A. S. Neill on Bertrand Russell

interviewed by Terry Philpot

THIS INTERVIEW WAS conducted at the request of Christopher Farley, Russell's secretary at the time of his death, who wanted to include it in a projected book for the Russell centenary in 1972, which did not, in the event, emerge in the form then envisaged.

I had, in fact, interviewed Neill once before; an extensive verbatim piece to mark his eighty-fifth birthday which appeared in *Peace News* (17 Oct. 1969). I had been disappointed. He gave the impression of tiredness. Neill's writing had always attracted me by a certain lightness and young-mindedness (not for nothing perhaps did he title his autobiography by the rather schoolboyish quip *Neill! Neill! Orange Peel*), and he remained irreverent and unconcerned by social conventions until the end of his life. But certainly the youthfulness and sprightliness never communicated themselves to me that day in the person.

Overtures to Russell had been less successful. *Peace News* had asked if I would interview him for his ninety-fifth birthday, and my request was met with a letter from a secretary saying that Lord Russell preferred practical support for his work rather than commemorative interviews. But when I was later researching an article (*Humanist*, July 1970) about Lord and Lady Amberley, Russell's parents, a letter from one of his staff in response to some questions apologized for his delay in replying due to illness, but promised that he would do so upon recovery. The letter reached me on the day of his death, 2 February 1970. Before that, though, I had written a long article on Beacon Hill School (*Humanist*, June 1969), relying much on a correspondence with Dora Russell.

My second meeting with Neill, then, took place on 9 January 1971 at

his small, comfortable house almost next door to Summerhill School, in Leiston, Suffolk. This time he seemed to me a healthy and alert eighty-seven-year-old, seated in a large, bright but sparsely furnished sitting-room.

There was still, I remember, a reserve about him, so that one had to prompt him. I suspect, though, that Neill may not have been a man much given to theorizing or elaborating his ideas (even if he did write several books). Much of what he did was instinctive (he admits as much in the interview) and pragmatic. For example, he was ready to throw out psychoanalytic theory which did not stand up to the evidence of his practice after taking the essential insights of the science for his own purposes.

He was not an intellectual. He told me that he preferred Wells' early novels like *Kipps* and *The History of Mr. Polly*, and regretted that they were no longer read by children, while he thought Wells' later work "books of dull sociology". When he had said this at a meeting, he said that he found that Wells had been sitting in the audience and had been most annoyed; his own view was the very opposite.

Neill was, as he always said, "a doer, not a thinker". The different approaches and characteristics of the two men came to the fore in their view of education, as is evidenced here.

INTERVIEW

When did you meet Russell?
I think that it was in 1925 when he came to stay at Summerhill for a week. I have an idea that he came to see what we were doing before setting up his own school, Beacon Hill. When his school was established I went there twice.

What were your impressions of him?
Where we met was in our sense of humour for we both laughed at the same things and this was most important. I used to meet with Freudians in Vienna and there there was no fun at all. When I stayed at Beacon Hill Russell seemed to have a very boyish, even childish humour. I liked his wit very much. I always remember the story of Russell and C. E. M. Joad, whom Russell disliked because of Joad's occasional habit of taking Russell's ideas and putting them into his own books without acknowledgement. When Russell was once asked by Joad to write a preface for a book of his, Russell sent him a postcard saying, "Modesty forbids."

Russell also meant everything that he said. There was nothing insin-

cere or false about him. At times, I think, he could be a bad prophet as when at a CND rally he told his audience that they would be lucky if they were alive at the end of the year.

He was also a man of marvellous knowledge. He had read Plato, Socrates, Kant, Hegel and Wittgenstein and all the great philosophers, whereas I can't read philosophy because I can't understand its language. I told Russell once that I could understand every word that he said but that his books were Greek to me. It was the same kind of situation with Herbert Read and me.

It always seemed extraordinary to me that coming as we did from such different backgrounds—I from a not too well off Scottish home, and he from the aristocracy—that we agreed on so much in education and other matters.

Where did you come together?
In being anti-establishment, and in being against character-forming, punishment, religion and indoctrination.

And where did you differ?
He was a thinker and I am a doer. I often act by instinct and rationalize afterwards. He placed a great deal of emphasis on intellect.

I remember once walking with him to a cinema in Lyme Regis one starry night. I said to him, "You know Russell, if we had a boy with us now I would leave him to think his thoughts and you would give him a lecture on the stars." I think that that really sums up our differences of approach. He, Montessori and most of the others attached a great deal of emphasis on learning in education, whereas I have never done so. Then, again, I never knew what Russell thought of Freud and the psychoanalysts.

Russell also stressed the importance of "moral training". Do you think that that affected his credentials as a free educationalist?
I am suprised that he said that. I wouldn't have thought that he was a moralist. I would have said that he was a man who accepted natural impulses. I felt about him that he was pro-life rather than anti-life.

What of the kind of child that he was dealing with at Beacon Hill?
The school had its share of problem children—as we have had—but I think that he had much the same *kind* of children as I have dealt with. They were certainly all middle class, which is inevitable with a private fee-paying school.

Do you think that Russell has a place in the spectrum of education?
A minor one. I do not think that he had much to give education compared with Homer Lane or, modestly, Summerhill, but then my whole life has been education, his was philosophy. Except for having married Dora Russell I don't think that he would have entered practical education.