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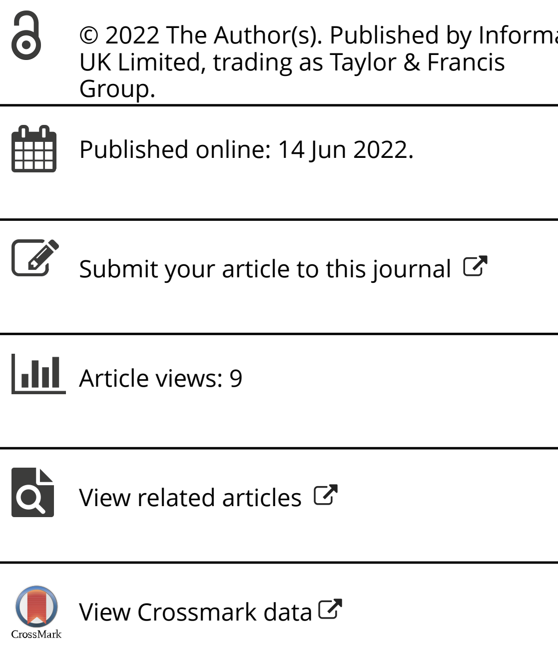

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Freedom, differentialism and the partnership method: the progressive education of Norman MacMunn

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ABSTRACT
This article has as its focus the life and thinking of the practitioner and theorist Norman MacMunn (1877–1925), whose experimental work in a number of schools outlined a new conception of freedom and one that drew initially upon the thinking and practice of Maria Montessori. It explores how MacMunn used these new psychological ideas to develop innovatory practice, which included techniques he christened 'differentialism' and 'the partnership method'. The relationship of these to future educational developments is explored. The article also examines MacMunn's later work, which began to broaden his thinking into a wider theory of human relations, and which stemmed from taking charge of his own school as well as his disillusion with the First World War. It situates MacMunn within the broader development of progressivism and makes the case for him as being an important figure in the emergence of progressive thinking.

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Progressivism; freedom; play; Montessori; experimental schooling

Introduction

This article takes as its subject the life and work of the schoolmaster, educator and theorist Norman MacMunn (1877–1925) specifically through an examination of his entire corpus of writing, which, though little known and read today, was nonetheless received positively by the academic and educational communities of the time and led to their author being widely lionised as one in the vanguard of those who sought the 'founding of a faith'.[1] In addition to focusing on his important published works, the article also seeks to explore the *practical* aspects of MacMunn's thinking, which can be seen most readily in his development of an innovative educational philosophy that he termed 'differentialism'. This was an attempt to devise a method which fostered individuality in the classroom and largely derived from his teaching experiences at both the King Edward VI Grammar School, Stratford-upon-Avon, and the West Downs preparatory school near Winchester. However, despite these efforts, which attracted international attention, MacMunn has since fallen into obscurity and to date there has been no piece of academic scholarship focusing upon him. Even within many of the 'road-map' texts purporting to cover the field he is noticeable by his absence; W. A. C. Stewart for

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[1]R. J. W. Selleck, *English Primary Education and the Progressives 1914–1939* (London, Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), 23.

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example mentions him but once, and the present author not at all, whilst his appearance within the pages of R. J. W. Selleck is limited only to his later endeavours at Tiptree Hall.[2] This neglect stands in contrast to other figures of MacMunn's generation who have been recently reclaimed. These include not merely those who, like him, were key protagonists of the New Ideals in education movement (Edmond Holmes, Lord Lytton[3]), or else other progressive thinkers and schoolteachers of the time whose work MacMunn knew and had sympathy with (Eugene O'Neill, A. S. Neill and Harriet Finlay-Johnson[4]), but also those key psychological pioneers such as Maria Montessori and Susan Isaacs, at least one of whom (Montessori) was to provoke MacMunn's academic interest.[5]

Such subsequent scholarly neglect seems all the more surprising as MacMunn was very active in contributing to wider publications and conferences and was often cited by his near contemporaries as an inspiring example of a practitioner who provided new possibilities in the field of teaching.[6] As was the case with Homer Lane and A. S. Neill, MacMunn was also a man who inspired great devotion to the point of discipleship and after his death was considered by his followers as one who had, 'begun to be recognised as a prophet in his own country'.[7] Giving weight to this point, and following his premature demise, friends and sympathisers even subscribed to a memorial fund to disseminate his ideas and gave away hundreds of free copies of his books to teacher training colleges.[8] In common with other such prophets who inspire such cultish devotion, MacMunn's behaviour did though become increasingly odd over time; Peter Cunningham has gone as far as to suggest that 'he acquired the reputation of a crank' and his last educational experiment consisted of schooling a handful of boys in San Remo, Italy, whose dwindling numbers were a result of MacMunn having fallen out angrily with their parents.[9] The failure of these later endeavours away from the land of his birth where he had forged his reputation, coupled with his untimely death from bronchopneumonia at the age of 48, serve perhaps to explain why such aforementioned critical neglect was allowed to take root.

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[2]The texts referred to here are W. A. C. Stewart, *Progressives and Radicals in English Education* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1972); John Howlett, *Progressive Education: A Critical Introduction* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013); and Selleck, *English Primary Education and the Progressives 1914–1939*.

