

## **A Ministry of Enthusiasm: Centenary Essays on the Workers' Educational Association**

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**Reviewer:** Janet Coles

In his foreword Tony Blair suggests that this book 'offers an overview of the important themes in the WEA's history and relates the past to the present and future of the association.' This is indeed true. The book acknowledges the association's successes, but is critical of its failures; its tone is at times joyful and at others poignant. It offers a realistic account of the past combined with key questions about the WEA's future and that of adult education in general. It is a fitting tribute to the achievements of the Association during its first hundred years.

The authors are from a wide range of backgrounds, some well-known, some less so but the papers are of a uniformly high standard. Some would have benefited from a more structured approach and greater use of sub-titles. Some inevitably are more descriptive than analytical. The ever-present problem of the organisation of such a history - whether to choose a chronological or thematic approach - has been solved reasonably satisfactorily, with what is in effect a combination of the two. The style is accessible, with terms such as 'Responsible Body' explained briefly for readers who are unfamiliar with them, but not at such length as would be tedious to others.

The brief chronology at the beginning of the book provides a useful resource which illustrates the scope of the Association's activities and will help readers who may only be aware of one particular aspect of the WEA's work or history, set that in a wider context. The ten pages of photographs indicate something of the Association's past, ranging in time from 1903 and the first page of the first minute book, to 2002 and a family learning group in Southampton. The photo of Albert Mansbridge 'in full spate' (plate 4, p. xviii) is particularly splendid, showing a rather different side of the WEA's founder from that which is normally portrayed. Unfortunately more than half the illustrations are taken from the time before the First World War, and though fascinating, present a somewhat unbalanced record.

There have been several recurring themes during the first hundred years of the WEA's existence: the central imperative of attracting working-class students; social purpose and social control; personal and societal advancement; the importance of academic standards; the supremacy of the tutorial class. They all appear in the book.

Stephen K. Roberts' introduction duly sets both the scene and the tone, pointing out gently that 'there seems little support from the contributors . for the notion that the WEA was patronised by the state because of its potential for keeping workers quiet'.(p. 9)

As the acknowledged authority on Albert Mansbridge, it is fitting that Bernard Jennings should contribute the paper on 'The Foundation and the Founder'. This serves as a useful reminder of the association's early years and its development, emphasising the unrivalled influence of Mansbridge. It may well whet the appetite to reread Jennings' other books or read his recently published biography of Mansbridge for the first time.[\(1\)](#)

In keeping with the rest of the volume, Jennings' approach is far from hagiographical. In view of my own somewhat ambivalent attitude towards Mansbridge I was interested to see how Jennings summarised his career. No-one could dispute the importance of his achievement in the setting up of the association (with, of course, financial support from Frances Mansbridge!); but to be shown the scheming side of his personality too is fascinating. The incident when he wrote to several luminaries, inviting them to attend the meeting at Manchester in 1904 illustrates this admirably.(p. 16) Mansbridge knew there was no chance of people such as the prime minister attending, but used their letters of polite regret as evidence of the meeting's importance.

Those who are only familiar with Mansbridge's name as the founder of the WEA may be surprised to learn of the role he played in the setting up of many other organisations connected with the education of adults: the British Institute of Adult Education, for example, which still exists today as NIACE. Even more surprising is that today's British Library Lending Division can trace its origins back to Mansbridge's Central Library for Tutorial Classes. Proof, indeed, that he was a man of vision.

In Bernard Jennings' second contribution, 'The Friends and Enemies of the WEA', the emphasis is on the latter, in particular the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC). Jennings aims to correct previous histories, which were based on dubious sources, and ends with a warning against those critics of the WEA and Ruskin who have 'an unconscious affinity' with medieval chroniclers, 'whose motto seemed to be "never let the facts spoil a good moral tale"'.(p. 108) Stern words indeed.

As its title suggests, Sean Creighton's paper 'Battersea and the Formation of the Workers' Educational Association', concentrates on the early years. The effects of various factors on Mansbridge at this time are skilfully traced, including the local environment - Battersea as 'the sink hole of Surrey' (p. 27) - the local Co-op and the sense of religious responsibility. The importance of the Social Democratic Federation in Battersea, of John Burns and Tom Mann are also made clear. Creighton claims that 'from 1884 to 1892 Battersea activists . were in the forefront of setting a new agenda for the organised working class and new organisations' (p. 32) - the ideal environment, no doubt, for the birth of Mansbridge's brainchild.

