

A Postcard from Oxford: Rudolf Steiner at Manchester College

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At the height of his powers, Rudolf Steiner presented a two-week conference at Oxford. The 'Oxford Holiday Conference' was titled 'Spiritual Values in Education & Social Life' (Mackenzie, 1922b), and it was this 1922 conference that laid the foundations for establishing Waldorf education in Britain and from there the rest of the Anglo world including Australia.

The original Waldorf School had been established in 1919 by Rudolf Steiner at the invitation of a German industrialist in Stuttgart, Germany. Steiner states that in the Waldorf School he sought "to apply the educational principles arising out of Anthroposophy" to children's education (1923, p.24). The school began with 150 students and this had grown to 700 by the time of the Oxford Conference (Steiner, 1922a).

Seven months before the Oxford Conference, Millicent Mackenzie had organised a delegation to the Anthroposophy headquarters in Switzerland. Steiner recorded that: "English friends of Anthroposophy were with us at a conference at Christmas [1921]" at the Goetheanum Dornach (1923, p.24). That Christmas Teacher's Course at Dornach led to the invitation for Steiner to present the Oxford Conference organised by Mackenzie.

Oxford was then, is now, and has been for centuries, a magnet for ideas, scholars, and learning. Steiner stated that: "Here in Oxford I feel the power of what lives in these old traditions inspires everything. And one who can feel this has perhaps the right to speak of what is new. For a new thing, in order to maintain itself, must be rooted in the venerable past" (1922b, p.7).

The conference programme named fourteen presenters for the summer event held in the fortnight of 15-29 August (Mackenzie, 1922b, p.1). Over the fortnight, Steiner presented the twelve daily morning lectures, and the afternoon lectures were presented by the other speakers.



There were 230 conference attendees (Schoolmaster, 1922). A report stated that: “the whole educational hierarchy was represented”, and that: “the great majority were teachers, directors of educational method, head masters and mistresses, professors of special subjects, assistants. The secretary herself, Mrs Millicent Mackenzie, who deserves congratulations on her organising powers, was formerly Professor of Education in the University of Wales” (Schoolmaster, 1922).

The minutes of the Anthroposophical Society of 2 February record that: “It was reported that Professor Jacks had promised Manchester College, Oxford for a fortnight in August for the proposed Educational conference” (1922, p.2).

Manchester College was founded in 1786 in the city of Manchester, it subsequently moved to London, and it settled in Oxford in 1889 (Plate 1). Manchester College began as a ‘dissenting academy’ with a Unitarian, non-



Plate 1. Manchester College Oxford, main venue for the Oxford Conference of 1922.

conformist, heritage. It was founded at a time when professions of faith were required at Oxford and Cambridge universities. In contrast, Manchester’s 1786 foundational document declared it to be open to: “every religious denomination, for whom no test, or confession of faith will be required” (quoted by Smith, 1986, p.xiii). At the time, the Unitarian doctrine of the unity of God and the rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity was, and remained until the Doctrine of the Trinity Act of 1813, an illegal and blasphemous position



(Smith, 1986). Carved in stone above the Manchester College entrance is: "To Truth, To Liberty, To Religion", words which were borrowed from the 1786 opening address of Manchester's first Divinity Tutor, Thomas Barnes (Smith, 1986) (Plate 2). Manchester College is now 'Harris Manchester College', a college of the University of Oxford (Bullen, 2008).



Plate 2. Inscription above the entrance to Manchester College.



Plate 3. Manchester College Library, venue for the Conference reception (15 August) - the mezzanine level is a recent addition.



For the Oxford Conference, three Manchester College facilities were utilised: the Library (Plates 3 & 4); the Arlosh Hall (Plates 5 & 6); and the Chapel (Plates 6 & 7). Afternoon and evening events were hosted at the nearby Keble College.



Plate 4. The Manchester College Library occupies the upper level.

Plate 5. Arlosh Hall at Manchester College, the venue for all morning lectures by Rudolf Steiner (16-29 August); the hall was built in 1919 (Smith, 1986) and was, at the time of the Oxford Conference, a recent addition to the College

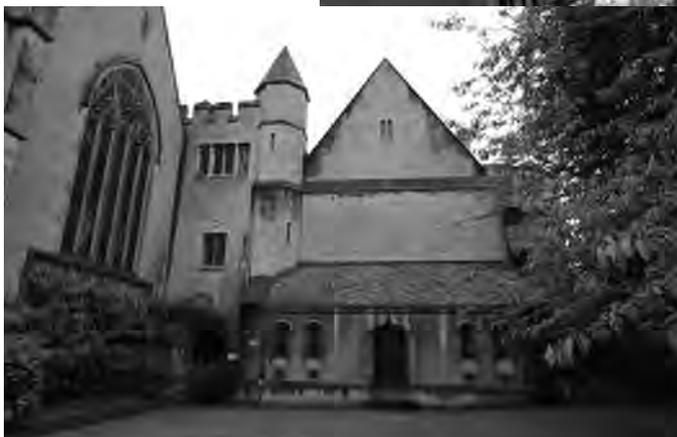


Plate 6. Arlosh Hall with the Chapel to the left.





Plate 7. The Manchester College Chapel where Steiner preached on the Sunday evening of 27 August.

The Oxford Conference reception was held in the Manchester College Library on the evening of Tuesday 15 August. The Oxford Chronicle (1922) reported that this was followed by an address and the official welcome by Professor L.P. Jacks, the Principal of Manchester College, held in Arlosh Hall, located across a lawn from the library.

Of Oxford, Steiner commented: “I feel it an especial honour to be able to give these lectures at this gathering here, in this venerable town. It was here, in this town, that I myself experienced the grandeur of ancient tradition, twenty years ago” (Steiner, 1922b p.7).

