benefited from Berg's commitment to the task of moving ideas around - as she worked energetically throughout her life to celebrate what she thought was good and criticise loudly what she thought was not good. And in the pre-electronic communication era in which Berg mainly worked, those ideas were moved about through the written word, in the form of books, articles and letters, and through in-person conversations: exactly as I had experienced in my brief relationship with Leila Berg.

Sometimes, I would emerge from the archives or from a conversation with someone who had known Berg,⁶ with the same feeling which she wrote about in her chapter *Moving Towards Self-Government*, 'drunk on all this companionship' and glad that these people and their ideas have existed. I wondered if I was in danger of becoming a 'prisoner of her ... rhetoric'⁷ as the historian David Limond has criticised Berg in her own work. Or whether I was becoming deluded by an inflated sense of the importance of radical ideas, which as Wright has argued, in his *Assessing Radical Education* 'failed' in terms of 'substantial sustained achievement'.⁸

⁵ Wills, D. (1947) *The Barns Experiment*, London: Allen and Unwin.

⁶ Conversation between Rosemary Fost, Beryl Kingston and Emily Charkin on September 17th 2012. And conversation between John Walmsley and Emily Charkin on 1st November 2012.

⁷ Limond, D. (2002) 'Risinghill Revisited' *History of Education* 31 (6) 611-622, at 621.

⁸ Wright, N. (1989) *Assessing Radical Education*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press, vii.

However, that *feeling* of excited companionship and meeting of minds is part of *understanding* how these kinds of networks operate. They are not constituted by the dry transmission of ideas from one mind to another but by the emotional encounters of real people in real relationships. As Burke has found in her work on Danish-English school architecture networks: 'human relations were a necessary fabric for the generation and exchange of new knowledge'.⁹ Therefore my job as a sober historian seems to be not to ignore those human relationships but to recognise their part in the story of radical education. And to use the historical evidence produced by these relationships to help reveal, what Skinner, historian of ideas, calls 'the battle behind the apparent certainties'.¹⁰ Those 'battles' - both at the time and in subsequent interpretation - are probably an appropriate legacy for the 'intensely combative'¹¹ Berg and her rebel networks.

This paper is mainly concerned with the period from 1965-1985 in which Berg was most closely involved in work on radical education. In her earlier life, she had been a member of the Communist party. In *Flickerbook*, an impressionistic autobiography of her early life, she writes about how in the late 1930s, her 'flat is full of Party people, talking, arguing, laughing and drinking mugs of tea. "Leila's salons."¹² From an early age, she was interested in education: as an eighteen year old, she was 'riveted' by Makarenko's account of the Gorky colony for young vagabond gangs.¹³ she also claims that Susan Isaacs, the progressive founder of the child development department at the Institute of Education 'started her off'.¹⁴ Berg had a short spell at a teacher training college which she described as 'like a dreary elementary school, stagnant and oppressive...nothing to do with children growing'.¹⁵ After this, she trained as a journalist and started writing books for children in the 1950s. By the mid 1960s, she was living in a house on Streatham Common. Her two children, Daniel and Jenny, were in their twenties. She was running a bookshop for children in Tooting. Berg describes how during this period in London 'ideas on education were leaping across the clouds like electricity' and how the 'whole idea of the English state comprehensive school had lit up the sky with a cascade of stars'.¹⁶ In *Reading and Loving* (1977) she remembers how, with the publication of the government's Plowden Report in 1967, 'we wondered if, amazingly, we would become respectable'.¹⁷

⁹ Burke, C. (2010) 'Putting Education in its Place: mapping the observations of Danish and English architects on 1950s school design', *Paedagogica Historica*, 46 (5) 655-672, 670.

¹⁰ Skinner, Q. (2002) *Visions of Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 7.

¹¹ Obituary in the Independent, 30th April 2012 (last accessed at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/leila-berg-author-and-editor-who-revolutionised-our-approach-to-childrens-literature-7688855.html> on 20th July 2012).

¹² Berg, L. (1997) *Flickerbook*, London: Granta Publications, 210.

¹³ Berg, L. (1972) 'Moving towards Self Government', in *Children's Right: Towards the Liberation of the Child*, London: Panther Books, 8-53, at 10/

¹⁴ Conversation with Leila Berg, January 1981, conducted by Jonathon Croall, Institute of Education Archives/Leila Berg.

