

Leila Berg (1917-2012): writer, rebel, radical educator

Emily Charkin's unpublished talk at Housman's Bookshop event, Wednesday 22nd May, 7pm

Berg's contribution to radical education and the lives of children

Introduction:

I am working with the history and philosophy departments at the Institute of Education on a PhD about children's experiences in anarchist communities in Britain and Spain in the 1930s. My wider research interests are radical education and ordinary lives. I met Leila Berg when she was ninety three and she talked to me about her life and shared some of her treasure-trove of books. This work has been based on those conversations, her books and correspondence and other materials held in her archives at the Institute of Education.

Leila Berg had - what might seem - a very unpromising start to a career in education. She 'wasn't interested in going to school',¹ she 'flatly refused'² to go to university and was expelled from teacher-training college after organising her fellow-students into attending a political meeting about the Spanish Civil War. Her description of this experience in her autobiography *Flickerbook* gives a vivid sense of the young Leila Berg. 'I packed first. Then I went straight into the Principal's room and said 'Don't bother to expel me. I was leaving anyway' and walked straight out again and caught the London train.'³ An unpromising start to a career in education.

Or perhaps not. Perhaps a very promising start to her life-long work of challenging the system and championing alternative ways to educate, learn and make change happen. And she walked this talk before she talked this talk. As a child she bunked off school and self-educated in the bookshops, record shops and libraries of Manchester in the early 1930s - piling up books and records and 'ducking under the thick white rope which divided the children's part from the grown-up's part in a library'. And as a young woman she describes how she educated herself at speaker's corner, the theatre, the cinema, concerts, bookshops - as she calls them - 'all great celebrating places, much better than schools'.⁴ And then, in her turn, she created these kinds of places - a play-group, a bookshop for children, cinema clubs, writing groups - places in which adults and children could share experiences and ideas.

Her more formal engagement with education came when she published *Risinghill* in 1965 - an account of a free school very near here which Lynn Brady will speak about later. [She told me that she had been drawn to visit the school out of curiosity after reading an article in the press - at the time she was not involved in educational circles.] The process of writing this book catapulted her into a world of educational ideas and people. She went on to collaborate with the photographer John Walmsley (here today) and the great and the good from progressive education in collecting together reflections on A.S.Neill, head-teacher of the famous libertarian boarding school, Summerhill to form a book called *Neill - the man and*

¹ Berg, L. In conversation with Emily Charkin, 10th March 2010 and 8th April 2010.

² Berg, L. (1997) *Flickerbook*, London: Granta Publications, 197.

³ Berg, L. (1997) *Flickerbook*, London: Granta Publications, 195.

⁴ *Flickerbook*, p223.

his work.⁵ Later in life she would describe how, in the 1960s, 'ideas on education were leaping across the clouds like electricity'.⁶ In this period, progressive or child-centred ideas were in the ascent and Leila Berg wrote how with the publication of the government's Plowden Report in 1967, 'we wondered if, amazingly, we would become respectable'.⁷

She needn't have worried too much about that. It is true that some of the ideas that she and others fought for in the 1960s became battles won: the abolition of corporal punishment and a more child-centred approach in classrooms for younger children. She also succeeded in persuading Macmillans to publish the Nipper series for children learning to read - the content was based on the everyday lives of working class children. Wendy Jones will speak more about this aspect of her work. It is mainly this contribution to child-centred education which has been celebrated in the obituaries and radio 4 programme *Last Word*. These wins were significant. And I'm glad that this side of her work has been recognised.

However, I'd like to argue that there was a more radical and less respectable side to Leila Berg's educational ideas which may prove more significant to the history of education in the longer-term. In the 1970s, Berg became disillusioned with the more main-stream progressive movement and aligned herself more closely to a libertarian, anarchist and de-schooling tradition - which was particularly strong in the USA in this period, reflected in the work of people such as John Holt and his *Instead of education*, Ivan Illich and his *Deschooling Society* and Paul Goodman and his *Compulsory Miseducation*. These books are still in print and can probably be found here in Housmans. Their work was concerned with radical societal change and a complete reframing of education – rather than the pedagogical, curriculum or school reform which concerned liberals and progressives.

