

Prep School Children: A Class Apart over Two Centuries (2009) by Vyvyan Brendon, published by Continuum, London.

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This is a powerful book. For me it was a roller-coaster, re-experiencing pain (Partridge, 2007) sparked off by Vyvyan Brendon's numerous, well-documented, often first hand examples, followed by anger and outrage that this was allowed to go on for so long – and, as Brendon admits, still does, even if in less overtly brutal form.

Brendon announces her intention as ‘not to produce an affectionate apologia for prep schools . . . nor do I presuppose with Nick Duffell that former boarding school pupils are all victims (Duffell, 2000). Instead, I have followed the evidence where it leads’. Thus, Brendon nails her colours firmly to Anglophone ‘empiricism’, and, in most respects, she lives up to her self-denying ordinance. However, this creates a problem when, at the end, she tries to draw more general conclusions, which evidently have to include some notion of ‘victimhood’ and its construction. I intend to return to the issue from a more conceptual perspective later.

Brendon has to be congratulated on gathering together between two covers so much material over such a long time span – two centuries (she does not have room to fully address the shorter history of girls’ prep schools, which deserves its own study). Developing an approach pioneered in her acclaimed *Children of the Raj* (Brendon, 2006), she has again turned up ‘varied and abundant evidence’ which sees prep schools ‘through the eyes of children in a way that has not been attempted before’. Most of the material is drawn from memoirs and letters, but latterly also includes contributions from some sixty interviewees. She has, at long last, given voice to those ‘privileged children [who] did not attract investigations such as the Victorian inquiries conducted by Lord Shaftesbury and Henry Mayhew into the circumstances and thoughts of young factory workers and street-traders’. In my view her book will serve a rather similar purpose, and, while too late for many of us, may well be terminal for any continuing notion of boarding for those aged thirteen and under. Such practice is no less justifiable than sending young children up chimneys, to work in mills, or down mines.

The book divides the history of prep boarding into nine comprehensive chapters, from the Georgian beginnings in the early nineteenth century to the recent ‘Harry Potter effect’. At the start, here is William Makepeace Thackeray at age six, leaving in the (then) stage coach: ‘I see the autumn evening: I hear the wheels: I smart the cruel smart again; and, boy or man, have never been able to bear the sight of people parting from their children’. Brendon adds, ‘It was lament that would echo down the ages’. Indeed!

The basic aim of these early ‘preparatory’ schools was to impart enough Latin and Greek for entrance to the few great public schools of England, such as Eton, Winchester, and Harrow. The ethos of such schools was well summed up by the second Marquess of Salisbury: ‘the more boys roughed it every way, the stronger and better they grew up’ (a view of developmental psychology effectively debunked, as Brendon recognizes, by the late eminent child and family psychiatrist Dr John Bowlby and his work, from the 1950s, on the effects of the premature rupture or failure of early attachment [Bowlby, 1975, p. 410]). Such ‘pedagogy’ usually involved appalling, unheated living conditions, bad food, lack of baths, flogging by masters, merciless bullying by older or bigger

boys, and rote learning of the classics. No wonder a German visitor remarked that English parents took more care in selecting a dog trainer or a horse breaker than they took in choosing a school!

As the insensitive and cruel boarding tradition began, so it went on, but it was given a big boost in Victorian times by the great expansion of the railways; the rapid development of industrial capitalism; creating an upper middle class of considerable size and wealth; and the growth and consolidation of the Empire. It became easier to send boys away to school, where they could be prematurely forged into mini 'tough men' – free from domestic motherly influence – apparently needed to run the upper echelons of industry and the civil service, and the far-flung corners of the Empire and their attendant armed forces. While the schools moved away from their classical bias, their internal regimes did not alter much. Brendon documents much beating and bullying, with naked terror often used by prefects as an instrument of 'divide and rule' control. And, in many ways, the separation between school and home became even more pronounced, aided by the distance to which boys could now be dispatched with ease.

On we go to what Brendon calls the 'late Victorian and Edwardian heyday' of prep schools, when the Empire was at its apogee, and needed an education system which prepared boys for 'long, lonely and chaste years in remote parts'. An official report in 1900 noted an 'intense desire of parents to do the best for their children [leading] to a vast exodus of boys from their homes'. By the late nineteenth century, there were some 400 prep schools turning out 'sturdy little boys' with little or no concern for their psychological welfare. Winston Churchill, no less, provides evidence of the brutality that still existed, 'boys were flogged until they bled freely, while the rest sat quaking, listening to their screams' (Churchill, 1930, p. 19). It is also clear that a rising tide of jingoistic patriotism started to permeate the schools at the turn of the century and increased pressures towards mindless conformity.