¹⁵ Berg, L. (1997) *Flickerbook*, London: Granta Publications, 191.

¹⁶ Berg, L. (1985) Notes for speech at John Holt's funeral. Institute of Education Archives/Leila Berg.

¹⁷ Berg, L. (1977) *Reading and Loving*, London: Routledge, 93.

Beryl Kingston and Rosemary Fost, both part of the NCT educational committee and living in South London during this period, knew Leila Berg and saw her as part of a local and national network of radical thinkers who together in the 1960s and 70s 'felt like things were going in the right direction...that radical ideas were mainstream': Fost uses similar language to Berg when she remembers it as a 'effervescent period of ideas coming together'.¹⁸ Berg's networks were not just in the education world. Her networks related to her work as an author, her life as a mother, grand-mother and neighbour in South London. Kingston recalls cinema nights in the basement of the Berg's house which included the now celebrated cinematographer Phil Meheux. Walmsley, an education photographer, who met Berg in the late 1960s and became a good friend and colleague, remembers his first impressions of her as part of a 'Streatham group of artists' and how she 'attracted and surrounded herself with talented people'.¹⁹ Berg's networks in the education world interwove with these geographical, social and cultural networks - in some ways reflecting her view that education should not be treated as distinct from the rest of life and her tendency to blur professional and personal boundaries.

Image of Risinghill.

Berg's more active relationship with radical education began when she visited Michael Duane's state free school, Risinghill, in Islington, London. She told me that 'I'd gone round to see the school for no other reason than that I was curious. The press drew my attention to it'.²⁰ She remembers being struck by the ease and friendliness of the children and being struck by how different the head's office was from the serious offices which heads usually have. She described to me how 'It was full of elderly people and babies. It was extraordinary.'²¹ On the closure of the school in 1965, she wrote *Risinghill: Death of a Comprehensive School* an impassioned defence of the school and Duane and an attack on the forces responsible for its closure. It was published by Penguin in 1968 after much wrangling between the publisher's lawyers and Berg who was determined to stick to her passionate and partisan version of events. Kingston, who also knew Duane from her own teacher-training days, remembers how Duane became good friends with Berg: that he was often at Berg's house and how they were 'on the same wave length'.²²

Risinghill established Berg as part of a wider progressive and radical education network. This network was not a professional or formal association such as the New Educational Fellowship of progressives earlier in the Century. It was, what Cunningham has called in his work on the importance of group biography, a 'horizontal network'²³ of activists and who were extremely critical of the status quo in education and worked towards changing it. This network extended geographically far beyond Berg's immediate London circle to radical head-

¹⁸ Conversation between Rosemary Fost, Beryl Kingston and Emily Charkin in September 2012.

¹⁹ Conversation between John Walmsley and Emily Charkin on 1st November 2012.

²⁰ Conversation between Leila Berg and Emily Charkin on February 2011

²¹ Conversation between Leila Berg and Emily Charkin on February 2011

²² E-mail from Beryl Kingston to Emily Charkin on 21st Nov 2012

²³ P. Cunningham, 'Towards a Prosopography of Progressivism', *History of Education*. 30/5 (2001), 439.

teacher Robert Mackenzie at Braehead in Scotland and A.S. Neill in his famous Summerhill boarding-school in Suffolk.

Show two images of Neill.

Neill self-defined himself as part of a group of 'rebels' when he wrote to Mackenzie that 'We three (Duane, Mackenzie and Neill) plus John Aitkenhead seem to be about the only rebels in the great scholastic Establishment'.²⁴ Berg worked with Walmsley to produce a book of reminiscences and photos about Neill and Summerhill which was published in 1969.²⁵ Berg requested contributions from radicals and progressives for whom Neill was an important shared hero: as Bob Mackenzie wrote to Berg 'Summerhill was the real pioneer. We made our compromises with the establishment. Neill never did'.²⁶ Berg herself in interview suggested 'I move among people who, they may not always know it, have been tremendously influenced by Neill'.²⁷

This network also extended across the Atlantic to the USA (interestingly not to Europe - a marked difference from the progressive networks earlier in the century). In particular in the 1960s and 70s, Berg became close friends with John Holt, writer and spokesperson for the radical education movement in the USA. In a draft for a speech she would make at his funeral, she describes how in this period 'across the channel there was Jonathan Kozoll, there was your George Dennison, your James Herndon, your Herbert Kohl and so many others and through print we were shouting our surprised greetings'.²⁸ This trans-Atlantic network was reflected in the editorial committee of the radical magazine *Children's Rights* for which Berg, Duane, Neill and Holt were all advisors.