The title of the paper by Lawrence Goldman, 'The First Students in the WEA: Individual Enlightenment and Collective Advance', sums up what Goldman regards as the key characteristics of the early years. It also introduces one of the recurring themes in WEA history: the tension between the advancement of the individual and the wider implications for society - as illustrated by the quote from the 1908 Report: 'What they desire is not that men should escape from their class, but that they should remain in it and raise its whole level'.(quoted on p. 51) The paper also looks at another recurring theme: the class background of the students. The comparison of the students at the legendary classes taught by Tawney at Rochdale and Longton is important and interesting. The significance of Tawney himself can hardly be over-estimated. When it was once suggested to Temple that what was needed 'were more men like Tawney', he responded

simply 'there are no men like Tawney'. The evidence in Goldman's essay confirms this. He concludes by claiming that the goal of achieving a balance between individual enlightenment and collective advance, though difficult to secure, was accepted by the early students. His argument is persuasive, the picture of those heroic early days moving and dramatic.

The chapter by Meredith Kwartin Rusoff, 'R. H. Tawney and the WEA', draws a conventional portrait, beginning with the inevitable quote from Tawney in 1953:

If I were asked where I received the best part of my own education I should reply, not at school or college, but in the days, when as a young, inexperienced and conceited teacher of Tutorial classes, I underwent, week by week, a series of friendly but effective deflations at the hands of the students composing them. (quoted on p. 59)

Predictable, perhaps, but it nonetheless continues to sum up the essential Tawney: the combination of scholarship and humility is a difficult one to beat. Rusoff takes the predominant strands of his life - his religion, socialism and passion for history - and ties them together logically, showing the influence all three had on his WEA teaching and vice versa. Writing in 1953, Mary Stocks claimed that Tawney would 'probably go down to history as the greatest adult education tutor of all time'<sup>(2)</sup>: this paper adds weight to this view.

The next paper, by the volume's editor, Stephen K. Roberts, looks in detail at the evolution of the WEA in the West Midlands, between 1905 and 1926. It provides an interesting example of the development of one area in the Association's formative years. There is the impression - inevitable in a paper of this length - that much has had to be left out. The association between the Birmingham branch and the University of Birmingham is described, as is the relationship with Birmingham City Council and the influence of local politics. Links to the labour movement are also touched upon. The concluding section presents a brief note on the 'legacy' of the early years.

In "'A Hard Rain's A-gonna Fall": the National Association and Internationalism, 1918-39', John Atkins looks at the twenty years after Mansbridge and the WEA had drifted apart; a time, obviously, when international events were particularly significant. Atkins argues that unfortunately 'The attempt to help establish and support British-style WEAs outside the United Kingdom was a highway that ultimately wandered into the sand'. (p. 126) It is easy to be critical with hindsight, equally easy to dismiss the failure as inevitable, given the international situation.

John Field takes the story forward in 'Survival, Growth and Retreat, the WEA in Wartime, 1939-45'. Having been at risk at the start of the war, the WEA was able to survive by developing courses for service as well as civilian personnel. Significantly, however, Field believes that members of the Association had also alienated many adult education advocates by their narrow attitude towards future planning.

Conflict is again revealed in the chapter by John Holford, 'Unions, Adult Education and Post-War Citizenship: the WEA and the Construction of Trade Union Education': as he points out,

This tension - standards and quality on the one hand, new opportunities and building a new social order on the other - was to prove lasting and intractable. (p. 158)

He shows that as long as fifty years ago, the Association began to realise that the tutorial class was not the most effective way of educating the working class and trade unionists, although it would be many years before the demise of the tutorial class could be accepted.

The book then provides a record of two contrasting areas: Scotland and Wales. The first of these, 'Ideology and Provision: the WEA and the Politics of Workers' Education in Early Twentieth-Century Scotland', by Rob Duncan, underlines the differences between practices in England and north of the border. The absence of Responsible Body status and the heavy involvement of the LEAs are well illustrated, as is the lack of

participation by Glasgow University, until the advent of A. D. Lindsay when the relationship was transformed. There is a fascinating reference to a covert investigation carried out by J. P. M. Millar of the NCLC, into the political allegiances of Edinburgh University staff who taught for the WEA branch.(p. 188) The Edinburgh branch seceded in 1926, ostensibly over the controversial plan to unify trade union education. Inevitably the emphasis is on the provision in Glasgow and Edinburgh but the chapter as a whole fills in many gaps in an under-researched area.