In the 1970s, Leila Berg became close friends with John Holt and joined forces with these writers - she no longer held out much hope for institutional education. She wrote in *Look at the Kids* in 1972 that schooling fails 'most children' and 'I sometimes think we are simply taking a chunk out of their lives'.⁸ She also criticised the wider tendency for children to be excluded from society. In *Backwards and Forwards* published in 1994 she wrote that 'we compartmentalise everything. We compartmentalise ages...as if children weren't aiming to be grown-up, as if old people had never been children'.⁹

Instead, in her books, she celebrated examples of active children learning from their families, communities and environments. She described, with careful attention, their play, work, conversations, feelings - and how everything has 'learning possibilities'.¹⁰ She argued that education should not be separate from life: for example in *Reading and Loving*, published in 1977, she wrote that 'you will notice that none of these children was in a building called School, with an adult called Teacher and with equipment specially designed as Scholastic. They were in the world, with their own drive to become competent in it'.¹¹

⁵ Berg, L. and Walmsley, J. (1969) *Neill - the man and his work*, London: Penguin Educational Special.

⁶ Berg, L. (1985) Notes for speech at John Holt's funeral. Institute of Education Archives/Leila Berg.

⁷ Berg, L. (1977) *Reading and Loving*, London: Routledge, 93.

⁸ Berg, L., (1972) *Look at Kids*, London: Penguin, 137-138.

⁹ Berg, L. (1994) *Backwards and Forwards*, Wivenhoe: Quentin Books.

¹⁰ Berg, L., (1972) *Look at Kids*, London: Penguin, 137-138. check page.

¹¹ *Reading and Loving*, p133.

Although these books are a valuable contribution to literature on radical education in the UK, I would argue that Leila Berg's *more* significant contribution was through the friendships and networks which she nurtured and which generated something like what the anarchist Malatesta called 'the continuous exchange of ideas'.¹² She was tireless in drawing attention to other people's initiatives, experiments and writing: for example she worked hard to promote the ideas practised in *The Peckham Health Centre*, an anarchist experiment in creating the conditions of good health which she described as a 'demonstration, a challenge and an irresistible inspiration'.¹³

She also nurtured these kinds of alternative ideas by bringing people together to talk. In 1968, she hosted a conversation between various libertarian head-teachers and John Holt. She describes it as follows: 'I managed to get John Holt, Mike Duane, Bob Mackenzie and A.S. Neill together for a weekend at my house. They knew each other of course but they had never all met. How they talked! It was quite a weekend.'¹⁴ A.S. Neill paid tribute to the importance of this kind of informal network for 'carrying on a very difficult battle as a very small minority' and John Holt argued that it helps us 'to avoid despair'. In creating these kinds of opportunities for the exchange of ideas outside of the main educational establishment and across the Atlantic, Leila Berg created an important alternative forum.

Overall, the critics are perhaps right that Berg and her fellow rebels 'failed' in terms of 'substantial sustained achievement'.¹⁵ The rebels themselves felt this intensely: [A.S. Neill felt 'he'd waged a battle and lost it'¹⁶ and Holt argued that 'if you look 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'.]¹⁷ However, taking Colin Ward's anarchist view of historical change as a 'series of engagements between libertarian and authoritarian solutions'¹⁸ battles may have been lost but the war is not over. [Fielding and Moss, contemporary champions of radical education, in their recent book have called for ideas and examples to contribute to the 'overthrow of the current educational dictatorship of no alternative'.¹⁹]As state institutions continue to flounder and home education grows rapidly, it could be that Berg's books and ideas will be turned to again as a source of real alternatives in education [and a related approach to social change in which the process itself 'constitutes an educative and motivating experience.']²⁰ Certainly Leila Berg remained optimistic: in a letter in 2002, at age 85, she 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.'²¹ And perhaps, by being here today to discuss her books and ideas, we are a testimony to Leila Berg's contribution to radical education: an on-going conversation about the reality of our lives with children and how they could be different.

¹² E. Malatesta (trans. V. Richards), in *Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas* (London: Freedom Press, 1965), 25.

¹³ L. Berg 'Moving towards Self Government', in *Children's Right: Towards the Liberation of the Child* (London: Panther Books, 1972), 8-53 at 27.

¹⁴ Berg, notes for funeral speech about Holt.

¹⁵ Wright, N. (1989) *Assessing Radical Education*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press, vii.

¹⁶ Holt writing about Neill, Institute of Education Archives/Leila Berg.

¹⁷ Transcript of conversation between Berg, Duane, Holt, MacKenzie, Neill, September 1968, Institute of Education Archives/Leila Berg.

¹⁸ Ward, C. (1988) *Anarchy in Action*, London: Freedom Press, 136. (First published 1972)

¹⁹ Fielding, M. and Moss, P. (2011) *Radical Education and the Common School*, London: Routledge, 1.

²⁰ Suissa, J. (2010) *Anarchism and Education*, Oakland: PM Press, 150.

²¹ Letter from Leila Berg to staff at Growing Without Schooling, 18th January 2002.