It is in this chapter, prompted by the memories of prep school survivor and highly respected psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion, with their admission of self-comfort in masturbation (Bion, 1986, pp. 38–39), that Brendon allows herself a questionable generalization about sexuality in prep schools, saying that most pre-pubertal boys were 'probably innocent'. In support, she refers to the absence of sex in memoirs or boys' letters home, but self-censorship and actual censorship of such letters is a more likely explanation. I can testify that sex, usually of a smutty homoerotic kind, but sometimes overtly abusive, certainly was not absent from my prep school, Boarzell, now defunct – ironically rescued from oblivion by unfavourable mention in her book.

Having become numbed by the seemingly endless accounts of neglect and brutality, I was still shocked to learn that in the harsh winter of 1916–1917, the negligence of some boarding schools seems to have led directly to the deaths of pupils. They were so weakened by the deficient heating and bad food that

they had little resistance to the flu and measles that swept through the institutions. Quite a number died who would probably have survived had they been let back to their warm and well-appointed homes. Yes, boarding school literally killed and crippled.

In the inter-war years a bit of fresh air blew through the system, partly inspired by progressive child psychologists like John Dewey, Susan Isaacs, and Dr Montessori. Such moves did not prevent Churchill's son Randolph being sexually abused by a young master (the boarding school tradition evidently dies hard), nor did it prevent inter-war schools from being likened to prisons, or even, in a memoir, to 'a Belsen of the spirit'.

It was at this point that my conceptual penny finally dropped: prison, concentration camp – the words 'total institution' formed in my mind and the name of famous sociologist Erving Goffman fell from my memory. Sure enough, in Goffman's summary essay 'Characteristics of total institutions' (1957), what do we find in his Fourth Category: 'institutions purportedly established the better to pursue some technical task and justifying themselves only on these instrumental grounds: army barracks, boarding schools . . .'. From there, it was only a small step to trauma psychotherapist Judith Lewis Herman's liberating notion of 'complex', in contrast to 'acute' trauma (though there was plenty of that, too). Herman defines Complex Trauma Syndrome as resulting from: 'A history of subjection to totalitarian control over a prolonged period (months to years). Examples include hostages, prisoners of war, concentration-camp survivors, and survivors of some religious cults . . .'. (Herman, 2001, pp. 119–121). And I would add, following Goffman's and Brendon's copious evidence, pupils of British and other boarding schools (disgracefully, many of the First Nation peoples of Australia and Canada [Courchene, 2009] were systematically decultured by such means).

If we apply Herman's now well-established diagnosis of complex trauma to former pupils of early prep boarding, then I think we can justifiably, in that more diffuse sense, apply the descriptor 'victim' to *all* who have passed through this exceptional form of pedagogy – leaving what Brendon calls 'indelible marks' (below). The emotionally numbing effects of this type of trauma (aka 'stiff upper lip'), as Duffell (2000) has pointed up in his 'strategic survival personality', can be both subtle and long-lasting, and very difficult to acknowledge and ameliorate. As Herman's trauma therapeutics ably testify, recognition of victimhood is the first step on the road to recovery and to becoming a survivor rather than a passive victim.

Moving on to the present, Brendon questions whether contemporary prep schools have become 'much more agreeable places'. Yes, there has been a steady decline in boarding prep numbers from around 29,000 in 1997 to under 22,000 in 2009; there have been improvements in facilities; there are more co-educational schools; corporal punishment has been abolished (officially

outlawed in 1998); boarding can be flexible (for some); and there is more contact between pupils and parents, partly aided by more accessible pay-phones and email – though this is evidently not true for the ten per cent of pupils whose parents live abroad, more in schools increasingly aiming for the global market. In contrast, Brendon notes that prep school education still

keeps children busy for a substantial part of the day . . . still separates them from contemporaries of different social class . . . still often separates from the opposite sex . . . the experience remains an intense one and makes indelible marks.

Goffman and Herman would recognize these attributes as marks of a highly controlling institution, even if weakened.

At what point does the hermetic institution of early boarding traditionally devoted to ‘toughening up’ lose its *raison d’être* and start to collapse? The tipping point is never easy to tell, but I suspect that *Prep School Children* will add momentum to a process that has been under way for thirty years. What Brendon has bravely done, in the face of Establishment taboo, is to lift the lid on the closed world of the private boarding prep school. In many ways, it has revealed an exercise in child cruelty, psychologically and emotionally if not physically. What we should now be able to see is the dreadful abrogation of children’s rights and welfare. When the elite mistreats its children, whether through ignorance or misguided intent, it is hardly surprising that our society ranks bottom in the well-being of children in the rich countries (UNICEF, 2007).

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