Show image of Holt in London.

This network was not just fuelled by books and correspondence. This image of Holt was taken, again by Walmsley, on one of his visits to the UK in which he stayed at Berg's home in Streatham and visited a local, progressive primary school. Berg and Holt exchanged ideas about writing, education and life. When Holt became ill with cancer in 1983 and refused treatment, Berg flew to his sick-bed. And at his memorial service, she spoke alongside Holt's friend George Dennison, another radical educator and writer. Berg received a letter thanking her for speaking and stating that 'you were an important person in his life, a colleague providing a relationship he treasured'.²⁹

²⁴ Croall, J. (1983) *Neill of Summerhill: The Permanent Rebel*, Routledge, London, 377.

²⁵ Berg, L. and Walmsley, J. (1969) *Neill - the man and his work*, London: Penguin Educational Special.

²⁶ Letter from Bob MacKenzie to Berg about A.S. Neill, Institute of Education Archives/Leila Berg.

²⁷ Conversation with Leila Berg, January 1981, conducted by Jonathon Croall, Institute of Education Archives/Leila Berg.

²⁸ Berg speech at Holt's funeral in 1985, Institute of Education Archives/Leila Berg.

²⁹ Letter from N. Talbot to L. Berg, 6th November 1985, Institute of Education Archives/Leila Berg.

In 1968, Berg facilitated a one off meeting between A.S. Neill, Bob Mackenzie, Michael Duane and John Holt. Some of these individuals had prior connections with each other (particularly Neill) but they had never all met together. The meeting took place in September 1968 at her house. She clearly took pleasure and pride in having made this event happen – claiming 'it was quite a weekend'.³⁰ Berg, at the time, believed it to be a unique and important meeting and wrote to a publisher about the possibility of publishing an article based on a transcript which she had typed up and to be called 'Talking about Education'.³¹ Although it was never published, the transcript *does* provide a very rich document for historians interested in radical education and the nature of this network of rebels.

In Berg's account of the event, she positions herself as the 'hostess' and acknowledges a gendered aspect to this situation: 'I was the only woman so I kept walking out of the discussions to cook meals'.³² However, in the recorded/transcribed parts of the conversation (these are the parts in which Berg was present) she contributes equally to the men. In fact, it is noticeable that all five appear to be equally engaged - certainly in terms of the frequency of their contributions. The content of the conversation is about topics of the moment such as corporal punishment, educational psychology and the abolition of examinations. They broadly agree on these topics.

They also share a certain approach to discussion: robustly arguing with each other while also expressing support for each other's work, clearly well-read and informed (for example, they make references to Bernstein's work on language and recent articles in the press) but mainly drawing on anecdotes and observations from their own contexts and experiences. Their way of conversing reflects their dual identities as writers and activists and their shared concern with the reality of children's experiences. In the process of this conversation, they are creating their sense of identity as a group: there is frequent use of 'we' and both Neill and Holt evoke a battle in which they are on the same side. For example, Neill says: 'we can only do what you and I are doing. Bob and John and Mike and Leila, just carrying on a very difficult battle as a very small minority, hoping gradually that the thing will spread'. Holt situates the value of the network as 'keeping up our morale' and 'to avoid despair' as 'we have to work on a great many fronts'.³³

³⁰ Berg draft for speech at Holt's funeral in 1985, Institute of Education Archives, Leila Berg.

³¹ Letter from Berg to Beryl MacPellhone (check spelling), 30th September 1968, Institute of Education Archives/Leila Berg.

³² Berg draft for speech at Holt's funeral in 1985, Institute of Education Archives/Leila Berg.

³³ Transcript of conversation between Berg, Duane, Holt, MacKenzie, Neill, September 1968, Institute of Education Archives/Leila Berg.