Richard Lewis provides an equally informative chapter on 'The WEA and Workers' Education in Early Twentieth-Century Wales'. The background of religious nonconformity, temperance and political aspirations were undeniably important and are given due weight. The rivalry with Independent Working-Class Education (IWCE) and the NCLC was strong, though as Lewis points out, some tutors taught both for the WEA and the NCLC, the only difference being that, in the words of one tutor, with the WEA 'you were paid'. (quoted on p. 208) The emotive description in the Western Mail of WEA classes as 'nurseries of Bolshevism' (quoted on p. 188) is reminiscent of the response by a local council to a tutor's request for a room quoted in the 1919 Report: 'if we let you have a room, you will make the place a den of anarchists'.<sup>(3)</sup>

Zoe Munby attempts to cover the whole century in her paper 'Women's Involvement in the WEA and Women's Education'. Predictably, information tends to be fragmentary at times, notably for the years between 1950 and 1970. There are references to some of the better-known names among women tutors, including Alice Cameron, Maude Royden and Margaret McMillan. There is an especially welcome section on a working-class woman tutor, Sophie Green, whose contribution is rarely acknowledged in the literature. The author says the details of how Sophie Green came to be appointed are unclear. There is however considerable evidence that it was through the efforts of Helen Stocks, who was an established tutor herself, as well as being the sister of Professor J. L. Stocks, and sister-in-law of Mary. When the Eastern District of the WEA received funding to appoint a tutor-organiser Helen Stocks offered to act as guarantor for top-up funding of £100 and Sophie Green was appointed.

Some issues remain topical, the debate over the provision of women only classes, for example, and the fact that 'supporting women students with childcare alongside course is no more an automatic entitlement that it was in 1903': disappointing but unsurprising. (p. 222)

Derek Tatton also provides an overview of the whole hundred-year period in his paper: 'Literature, Cultural Studies and the WEA'. A case could be made for focussing on any of several subject areas within WEA teaching, but literature has remained a favourite. There are links, not only to cultural studies, as Tom Steele's work has demonstrated so ably, but also to the women's movement. Tatton traces the development of literature from its position on the boundary, touching again on the social purpose versus personal enrichment dichotomy.(p. 243) He also uses one of the most apt of all the quotations in the book, from Temple sixty years ago: 'Business is concerned with people as they are; education is concerned with people as they may become'.(quoted on p. 256)

1964 saw the winding up of Workers' Educational Trade Union Committee (WETUC), as well as the NCLC, and so makes a logical starting point for the chapter, 'From Day Release to Lifelong Learning: Workplace Education and the WEA', by Peter Caldwell and Stephen K. Roberts. The paper traces developments during the following three decades: the Russell Report of 1973 which led to the expansion of trade union studies; the advent of the Thatcher government and the reversal of this trend; the involvement of the WEA in 'Return to Learn' and 'Second Chance' provision. The authors see the Kennedy Report, the appointment of a minister for lifelong learning, and the setting up of the Union Learning Fund as reasons for optimism. Time will tell whether this is justified.

In her essay 'WEA Values in the Twenty-First Century', Julia Jones muses on the WEA's development over the last hundred years and concludes that some of the aims and values expressed in the early years remain relevant today. As 'a relative newcomer to the WEA', she has been intrigued by 'how tangible a dynamic the Association still does possess'.(p. 274) This theme is also illustrated in the final paper, 'WEA Voices' which,

as the title suggests, consists of a selection of quotes from those involved with the Association during the last century. The range is broad, from unknown students to MPs who taught for the WEA. Of these, the most memorable must be Neil Kinnock's experience in Aberfan; the most critical the contribution by Kingsley Amis.

It is almost inevitable that the centenary year of the Workers' Educational Association would be marked by at least one commemorative publication. Less predictable, however, is that such a book would be of the standard of this collection of essays. It is a joy to read, as well as being a highly informative volume. It should appeal to adult education historians and practitioners; and to anyone interested in the voluntary sector or with a wider interest in the history of social movements.

The title is taken from a letter written by William Temple to Albert Mansbridge in September 1908, assuring the WEA's founder that his was a 'ministry of enthusiasm'.(quoted on p. 2) The word ministry had obvious religious connotations for both men and was an apt one in the Association's formative years. For a volume covering a much longer period, however, some may regard it as problematic. Reading the book will convince them of its validity.

## Notes

1. B. Jennings, Albert Mansbridge: the Life and Work of the Founder of the WEA, Leeds Studies in Continuing Education (Leeds: University of Leeds with the WEA, 2002).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. M. Stocks, The Story of the WEA (London: WEA, 1953), p. 39.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Ministry of Reconstruction, The 1919 Report: the Final and Interim Reports of the Adult Education Committee of the Ministry of Reconstruction, 1918-1919 (London: HMSO, 1919), p. 207.[Back to \(3\)](#)

The author thanks Dr Coles for her review and does not wish to comment further.

### Other reviews:

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