



## **‘Handsworth Revolution’ by David Winkley**

A review by Ranjit Sondhi

My copy of *Handsworth Revolution*, signed by my friend, the author David Winkley, sits on my desk provocatively in front of my collection of antiquarian books on the British Raj in India. What an incongruous juxtaposition! The paperback edition, with its symbolic rebel red spine and a rather stately photograph of the author standing in front of his school, forms a perfect contrast with the style and content of the leather bound volumes. But I sense an intriguing connection between the pompous descriptions of Britain’s imperial past contained in the older tomes and the fine textures and grains of contemporary life in the centres of modern, urban, cosmopolitan Britain so exquisitely captured by David Winkley in *Handsworth Revolution*.

This connection is, of course, Handsworth, its people and the processes by which the old colonial relationships have come to be reproduced with a vengeance on the very doorstep of the mother country. Embedded firmly in the national consciousness through the near obsessional scrutiny of a whole wave of urban political and social scientists in the sixties – Handsworth forms the backdrop against which David Winkley’s odyssey of a primary school is set. This once highly desirable district has become a by-word for the newly-discovered inner city twilight areas notable for their extreme multiple deprivation. And it was in Handsworth, in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War that the fatal coincidence between race and poverty led to a moral panic about incoming migrant populations from the vast colonial native reserves of the Caribbean, Africa and Asia. It was here that they found shelter in the decaying Victorian houses, now multi-occupied, shielding themselves from the worst excesses of deprivation, disadvantage and discrimination, while the rest of the city did its best to keep these seemingly undesirable strangers from spilling out into established white middle-class areas.

As for the author, I have the privilege of knowing David long before he wrote about his school. Usually it is the other way round; readers get to know about authors after reading their books. But David and I have been close friends, fellow-travellers, soul-mates now for more than three decades. And of course, it is in Handsworth – this crucible of social and cultural ferment – on the edge of which we both live to this very day – that our friendship has been forged, almost from the moment David arrived to take on the Headship at Grove School in 1974. We were then both, as David might have said, ‘slender, young, long-haired men who would have looked more in place in 1968 Paris barricades’. Both university graduates with first class degrees, he in Philosophy, and me in Theoretical Physics, we had eschewed more comfortable and lucrative career options to redirect our energy into creating a more equal and just society.

I had arrived in Handsworth feeling betrayed by the failure of orthodox forms of parliamentary democracy and fired by fresh ideas flaunted in the New Left Manifesto published in the sixties. While still at University, I had joined demonstrations and campaigns against the Vietnam war, racial discrimination, child poverty, world hunger. It was inevitable then that, instead of returning to India to follow my father into the Indian Civil Service, I would join an ‘urban commune’ in Handsworth set up by a small group of university graduates dedicated to nurturing a form of neighbourhood politics and developing ‘a vanguard of the proletariat’.

The theory was that as local people assumed greater power over their own lives, we would do ourselves out of a job. Radical ideas, that would have disturbed even the most progressive and liberal of English families, let alone my father, the Commissioner of the Punjab, who must have been aghast at what he thought was the triumph of pure passion over the wisdom of tradition. It was only years later that he would grudgingly come to acknowledge that we were engaged in 'something substantial'.

In such circumstances, one looks for allies and David proved a worthy one. As the title of his book implies, David was also engaged in a revolution – one that would be conducted from within the existing educational system and that would ultimately transform not only the school, but the philosophy and practice of teaching in primary education across the country.

Like a truly radical thinker, David resolutely set about questioning everything, especially the received wisdom on how young children should be taught. Throughout the book we are invited to share his thought processes, as he reflects upon established and emerging educational policies with great insight and integrity. Not only does he dissect national policy, but like all truly great critics, he is not afraid of articulating his own doubts and certainties.

David brings the full weight of his knowledge of philosophy, literature, music and art to bear upon his profession. But above all, he grounds his understanding of the educational process on the cumulative effect of countless human encounters actually taking place in the school classroom, playground, dining hall and corridors between teachers, pupils, dinner-ladies, visitors, parents and other members of the Handsworth community.

In this he is refreshingly different from the many other radicals who have based themselves in Handsworth, who spend endless hours in violent argument over different shades of Marxist ideology, but who remain curiously inept in their interactions with ordinary people in the streets and have no time for those who work for the establishment.

I am immediately drawn towards the warmth and humanity of David's brand of revolutionary zeal. But I am intrigued most of all by the way in which David deals with boundaries. I am obsessed with this question. As one born in the Punjab into an upper-middle class family, schooled in missionary schools by Irish Christian brothers before coming to a very English public school in Bedford, holding on to my Indian nationality and then subsequently becoming registered as a British citizen in a country that has never quite felt totally at ease with the different cultural groups in its midst, I am all too conscious of the number of different boundaries – both internally generated and externally imposed – with which I have had to contend. It is a question that goes to the very heart of how my identity is made, un-made and re-made.