But were they really on the same side in the 'battle' or was it just that, as Walmsley perceived with Neill and Berg, they 'railed against the same things'?³⁴ Wright has argued that the radical movement in education was 'wracked by internal disagreements'³⁵ and Shotton, in *No Master High or Low*, has argued against the 'temptation to talk of a movement' on the basis that 'these schools and initiatives don't link with each other and more widely'.³⁶ However, this transcript reveals many shared values and tendencies of thought within this particular group. Some of these values were shared with the wider progressive movement in this period, for example, an abhorrence of corporal punishment and a preoccupation with the interests of the child. However they also share a more radical libertarian position in which their view of the child and their view of education can be differentiated, as Shotton has argued for, 'from the more general progressive tradition with which it is normally associated'.³⁷

This group shared a radical critique of the status quo in society and education (and this when progressivism was at its most influential): Neill, in typically blunt style, says 'I think the H bomb would be a bloody good thing. Come on, let's start again' and Holt argues that 'if you look objectively at our society or at our so-called civilization from any distance, it's very hard not to conclude that it's going over the edge of the cliff'.³⁸ They, therefore, argued for radical societal change and a complete reframing of education – rather than the pedagogical or school reform which concerned liberals, progressives and even some radicals. They also shared the view that education should not be separate from life and that it should not be seen as a positional good to be competed for: in practice, they discussed the abolition of the examination system and certification culture.

Show image of child swinging at Summerhill.

Their view of the child was also distinct from mainstream or idealised, progressive accounts.. In *Towards Self-Government*, Berg describes how 'the true educationists - Lane, Neill, Duane - always saw the individual child in front of him and spoke directly to him, not to an abstraction'.³⁹ Holt believed that Neill's importance was that he 'responded to children as they are. Not as material for Harvard'.⁴⁰ Wright has argued that Berg's distinction between those who follow theories and those who follow children should be reframed as theories based upon observation of and knowledge of real children and those which are not.⁴¹ In

³⁴ Conversation between John Walmsley and Emily Charkin in London, 1st November 2012.

³⁵ Wright, N. (1989) *Assessing Radical Education*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 14.

³⁶ J. Shotton, *No Master High or Low: Libertarian Education and Schooling in Britain 1890-1980* (Bristol: Libertarian Education, 1993), 121.

³⁷ J. Shotton, *No Master High or Low: Libertarian Education and Schooling in Britain 1890-1980* (Bristol: Libertarian Education, 1993), 16.

³⁸ Transcript of conversation between Berg, Duane, Holt, MacKenzie, Neill, September 1968, Institute of Education Archives/Leila Berg.

³⁹ Berg, L. (1972) 'Moving towards Self Government', in *Children's Right: Towards the Liberation of the Child*, London: Panther Books, 8-53, at 13.

⁴⁰ Draft notes by Berg for talk at Holt's funeral, Institute of Education Archives/Leila Berg.

⁴¹ Wright, N. (1989) *Assessing Radical Education*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 162.

either dichotomy, Berg and the people she gathered in her living room that weekend, were, as Walmsley describes it 'on the same page' in placing great importance on the experiences and realities of children's lives.

They also shared a profound mistrust of all authorities – whether in the shape of psychologists (Holt argued that I would a good deal rather have a kid hit with a stick than be brain-washed for hours at a time), well-meaning parents or teachers ('benevolent authority. It's a bloody awful thing. It's really dangerous.'),⁴² certificate culture (Neill argued 'It comes to this that Picasso couldn't get a job teaching art in a state school – he's no certificate') and the state itself (Neill again: bastards you get in Westminster – all the self-seekers). The transcript shows that they were deeply concerned with wider societal issues but they did not think that the change would come through formal politics and the state. Neill argued that 'if I tried to reform society by action, society would kill me as a public danger'.⁴³ Instead, they saw themselves as part of what Holt calls a 'guerilla war' – 'a shot here and a little shot here...places where we can apply a little leverage'.⁴⁴

