

A S Neill, who set kids free for a society in chains

By Martin Thomas

AS NEILL, FOUNDER of Summerhill School, died in 1973 at the age of 90. In his practice and in his writings he was the most uncompromising advocate of freedom in education.

"Their reaction to freedom is rapid and tiresome. For the first week or two, they open doors for the teachers, call me 'sir', and wash carefully. They glance at me with 'respect', which is easily recognised as fear. After a few weeks of freedom, they show what they really are. They become impudent, unmannerly, unwashed. They do all the things they have been forbidden to do in the past: they swear, they smoke, they break things. And all the time, they have a polite and insincere expression in their eyes and voices.

"It takes at least six months for them to lose their insincerity. After that, they also lose their deference to what they regarded as authority. In just about six months, they are natural, healthy kids who say what they think without fluster or haste."

Summerhill is based on a simple idea: "To renounce all discipline, all direction, all moral training, all religious instruction."

The children come to lessons or stay away as they please. They make up their own rules in a school government and enforce them themselves. They play as much as they want to and learn what they want to.

True, the bill for breakages is higher than at other schools. True academic standards are not high. Summerhill has mostly had to deal with 'problem' children with whom the conventional school system has already failed. Yet it proves that human freedom can work. The school does not collapse into havoc.

The freedom is not licence for unlimited damage. "What would you do if a boy started to hammer nails into the grand piano? It doesn't matter if you take the child away from the piano, so long as you don't give the child a bad conscience about hammering nails. No harm is done by insisting on your individual rights, unless you introduce the moral judgement of right and wrong. It is the use of words like naughty, or bad, or dirty, that does



Children need adventure, freedom, the right to protest

harm."

The freedom is less than total on another count too. Neill's writings alternate between stating that schools should not try to mould children into pre-set patterns, and describing the pre-set pattern into which he tries to mould children (happiness, sincerity, balance and sociability). No one can run a school without, consciously or unconsciously, setting aims for education. You can minimise the use of moral and physical terrorism; but you cannot abolish moulding entirely.

Neill saw through the limits of conventional "progressive" schooling: "The child of spirit can rebel against the hard boss, but the soft boss merely makes him impotently soft himself." He was clear that he was against present-day society, and he was clear that what he could do in his free school was strictly limited by society.

But he regarded revolutionary activists as neurotics, and "I would rather see a school produce a happy street cleaner than a neurotic scholar." Isn't the only rational course for a street cleaner today to be "neurotic" in Neill's sense?

At times, Neill resolved his dilemma by opposing himself not only to present-day society, but to society in general. "The very nature of society is inimical to freedom. Society — the crowd — is conservative and hateful toward new thought." Many Summerhill pupils, we are told, spent years at Summerhill attending virtually no lessons — and then, once interested, covered conventional syllabuses in a short time. But they went to other schools to do that work — and to that extent the functioning of Summerhill depends on ordinary schools and on middle-class parents able and willing to arrange education flexibly for their children.

Marx, in the *Communist Manifesto*, attacked the early utopian socialists for a "fantastic standing apart from the contest." Neill did that. "But", Marx added, "these socialist and Communist publications contain also a critical element. They attack every principle of existing society. Hence they are full of the most valuable materials for the enlightenment of the working class."