I am totally absorbed by the way in which David deals so naturally and unselfconsciously with this issue. One gets the impression that for David boundaries exist but only for the moment, to provide a line across which the cut and thrust of dialogue can take place. Without boundaries, no discourse. But boundaries are like semi-permeable membranes, flexible, dynamic, transient, not doomed to survive forever. They can be and are frequently crossed and recrossed, regularly transcended, expertly and with great sensitivity, without causing hurt or offence.

Take the fraught issue of how to deal with matters of race, colour, culture and ethnicity. The pupils at Grove and their parents came from very different parts of the world, from Kashmir, Jamaica, Barbados, Gujarat, Punjab, Vietnam, Poland. And yet despite the serious race riots so graphically described by David, it is clear that at Grove all nationalities are inextricably linked by a common humanity despite the misplaced efforts of a number of cultural communities, both new and old, who trade upon difference at the expense of commonality. In this sense, the old idea of 'townhall multiculturalism', of fragmenting society into parallel worlds that never meet, is replaced by an intercultural approach in which ethnicity is not the one difference that makes all the difference.

There are other boundaries too, other than those relating to the culture, religion and ethnicity of the children that fix my attention. Grove School does not exist in a vacuum, hermetically sealed off from the rest of the community. David unpicks the intricate relationship between teacher and pupil, teachers and teachers, parents and pupils, school and community, education and society.

Grove school teachers are expected to be both experts in their own subjects and yet be able to work across the school with equal dexterity and enthusiasm. The line between teacher and pupil is also complex. There is an emphasis on acknowledgement and respect of authority but teachers and pupils are also all on the same side, constantly challenging and learning from each other in a common educational endeavour. Finally, the school is not contained by the iron railings that surround it. It spills over into the community. Some of the most moving accounts are those relating to David's frequent visits to children's homes to sort out problems relating to behaviour and performance. In turn, the community is at ease with the way in which children are nurtured by him and his teachers.

As an accomplished pianist himself, David would say that the work of the most talented and inspired teachers was like producing a piece of jazz. I prefer to liken it to ragas in Indian classical music. In both musical compositions, a very clear discipline is established to set the mood, before the musician is given full licence to explore and develop any particular musical variation within it. As such, the music is not necessarily pre-planned or written down, but emerges in often unpredictable ways making each rendering highly individual and unique.

In David's own words, borrowed from an earlier critique of the Plowden report, we have to move from 'condescension to complexity'. For David, structures, cultures and biographies, which defined each individual child, are all intricately interconnected and have to be acknowledged, understood and critically appraised simultaneously. The primary miscalculation traditional revolutionaries made lay in the assiduous attention they paid to the analysis of grand narratives, of sweeping ideologies, while shying away from the power of personal relationships. As if class consciousness was not to be diluted or sullied by a self-indulgent attention to strengthening the fragile and tender relationships that are the very stuff of human kindness.

This is where David's approach to community-centred education teaches me some critical lessons. At the very least, David's book is an anthology of a series of close personal encounters marked by warmth, compassion and mutual respect, exquisitely observed and detailed, constantly reminding us what it is like to be human.

It is worth cataloguing each remarkable event from David's first unforgettable interview for the job, the trial by assembly, the behaviour of eccentric but caring teachers, the amelioration of over strict and disciplining parents, the machinations of Miss Minchin, the school inspector, the quelling of a classroom riot, touching visits by school alumni, the alarming stoning of the youth worker's car, cheeky little Wesley and the staff lock-in, the disaster with Bob's beloved projector, the gentle and humane removal of burnt-out teachers and the recruitment of gifted and talented musicians, mathematicians, artists, the yellow cards for boys who play 'tipping grandma out of bed,' the taming of Mr Afraz, the delicate handling of excessively naughty children, the hustlers, the truants and street-wise children, the story of the special unit, discussions about behaviourism and, the 'statementing' of Marcus, an altercation with the Deputy Chief Education Officer, the story of the little girl with an umbrella under a leaking classroom ceiling, the brilliant productions of Troilus and Cressida and Midsummer Night's Dream, the natural comedian who plays Trinculo, the fraught but hilarious school trips, examples of deeply disturbing white racism and the overreaction of anti-racists with the notable exception of the more balanced Joshua, the inimitable local GP Dr Pike, the glare of media publicity after the school became nationally famous, the determining factors of poverty and crime, the terrible tragedy of Parvinder's death, the extraordinary deliberations of the philosophy group – all the way through to David's final nostalgic farewell.

As I read and re-read this extraordinary book, I am reminded of Henry James, and his Portrait of a Lady, where so much meaning is captured in the minutest observations of his protagonists' movements, thoughts and actions. For David too, the whole world is contained in the most fleeting of

moments - a whole series of gestures, touches, smiles, retorts, glances, pauses and silences. The cumulative effect is breath-taking in its intensity and revelation.

If I worked at Waterstones I would be hard put to classify *Handsworth Revolution*. It could sit equally comfortably under a number of different disciplines – urban sociology, cultural studies, child psychology, philosophy, education, social policy, autobiography. A part of me would like to see it nestling among the novels. David is first and last a word craftsman, a gifted storyteller. And as we have been told, even God loves those who tell a good story.