DIFFICULT CHILDREN

A WAR-TIME EXPERIMENT.

Among the more valuable by-products of the recent war was the work which was done in the residential treatment of difficult children. Unostentatiously and quietly carried on, knowledge of this work, as a whole, might never have reached the general public if the Ministry of Health had not published, a year or so ago, a most interesting and informative pamphlet about it.[1] It is with one small piece of this work—Barns Hostel School—that this paper is concerned.

A passing reference to Barns, in a recent Blackfriars, suggested that the school was started by the Q Camps Committee, which had been responsible for Hawkspur Camp. This is an excusable error, but I may perhaps take this opportunity to make it clear that the Q Camps Committee is entirely unconnected with Barns House, and has no connection with the Society of Friends; the Q does not stand for Quaker.

The work at Barns Hostel School, however, was initiated by the Society of Friends, and attempted to express Friends' principles. As Friends have never committed themselves to a credal statement it is not easy to say, shortly and clearly, what those principles are; but at any rate they are likely to be in the nature of corollaries to the one belief that has been described as the foundation stone upon which Quakerism is built. This is the belief in the "Inner Light"—in "That of God in every man". The authoritative Quaker history[2] claims that all the distinguishing views of Friends flow from this main proposition. It is not possible in this short paper to trace the connection between the various aspects of the work at Barns House on the one hand, and this fundamental proposition and its corollaries on the other. But I believe that it is possible to do so, and I have attempted to do so elsewhere.[3] I must, however, make it quite clear that in any deductions I may draw—as indeed in anything I say—in what follows, I speak entirely for myself. Where the first person plural is used, the reference is not to the Society of Friends as a whole, but to my immediate colleagues at Barns House.

We believed that our attempt to heal the waywardness of the people with whom we were concerned must be based upon an ap-

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1 Hostels for Difficult Children. (H.M.S.O., November, 1944).
2 The Beginnings of Quakerism, by Wm. Chas. Braithwaite.
3 In "The Barns Experiment". Allen & Unwin; 1945.

peal to that of God within them; and since only love can reach Love, it was by love that that appeal must be made. We believe that to have been in line with the teachings of Jesus, and like so many of the teachings of Jesus, its truth has recently been attested to by scientific research; what else do psychoanalysts mean when they talk of the positive transference? The more extensive scientific research becomes (it seems to me) the more it bears out the simple teachings of our Lord. It has been abundantly demonstrated that the delinquent youth tends to come from a family that is spiritually and emotionally unhealthy. Unhealthy that is, in the sense that the parents have failed to provide that example of affection *for each other* and of loving solicitude *for the child* which are essential to the child's proper growth in the psychical as distinct from the physical sphere. These children are thus—or believe themselves to be, which amounts to the same thing—deprived of their proper share of affection, and we have conceived it as our first duty to supply that lack. By this means we were able to develop in the children a feeling of security on a deeper level than is provided by the orthodox discipline of many institutions for "difficult" children.

This involved the total renunciation of punishment. Punishment with these children has too often come to be associated, not with moral condemnation (which is its proper function) but with personal animosity. If we punished, personal animosity was assumed, and our first aim thwarted. So we could not punish.

It will readily be seen that if we were to act conscientiously upon this principle our task was an extremely difficult one. There were at Barns Hostel School thirty boys, between the ages of eight and fifteen, and with Mental Ages covering an even wider range, all of whom had come to Barns specifically because they were "difficult". Among these children we had to procure some kind of order, safeguard health, provide some form of schooling, and help them to overcome the defects of their temperament and character.

Obviously thirty "wild" boys who are accustomed to render obedience—if at all—only on pain of punishment, are going to "play up" when there is no longer any punishment. And play up they certainly did. But from the first we pushed on to them the responsibility for their own behaviour, by a system of government which we called shared responsibility and which some call self-government. The period of chaos and disorder lasted about three months; I had expected it to last six. It disappeared (at any rate in its more tiresome manifestations) as soon as the boys became convinced that they were loved. Then—and not before then—

they were able to accept in a real sense the duties involved in sharing with the adults the responsibility for the government of the establishment.

Matters concerning the health of the children were the responsibility entirely of the adults; all other matters came within the ambit of the democratic machinery of the house; and when the children saw that we were honest and sincere in sharing certain responsibilities with them—that it was not just a pious make-believe—there was no difficulty in securing obedience to those edicts that we found it necessary to lay down about such things as hours of sleep, bathing, and so on. In their attitude to law-breakers—with whom they dealt themselves—they often displayed a tolerance and a wisdom that were object lessons to us all. Our non-punitive attitude was infectious (or else the boys knew from their own experience the futility of punishing people) and while the boys' "Court" did sometimes inflict mild penalties, in the main their judgments aimed rather at restitution, compensation and the prevention of a recurrence of the offence, than at punishment for its own sake.

We had our own school, but it was one in which the Local Education Authority had, as it were, extraterritorial rights. We therefore said to the boys (in effect), "School attendance is a matter outside the jurisdiction of any of us; it is a demand made upon you by outside authority, and whatever you or we may think about it, it is compulsory". And after the first few months there was little serious trouble about it. Truancy was in time reduced almost to vanishing point, although many of the boys had hitherto been persistent truants. It disappeared, not because of the attitude described immediately above, which was one of expediency rather than principle, but because of the attitude of the teaching staff which—after a false start—was based on the same fundamental principle that I was attempting to describe earlier. School was, in time, brought into the ambit of shared responsibility, with the proviso that three hours attendance each day was obligatory—a reduction from the statutory five hours which we were able to make with the connivance of very sympathetic Authorities. These three hours were devoted in the main to the three Rs, but while the boys thought they were "getting away" with half-time schooling, in practice they attended school morning, afternoon and evening, weekdays and Sundays. For we had a wide and varied programme of non-academic educational activities which they were free to attend or not at their own discretion—music and art in their various manifestations, woodwork and various other kinds of handwork, poetry, wireless lessons and so on and so on. And because these lessons were voluntary and the teachers were en-

thusiasts and not drudges, sound educational work was done. Boys whose school attainments had been far below what was normally to be expected of their age and intelligence at a full-time school, in this semi-voluntary school with no "discipline" rapidly made up leeway and were sometimes known to make two years' progress in six months.

I had the good fortune to enjoy the help of colleagues of an exceptionally fine calibre, not only as teachers, but as domestic workers too. (They were not Quakers, though most of them had, what Friends call, a "concern" for the work. They included at one time a Catholic, a Christian Scientist, a Theosophist, an Anglican and two members of the Church of Scotland!) All these attended the weekly staff meetings, where the boys were each discussed in turn, and a record was kept of these discussions. We had, to help us in our work, a family history on each case, sometimes provided by the Child Guidance Clinic, and sometimes provided by our own Social Worker, whose duty it was to maintain liaison between Barns and the boys home, and to help the boys to adjust themselves when they finally left us.

Our most serious lack—which was due entirely to war circumstances—was the continuous help of medical and educational psychologists, but so far as circumstances made it possible, we enjoyed the fullest co-operation of the Child Guidance Clinic in Edinburgh, whence most of the boys came. Started originally as part of the Evacuation Scheme, Barns has now been established on a permanent footing, and it is hoped that it will soon be possible to secure the continuous psychological oversight that we lacked during the war years.

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