Despite these important shared values and ideas, the network was not without its tensions and contradictions. There is some evidence that Neill was concerned about Berg's book on him. He wrote 'I keep hearing rumours about the book you are doing. What is it all about? A life of me? A damnation of me? I'll be nervous until I hear from you'.⁴⁵ It also seems that the book caused some rifts within the wider network as there was a rather unseemly jostling for position to be close to Neill – the man who claimed that he did not want any 'disciples'.⁴⁶ In interview in 1981, Berg admitted that 'I didn't get to know him very well. There was bad feeling between Mike and Ena. I was associated with Mike then and it was difficult for me not to pick up his feelings about Ena'.⁴⁷ A note from Neill just before the 1968 meeting also gives another perspective on the relationships within this group: 'I want to meet Bob...my only snag is that in a group of him and Mike and Holt, I won't get enough of him'.⁴⁸ This short note is a 'sobering' reminder of the realities of these kinds of inter-personal networks and raises useful questions about Berg's rose-tinted account of Holt and Neill's relationship and, indeed, Holt's perception that Neill 'looked upon me as his son'.⁴⁹ Neill also had some differences of opinion with the editor of *Children's Rights* who published an article encouraging children to wreak havoc in their schools. He felt that he was in a 'dilemma' about whether to resign but in the end settled for a letter to the Guardian the following day arguing that sabotage was not the answer as it was 'uncreative rebellion'.⁵⁰

⁴² Transcript of conversation between Berg, Duane, Holt, MacKenzie, Neill, September 1968, Institute of Education Archives/Leila Berg.

⁴³ Cited in Jones, K. (1983) *Beyond Progressive Education*, London: Macmillan, 34.

⁴⁴ Transcript of conversation between Berg, Duane, Holt, MacKenzie, Neill, September 1968, Institute of Education Archives/Leila Berg.

⁴⁵ Note from Neill to Berg, 12th June 1969.

⁴⁶ Letter from Aitkenhead to Berg, Institute of Education Archives/Leila Berg.

⁴⁷ Conversation with Leila Berg, January 1981, conducted by Jonathon Croall, Institute of Education Archives/Leila Berg.

⁴⁸ Note from Neill to Berg, 13th September 1968, Institute of Education Archives/Leila Berg.

⁴⁹ Letter from Farenga to Berg, 16th November 1985, Institute of Education Archives/Leila Berg.

⁵⁰ Cited in Croall, J. (1983) *Neill of Summerhill: The Permanent Rebel*, Routledge, London, 388.

As well as these personal tensions and differences of emphasis, a more substantial difference of opinion emerged in the 1970s, as disillusion about the possibility of real change in schools set in. In Berg's draft speech for Holt's funeral in 1983, she described how 'after a while, John too got disillusioned and we all knew that the stars from those glorious fireworks were fading from the sky...began to think about the family as the point of life and growth.'⁵¹ For Holt, this meant that he increasingly turned away from schools which he believed were 'terrible places'⁵² and claimed that 'really my only interest in education is to find ways to get more and more children out of their clutches'.⁵³ In 1977, he set up *Growing without schooling* and a mail-order book shop which supported home educating families. Neill, in stark contrast, thought that parents and family represented the root of the problem. Berg, in interview about Neill, suggested that 'one thing of his I didn't accept was the separation of the child from the parent. I thought the family context was very important to children'.⁵⁴ This difference of opinion about the respective roles of school and family would seem to support Wright's argument that the radical movement was agreed about the wrongs of schooling but not so clear about how to set about 'remedying these wrongs'.⁵⁵

Berg's correspondence with Holt also reveals some tensions between their views. For example, Holt wrote a positive review of Berg's *Reading and Loving*. However, in a detailed letter, he challenged her assumption in the book that learning to read needed loving attention. He proposed a more pragmatic view that children can and do learn to read under many, less than ideal, circumstances. He also argued that there is 'very little that we can do through the medium of institutions'.⁵⁶ He suggests that 'there may be some slight or even not so slight difference of opinion between us'.⁵⁷ He also challenged some of her remarks given at a library conference in Toronto. He argued that she was in danger of falling into the progressive's trap of harnessing children's natural curiosity as a motivational device or trick for traditional educational purposes. Instead he cited with approval the anarchist, Paul Goodman's position, that 'good families are instructional precisely because they do not set out to be'.⁵⁸

⁵¹ Draft for John Holt's funeral, I of E archives/Leila Berg.

⁵² Letter from John Holt to Leila Berg, 6th June 1976, Institute of Education Archives/Leila Berg.

