

A post-card from Edinburgh, May 2019:

A Report from the International Forum for Steiner Waldorf Education

Half a million people live in *Edinburgh*. It's a city which probably began life as a hillfort over a thousand years ago. A town developed next to the hillfort and was proclaimed by royal charter in the early 12th century. By the middle of the 14th century, Edinburgh was being described as the capital of a place called Scotland.

Was *Ernst Schumacher* visiting *Edinburgh* when he chose the title for his book, *Small Is Beautiful?* Probably not, but it is! Nestling beside the churning North Sea, amid rolling hills, a sleeping volcano and forested slopes, *Edinburgh* interrupts nature in a very gentle manner.

Thirty of us came to Bonny Scotland from Africa, North and South America, Russia, China, the Holy Land and all corners of Europe. This meeting of the *International Forum* resisted the temptation to follow a simple or false binary, meaning it was a gathering that was both sombre and joyful; troubling and invigorating.

The weather was, for Scotland in May, just right. 14 degrees centigrade, soft rain, the sky laden with grey and white clouds with occasional, promising splashes of blue sky and pale sunlight.

The four-day gathering opened with a Dutch nursery rhyme:

White swans, black swans,

Will you sail to England with me?

England is closed because the key has broken.

Is there no key-maker in the land,

Who can fix the key?

We were, of course, not in England, but where were we? In 2019 do even the citizens know?

We came to a place where many people gather from all over the world; a nation within an island of nations, a patchwork of kingdoms and countries, some of which were, some are and others that might be.

And what did we hear? It's tempting, I know dear reader, to imagine bagpipes and an airy highland reel welcoming us to the land of the Gaels. Yet, the opening treat was both a surprise and a delight: an *Impromptu* by *Schubert* performed effortlessly and brilliantly by a Grade 12 student in wellingtons.

What else?

- Steiner's visits to these islands and the wide-ranging talks he gave on education and spiritual science. He made his first visit in the spring of 1913 and his final visit was in the late summer of 1924. While in *Penmaenmawr*, in the mountains of north Wales, he is reported to have said that he felt "at home".
- 80 years of life and activity of the *Edinburgh* Steiner School, which opened in 1939, as schools in Germany were being shut down by an extended wave of terror which swept across Europe. Before this, from 1922, Steiner had been in discussion with a small group of women

about their aim to begin educational activity in *Kings Langley*. Three years later, in 1925, the first Steiner school in the UK opened in London.

- Reflecting on the second half of the 20th century, there were wide-spread calls for people to be free and a climate of liberal universalism hung in the air. In 1989, now a generation away, the Berlin Wall crumbled. Today, walls are being built around the world and fear and instability are at large. With the turn of the century, the call for freedom was quietened and a new call for social equality is now heard. Some of the instruments in the equality ‘tool-kit’ need to be watched and handled with care. The prominence in the global economic, civic and social agenda of standards has led to a culture of standardisation, which can tilt effortlessly into a culture of uniformity. If this phenomenon, trend and danger are not understood clearly and appropriate responses made, the doors to the forces of authoritarianism swing open.
- The current state of low ebb in the Steiner Waldorf movement in the UK, where outer pressures and challenges vie with internal differences and tribulations concerned with organisational fluency and leadership. These times are particularly difficult for schools in England. A combination of austerity, tightening regulation and a series of poor judgements arising out of a wave of school inspection visits have produced low morale and a state of crisis. Fragmentation is, arguably, a dynamic in the country at large, as well as within the Steiner Waldorf movement. The key question facing SWSF is whether consent for an organisation to lead and govern can be re-newed, or whether we have reached a place where the signposts to the future come in the form of a series of positive, individual initiatives. In every challenge, opportunity springs up and like the pearl in the oyster, opportunity is something new which can lie hidden, or un-noticed. To be able to grasp opportunities that are thrown up by setbacks and disruption, we need hope, alertness and courage.
- Further afield, celebrations for 100 years of Waldorf education are gathering pace, full of verve and energy. Enthusiastic reports and feedback were received from a string of conferences held recently in Nairobi, Bangkok, Taiwan and Switzerland.

The meeting ended by looking ahead to the next World Teachers’ Conference in 2022. In seeking for a theme or leitmotif, the fast-developing conditions of modern life, medical-technical possibilities of change and fundamental questions of purpose and ethics ring out loud and clear. Is the time approaching when it will not sound strange to ask such things as: “*What is the point of a human being having a body?*” or, “*How can we access the wisdom of the body consciously?*” and, “*What are the actual relationships between the brain, the heart and the limbs and how do we support and serve the whole human being.*”

The next meeting of the *International Forum* takes place in Berlin, in September. We will gather together to listen again for “*the heart’s cosmic pulse*”; to share our times and our places and to refresh our commitment to the children of the world – their health, well-being and their learning.

Trevor Mepham