

## Beacon Hill School: the second phase

by David Harley

Dora Russell. *The Tamarisk Tree 2: My School and the Years of War*. London: Virago, 1980. Pp. vi, 218; 20 photographs. £8.95; C\$27.00.

THE PUBLICATION OF the second volume of Dora Russell's autobiography, *The Tamarisk Tree 2*, is a welcome event. It has been five years since the publication of the first installment of this work and readers must have wondered whether they would ever read the continuation of the inspiring but turbulent life of Dora Russell. Moreover, there were those among us who were anxious to hear about a subject upon which Bertrand Russell was more than reticent to speak—namely, Beacon Hill School. In her latest book, the author provides a well written and informative account of the subsequent events within her own personal life together with those of the school which she and Russell founded in 1927.

Perhaps the first reaction one is likely to have to *The Tamarisk Tree 2* is surprise at its cost. A copy ordered from England is likely to cost about \$30 and one is unlikely to find a copy in a Canadian bookstore for much less—if, indeed, one is lucky enough to find it at all! A second reaction to the book is that it is much smaller than one would expect. With only 218 pages and with the book itself measuring only eight inches by five, the material presence of *The Tamarisk Tree 2* does little to justify its selling price. Yet despite these drawbacks, the book has been very well received. Indeed, the first printing was sold out in a matter of weeks—a fact which, of its own accord, may be interpreted as praise for Dora Russell's latest effort.

Apart from the intrinsic merits of *The Tamarisk Tree 2*, its enthusiastic reception has probably arisen from the fact that the book addresses itself to a diversity of readers. To begin with, it appeals primarily to those interested in Bertrand Russell by virtue of the fact that it provides a continuation of the events described in the first volume of Dora's autobiography. Despite the fact that many readers were undoubtedly drawn to this first work in order to learn more about Russell, there have been, one supposes, many who grew to appreciate Dora more as a thinker in her own right and not merely as a convenient source of Russell heirs. And, indeed, the emerging awareness of Dora's own independent existence and considerable intellectual acumen is only now being appreciated. Yet it is clear that her reputation as a thinker is at last being given the recognition it deserves. She is, in the final years of her life, again returning to the public eye with much the same energy and

contempt for orthodoxy that she exhibited in the 1920s. Moreover, the issues she addresses herself are as timely now as they were fifty years ago, and much that she predicted at that time has already come to pass—a factor which gives added weight to her current predictions.

Broadly speaking, the ideas of Dora Russell can be divided into three distinct but related areas, namely, feminism, education and the overall direction of industrial society. *The Tamarisk Tree 2* addresses itself to the first two of these areas by way of weaving her ideas upon the warp and weft of the events in her own immediate experience. The second is dealt with through a central focus upon the school. The third area, it has been promised, will be presented in detail in a forthcoming volume devoted specifically to the "machine age".

On the whole, *The Tamarisk Tree 2* is a book about Beacon Hill School and should be understood as such. It is autobiographical to the extent that the history of Beacon Hill must inevitably include much of the personal information regarding the individual who sustained it for so long and against such difficulties. Dora is careful to emphasize in the subtitle of her book that Beacon Hill is "My School". She believes that Russell's behaviour after he left her in 1932 constituted a betrayal of the school and as such he forfeited his right to share in any credit. The school which began as theirs became, therefore, hers: "To the general public the enterprise, due to Bertie's eminence, was, in effect, his school. Yet, since he left the school after the first five years, whilst my work in it lasted, in all, for sixteen, it thus became my own effort" (p. 6). Moreover, as we learn through both volumes of Dora's autobiography, Russell, who had once been a staunch supporter of the school, became, during the process of their divorce, one of the school's enemies. And, in order to secure custody of his children, he sought to denigrate it so that he could have John and Kate Russell attend W. B. Curry's Dartington Hall. The battle between the Russells also extended to their friends. On the one hand, Russell asked them to sign documents attesting to the fact that Beacon Hill was not a fit place for children to be educated. On the other hand, Dora requested her supporters (including no less a person than H. G. Wells) to sign documents attesting to the quality of education at the school and her own competence as a teacher.

In the middle of all of this, Beacon Hill School became the target of discussion, debate and conjecture. When asked about the school in later years, Russell repeatedly refused to give any details, and, when he did speak of Beacon Hill, it was never with any sense other than one of abject failure and disappointment. It has been left, therefore, to Dora to tell the tale of Beacon Hill—the school which was the source of personal triumphs and failures. Moreover, this is a task which she undertakes with considerable competence and unflinching enthusiasm.

To those of us who were led to expect that Dora's book would be exclusively about the school, *The Tamarisk Tree 2* may provide some disappointments. It is not solely devoted to giving an account of the school and does not provide much detail in terms of concrete examples of how it was operated that many would have liked. It does, however, provide a strong sense of the kind of spirit which Beacon Hill was intended to develop and which, to a large extent, it incorporated. As a personal statement about the school *The Tamarisk Tree 2*, could have no rival, and, in the course of this personal statement, the author imparts some new information about the school and its operation. In fact, *The Tamarisk Tree 2* represents the most detailed published account thus far of the operation of Beacon Hill School. We learn, for the first time in print, just what happened to the school after Russell left it—about the numerous moves from place to place and the struggle to keep it financially afloat. We learn how Dora's life revolved almost entirely around the school until it was closed in 1943 (some eleven years after Russell himself gave up any share in it).

In addition to presenting her own ideas and views, *The Tamarisk Tree 2* includes eighty-eight pages of plays produced and written by the children of Beacon Hill between 1933 and 1942. The first of these, entitled "Thinking in Front of Yourself", was previously published in 1934 by the Janus Press in a book of the same title. That volume also included many other plays and poems acted and written by the school children. However, its print-run was rather small and it has taken on the status of a collector's item. With the publication of *The Tamarisk Tree 2*, Dora has made more readily available what is considered by some to be the most representative Beacon Hill play and one which captures the school's fundamental spirit. In addition, she has included four previously unpublished plays: "What Shall We Do about Judgment Day?" (1937), "The Feast of the Gods" (1938), "Cats Have No Fun" (1938), and "Give the Devil His Due" (1942). By so doing, Dora has allowed the voices of the students of Beacon Hill to speak for themselves.

In conclusion, *The Tamarisk Tree 2* can be recommended to the reader as a provocative and informative account with relevance to a diversity of interests. It is well written, lively and bound to please whoever makes the effort to procure a copy.

*Department of Philosophy*  
*McMaster University*