⁵³ Letter from John Holt to Leila Berg, 6th June 1976, Institute of Education Archives/Leila Berg.

⁵⁴ Berg in interview with Jonathan Croall, January 1981, Institute of Education Archives/Leila Berg.

⁵⁵ Wright, N. (1989) *Assessing Radical Education*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 176

⁵⁶ Letter from John Holt to Leila Berg, 12th August 1976, Institute of Education Archives/Leila Berg.

⁵⁷ Letter from John Holt to Leila Berg, 12th August 1976, Institute of Education Archives/Leila Berg.

⁵⁸ Letter from John Holt to Leila Berg, 3rd November 1976, Institute of Education Archives/Leila Berg.

The available evidence suggests that Berg was somewhat ambivalent about home education in the UK. In one of our conversations, she suggested that home education had 'been tried rather badly'.⁵⁹ In the 1980s, she did remain in close contact with people at Growing Without Schooling. However, it is not clear whether this was out of personal loyalty to Holt, which is certainly the emphasis of the content of her letters, rather than whole-hearted support for home education. However, on the closure of the organisation, she wrote to the staff to say that 'she was so nourished by it'.⁶⁰ It is also possible that she had some connection with the Education Otherwise group in the UK (founded 1977) since when Holt became ill, Berg was asked by Growing Without Schooling to pass on the news to the 'EO folks'⁶¹ which would probably refer to this group. She also had some books about home education on her shelves.⁶²

If Berg did not follow Holt in becoming a whole-hearted champion of home education, she was, nevertheless, in many ways, a natural part of the wider radical de-schooling movement with Holt and his friends and compatriots Illich (1926-2002), Goodman (1911-72) and Dennison (1925-87). In *Look at Kids* she gives many examples of how schooling fails 'most children' and argues that 'I sometimes think we are simply taking a chunk out of their lives – ten years when we drive them and beat them and disintegrate them and undermine them, till at last they escape from us'.⁶³ In rejecting schools, she may have been influenced by Holt, but she was also returning to her own experiences as a child who, as she told me, 'wasn't interested in going to school'⁶⁴ and as an adult, her visceral rejection of all kinds of institutions.⁶⁵

Show image of her in the park with grand-children.

Instead, she celebrated learning environments and relationships outside schools - particularly across generations. As a child, she ducked under the 'thick white rope to divide the children's part from the grown-up's part' in a library and as a seventy seven year old, she wrote a book challenging the tendency to compartmentalise everything: 'We compartmentalise ages...as if children weren't aiming to be grown-up, as if old people had never been children.'⁶⁶ In the final chapter of *Reading and Loving* she gives examples of children learning in train stations, the Tate gallery and home – she draws attention to the fact that 'none of these children was in a building called school, with an adult called Teacher and with equipment specially designed as Scholastic'.⁶⁷ And in her own practical work with children, after her negative experience of teacher training, she chose instead to run a free play group in her own home, a bookshop for children in Tooting and even if she went into

⁵⁹ Berg in conversation with Emily Charkin, 8th April 2010.

⁶⁰ Letter from Leila Berg to staff of Growing Without Schooling, 18th January 2002, Institute of Education Archive/Leila Berg.

⁶¹ Letter from Donna Richoux to Leila Berg, 25th July 1985, Institute of Education Archives/Leila Berg.

⁶² For example, Guterson, D. (1992) *Family Matters*, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

⁶³ Berg, L., (1972) *Look at Kids*, London: Penguin, 137-138.

⁶⁴ Berg, L. In conversation with Emily Charkin, 10th March 2010 and 8th April 2010.

⁶⁵ Berg, L. (1977) *Reading and Loving*, London: Routledge, 134.

⁶⁶ Berg, L. (1994) *Backwards and Forwards*, Wivenhoe: Quentin Books.

⁶⁷ Berg, L. (1977) *Reading and Loving*, London: Routledge, 133.

schools, it was as a writer interested in the children's lives and 'never as a teacher, never as part of the Institution'.⁶⁸

Show image of her running informal play-group at home.