Steiner delivered all his addresses in German. He requested of his audience: “forgiveness that I cannot speak to you in the language of this country ... Any disadvantage this involves will be made good, I trust, in the translation to follow” (Steiner, 1922b, p.7).

The lectures were translated by George Kaufmann, an M.A. in mathematics and chemistry from Cambridge University, who was later the first translator into English of Steiner’s Agriculture Course (Steiner, 1924). Kaufmann had an Australian father, an English mother (Whicher, 1977), plus what must have been a remarkable gift for languages. (From 1940 Kaufmann adopted his mother’s maiden name, ‘Adams’).



Kaufmann had travelled to Dornach and met Steiner in 1919. He was in Dornach when the First Goetheanum building was opened in 1920. He was first called upon to translate Steiner's lectures into English at the 1921 Christmas Teacher's Course at the Goetheanum (Whicher, 1977).

Olive Whicher wrote of Kaufmann's skills as a translator:

"he would stand up, so young a man, at intervals in a lecture divided into three parts, and repeat again in beautiful English and with utmost devotion, almost word for word what Rudolf Steiner had just spoken in German in a lecture of vast spiritual content. He made a few pictorial notes of his own creation and for the rest relied on his prodigious memory and spoke with great vitality and confidence. In all he interpreted about 110 lectures, besides many conferences and conversations. For him and for those present it was an unforgettable experience, and Rudolf Steiner never failed to express his great gratitude" (Whicher, 1977, p.20).

All of Steiner's morning sessions (16-29 August) were presented in the Arlosh Hall. On the Sunday (27 August) evening before the close of the conference Steiner preached in Manchester College's Chapel. The audience included some of the attendees from the Modern Churchmen's Conference (Manchester Guardian, 1922) which was also being held at Oxford that summer.

The conference was very well covered in the press with reports appearing in local and national newspapers including: the Oxford Times; the Oxford Chronicle; the Daily Telegraph; the Daily News; the New Statesman; the Guardian; the Inquirer; the Times; the Westminster Gazette; the Star; the Cambridge Daily News; Christian World; the Lancashire Daily Post; the Sheffield Independent; the Nottingham Journal and Express; the Staffordshire Sentinel; East Anglian Daily News; the Burnley News; the Preston Guardian; the Derby Daily Express; and the Lady's Pictorial. Accounts of the conference appeared in the educational media including: Education; the Scottish Educational Journal; the Journal of Education; the Sunday School Chronicle; the Music Teacher; and the Teacher's World.

A Conference attendee declared that Steiner had "a fine clear voice, capable of great extension of power ... seeming to have an infinite reserve upon which to draw" and was "an accomplished, spontaneous and yet disciplined orator" (Hare, 1922, p.219).

That first-hand report of Steiner's presentations in Oxford stated that:

"When at last he spoke it was clear that he possessed the qualities of expositor and preacher to a matchless degree. Also, being an artist to



his finger tips, it was obvious why he spoke in his own tongue, of which he has an absolute mastery ... a large part of an English audience is unable to understand German ... Ordinarily, it would be something of a strain on an audience to listen to three addresses and three translations covering a period of two and a half hours, but ... Dr. Steiner ... soon holds his listeners under the spell of his power ... there is no artifice of irony, no rebuke, no criticism, and what is perhaps more remarkable, no appeal ... Dr. Steiner does not shrink from that thoroughgoing formality which gives to his address ... absolute clarity. Words, phrases and formulae ... and rhythmical cascades of eloquence, which sometimes reach the rapidity and force of a torrent" (Hare, 1922, p.219-21).

Steiner told his audience that "A school such as the Waldorf School is an organism" (Steiner, 1922b, p.89). Steiner returned to Britain the following year for another summer conference this time at Ilkley, Yorkshire; by then he was referring to "the Waldorf School Movement" (Steiner, 1923, p.226). He elaborated that: "The Waldorf School is an organism complete and whole in itself, and if it is not thought of as such, many of its educational principles may be misunderstood" (Steiner, 1923, p.201-2).

One newspaper observed that the conference "seems to have laid the seed for a development of importance" (Guardian, 1922). "In the end it was decided to form a union to promote the ideas expressed unanimously on the necessity of insisting upon other values than those which a materialistic age has brought into use" (Guardian, 1922).

The immediate outcome of the Oxford Conference was the passing of a five paragraph statement of intent to advance the cause that Steiner and others had espoused. The final paragraph stated that "We therefore feel that the impulse should go out from this conference, to form a world-wide association for the foundation and support of schools in which the teachers will work freely and co-operatively on the basis that has been indicated. We propose that a Provisional Committee be formed to take the preliminary steps for giving effect to this resolution" (Mackenzie, 1922a). Mackenzie urged the Conference delegates to "Do it now" (Manchester Guardian, 1922), and a Provisional Committee was duly elected. The names of eleven Committee members were reported, and they included: Millicent Mackenzie; George Kaufmann; two school principals; one mayor; and Professor L.P. Jacks of Manchester College.

The success of the conference was due in large part to the remarkable presentation skills of Rudolf Steiner and George Kaufmann, and to the



organising skills of Millicent Mackenzie. There are now reportedly over 1000 Waldorf schools located in more than 60 countries; there are over 40 Waldorf schools and kindergartens located in the UK (SWSF, 2010) and about 60 in Australia (Steiner-Australia.org, 2010).

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Acknowledgements: Thank you to Sue Killoran, Fellow Librarian, Harris Manchester College, and to Margaret Jonas and Veronica of the Library, Rudolf Steiner House, London.