Berg was not alone in the UK in her sympathy for de-schooling ideas. Michael Duane, despite (or perhaps as a result of) his own work within the schooling system, wrote a robust defence of de-schooling against 'misconceptions' in the UK⁶⁹ for the first edition of *Children's Rights*. In 1965, Mackenzie wrote a book entitled *Escape from the Classroom*. The UK radicals, including Neill despite his reservations about the role of parents, certainly shared the de-schooling critique of the separation of education from life and the problems of compulsory institutionalised schooling. In their support of these ideas, Berg and her fellow rebels, were in sympathy with not only the US de-schooling movement, but also the work of anarchists educational writers such as Colin Ward, the British anarchist, who also recently died (1924-2010).

Colin Ward's work *The Child in the City*(1979)⁷⁰ represents children in a strikingly similar way to Berg's *Look at the Kids*: robust, capable, active. Ward and Berg also shared a common interest in the Peckham Health Centre (1935-1950), celebrated by anarchists as a 'parable of the way things ought to be'.⁷¹ Berg supported Ward in trying to get a new book about it commissioned, to be called *A Health Anarchy*.⁷² Berg also passed on *The Peckham Experiment* to John Holt who was 'fascinated by it'⁷³ as an example of an alternative to school. He included extracts from it in his *Instead of Education*⁷⁴ an example of how ideas did not just travel in an easterly direction.

It is perhaps through this connection to anarchism that Berg's network of rebel educators who met in her living room in 1968 should be understood. Berg, according to Kingston, called herself an anarchist. Duane had strong links with the anarchist publishing group, *Freedom*. Neill did not call himself an anarchist and it is debatable whether Summerhill should be classified as anarchist.⁷⁵ However, Neill and his school have been celebrated by many anarchists, such as Colin Ward as an important and successful experiment in freedom and self-government. The differences of opinion between these rebels about the respective roles of parents, schools and the state, are less important than their shared view on the dignity of the child, an education without fixed ends and resistance to authority in all its forms. Education, for this groups of rebels, was, as Suissa has suggested for anarchist education, 'one of the many arenas of human relations in which we constantly experiment with our ends, our goals'.⁷⁶

⁶⁸ Berg, L. *A letter to John*, undated but c. 1988, Institute of Education Archives/Leila Berg.

⁶⁹ Children's Rights, number 1 (no date) 4.

⁷⁰ Ward, C. (1979) *The Child in the City*, London: Penguin.

⁷¹ Ward, C. (ed.) (1966) 'Peckham Recollected', *Anarchy*, 6, 52.

⁷² Letter from Berg to Leek (Allen and Unwin publishers), 8th November 1976, Institute of Education Archives/Leila Berg.

⁷³ Letter from John Holt to Leila Berg, 30th July 1975, Institute of Education Archives/Leila Berg.

⁷⁴ Holt, J. (2004) (1st pub. 1975) *Instead of Education*, Boulton: First Sentient Publications.

⁷⁵ Suissa, J. (2010) *Anarchism and Education*, Oakland: PM Press, 93-99.

⁷⁶ Suissa, J. (2009) 'The space now possible: anarchist education as utopian hope', in L. David and R. Kinna (eds.) *Anarchism and Utopianism*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 241-56, 254.

Historians of radical education, Shotton and Wright, have criticised the radicals for failing to create a 'radical blue-print'⁷⁷ and engage with the existing political system. They claim that these failings undermined the possibility of more organised action to challenge the status quo. However, it is in keeping with their experimental outlook that they did not prescribe this 'blue-print' and Wright himself concedes that in the field of education 'uncertainty ought to prevail'.⁷⁸ Perhaps this network should be judged by the anarchist paradigm, described by Landauer, whereby, 'the state is not something that can be destroyed by a revolution...' but 'by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently'.⁷⁹ Berg and her rebel allies did exactly that: in their writing, their ways of working with children and in their ways of working with each other. Wright has criticised the fact that 'there was no radical equivalent of the New Educational Fellowship'.⁸⁰ However, perhaps, with reference to the conference theme, rebels, by their nature, network differently from reformers or rulers. As Martin has argued in her work *Making Socialists* the insights provided by group biography 'show elements of another practice'.⁸¹ The practice amongst this network of rebels was supportive, challenging, fluid, non-hierarchical and committed to Malatesta's notion of the 'continuous exchange of ideas':⁸² in their way of engaging with each other, they offered an educative alternative to more conventional networks.

Shotton has also argued that 'the mystery and the mistake is that they did not take their message outside the confines of their own communities and political movements'⁸³ and Wright has called the radicals a privileged and 'in-ward looking clique'.⁸⁴ Although this network of rebel writers may have failed to persuade politicians, neither did it just speak to itself: they published tirelessly in radical and mainstream press, they acted as advocates for children,⁸⁵ plays and TV programmes have been made about their work.⁸⁶ They share an accessible writing style which did not just speak to academics and educationalists. In particular, Holt's books *How Children Fail* (1964) and *How Children Learn* (1967) achieved high sales and the status of classics. Berg also reached a mass market with her books for children learning to read, the Nipper series, which sought to validate working class children's experiences. In fact, it could be argued, that by standing outside of the educational establishment and by not engaging more directly in politics, this group of rebels remained able to communicate more directly to the public.

⁷⁷ Wright, N. (1989) *Assessing Radical Education*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 168.

⁷⁸ Wright, N. (1989) *Assessing Radical Education*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 169.

⁷⁹ Ward, C. and Goodway, D. (2003) *Talking Anarchy*, Nottingham: Five Leaves Publications.

14.

⁸⁰ Wright, N. (1989) *Assessing Radical Education*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 174.

⁸¹ Martin, J. (2010) *Making Socialists*, Manchester University Press, 68.

⁸² E. Malatesta (trans. V. Richards), in *Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas* (London: Freedom Press, 1965), 25.

⁸³ J. Shotton, *No Master High or Low: Libertarian Education and Schooling in Britain 1890-1980* (Bristol: Libertarian Education, 1993), 62.

⁸⁴ Wright, N. (1989) *Assessing Radical Education*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 174. **check page**

⁸⁵ **Palmer, T. (1971) *The Trials of Oz London: Blond and Briggs*. CHECK.**

⁸⁶ *Risinghill* was adapted for the stage as a play in Salisbury Playhouse called *Raising Hell*. Summerhill has been the subject of a TV documentary in 1992 and a TV drama in 2008.

Overall, the critics are probably right that these groups of rebels failed to have significant influence on the direction of travel in education. The rebels themselves felt this intensely: Holt wrote that Neill felt 'he'd waged a battle and lost it'⁸⁷ and Duane, at their meeting in 1968, expressed 'a kind of despair in the education system in this county'.⁸⁸ Berg and Holt remained more optimistic: in a letter in 2002, at age 85, Berg could still write 'people are beginning in small ways to do things they want to do, heartening things and to gather other people around them'.⁸⁹ In Holt's wider 'guerilla war'⁹⁰ or what Ward describes as a 'series of engagements between libertarian and authoritarian solutions throughout history',⁹¹ their success remains to be seen - and our current system is definitely creaking.

This talk concludes where it began - with the work of Michael Fielding who first introduced me to Leila Berg. In an article about Alex Bloom, he has argued for the importance of putting a 'hand around the flame' of his work and to 'retell other stories which have been shamefully forgotten'.⁹² And in his most recent book (in review, compared to Holt's *How Children Fail*) he argues that examples from the past of 'real utopias' and 'social alternatives' represent pre-figurative practices which could contribute to the overthrow of the 'current educational dictatorship of no alternative'.⁹³ This history of Leila Berg and her rebel networks, is offered as a contribution to Fielding's work in the present and Berg's work in the past to keep flames alight - through writing, action and friendship.

⁸⁷ Holt writing about Neill, Institute of Education Archives/Leila Berg.

⁸⁸ Transcript of conversation between Berg, Duane, Holt, MacKenzie, Neill, September 1968, Institute of Education Archives/Leila Berg.

⁸⁹ Letter from Leila Berg to staff at Growing Without Schooling, 18th January 2002.

⁹⁰ Holt, J. in transcript of conversation between Berg, Duane, Holt, MacKenzie, Neill, September 1968, Institute of Education Archives/Leila Berg.

⁹¹ Ward, C. (1988) *Anarchy in Action*, London: Freedom Press, 136. (First published 1972)

⁹² Fielding, M. (2005) *Alex Bloom, Pioneer of Radical Education*, *Forum*, 47 (2 and 3) 119-134, 132.

⁹³ Fielding, M. and Moss, P. (2011) *Radical Education and the Common School*, London: Routledge, 1 and 38.