[3]See John Howlett, *Edmond Holmes and Progressive Education* (Oxford: Routledge, 2016) and John Howlett, 'The Spiritual Life and Educational Philosophy of Lord Lytton', forthcoming in *History of Education*, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0046760X.2021.1889694?journalCode=thed20.

[4]See Catherine Burke, '"The School Without Tears": E. F. O'Neill of Prestolee', *History of Education* 34, no. 3 (2005): 263–75; Sven Müller, *Freedom and Authority in Alexander S. Neill's and Jean Jacques Rousseau's Philosophy of Education* (Bloomington: Tectum Verlag, 2010); and Mary Bowmaker, *A Little School on the Downs: The Story of the Pioneering Educationalist Harriet Finlay-Johnson, Headmistress of Sompting School, West Sussex, 1897–1910* (Bognor Regis: Woodfield Publishing, 2002).

[5]See Philip Graham, *Susan Isaacs: A Life Freeing the Minds of Children* (London: Karnac Books, 2009); as well as Angeline Lillard, *Montessori: The Science behind the Genius* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) for one of the many examples of recent work on Montessori.

[6]For examples of the uptake in MacMunn's ideas see G. T. Roscoe, 'Some Educational Experiments', *Australasian Journal of Psychology and Philosophy* 8, no. 4 (1930): 290–301; and G. W. Spriggs, 'Problems of Individual Education, with Special Reference to Work in Mathematics', *Mathematical Gazette* 15, no. 206 (1930): 38–54.

[7]Ursula Greville, 'Excursions', *The Sackbut* 8 (January 1928): 154.

[8]This detail is mentioned in May MacMunn, 'Biographical Note', in *The Child's Path to Freedom*, 2nd ed., ed. Norman MacMunn (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1925), xx.

[9]Peter Cunningham, 'MacMunn, Norman', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-63821?rskey=nxBMML&result=2.

This article therefore seeks to offer a corrective to those earlier accounts by reinstating MacMunn as a figure central to the early development of British progressivism. Although drawing inspiration from the works of the American theorist John Dewey, progressivism of this type found in Britain at the time was concerned more with considerations as to how the child could be truly 'free' in the classroom, whether that freedom be of the mind, the body or the spirit. The zeal for experimenting with ideas around freedom led, in addition, to many pioneering progressives setting up their own schools or else trialling experimental practices in the classroom. A flavour of this can be gained by a reading of Alice Woods's (1920) seminal account in which the author not only observed and catalogued some of those aforementioned experiments taking place but was also moved to comment that, 'The experiments show us also that it is possible to free our children from many of our traditional plans and methods'.[10] It was, as the following account will show, this desire to break with traditional approaches that motivated MacMunn in his own later activities.

To show how he achieved his aims the article addresses a number of key areas. The first of these is *ideological* and derives from exploring MacMunn's distinctive educational philosophy, which was constructed by reference to contemporary ideas around child freedom and which became articulated in a succession of important texts and publications.[11] Although MacMunn has been sometimes mentioned *en passant* as an important champion of Maria Montessori and Homer Lane (both of whom at different points in his life he revered), crucial to the present discussion will instead be an attempt to see his work as in fact highly original in its own right and foreshadowing similar ideas adumbrated later on by better known educational figures.[12] As a case in point, MacMunn's notion that children in mainstream schools suffered from an 'excess of repression' anticipates by nearly a decade analogous language used by A. S. Neill.[13] Similarly, his hope that education could serve as a 'path to realization of a higher human type' pre-dates comparable esoteric claims later made by Edmond Holmes.[14] The second theme percolating the article is the application of MacMunn's ideas within various school settings, particularly the notion of 'differentialism', which he put forward as a direct result of his teaching experiences and observations.[15] In this respect, MacMunn was also ahead of his time in promoting alternative forms of pupil assessment – he argued that 'examinations . . . [should] become essentially tests of intellectual appreciation rather than of power to memorize' – as well as new and inventive ways of configuring formal curriculum subjects, including giving primacy to speaking and listening rather than the more traditional reading and writing.[16] Through looking at some of these aspects, the article identifies examples where educational concepts and

[10]Alice Woods, *Educational Experiments in England* (London: Methuen & Co, 1920), 226.

[11]See in particular Norman MacMunn, *A Path to Freedom in the School* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1914); and Norman MacMunn, *The Child's Path to Freedom* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1921), which was revised with a new foreword by Percy Nunn and biographical note by May MacMunn in 1925.

[12]See Sol Cohen, 'The Montessori Movement in England, 1911–1952', *History of Education* 3, no. 1 (1972): 51–67; and W. A. C. Stewart and W. P. McCann, *The Educational Innovators: Progressive Schools, 1881–1967* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1968), 92–93.

[13]MacMunn, *Path to Freedom*, 141.

[14]Ibid., 143.

[15]See Norman MacMunn, *Differentialism: A New Method of Class Self-Teaching* (London: W. H. Smith & Son, 1914); as well as Norman MacMunn, *Differential Partnership Method* [A Series of School Textbooks] (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1914).

[16]MacMunn, *The Child's Path*, 76.

ideas used today can be traced back, after a fashion, to antecedents in the past and thus provides further evidence of the importance of MacMunn and the need to re-integrate him into the historical narrative.

Early life, and experiments at Stratford-upon-Avon

Norman MacMunn was born in 1877 and studied at Wolverhampton Grammar School from 1889 to 1895.[17] He described these years as 'mental agony' and, although we should be wary of any attempts at psycho-history, this may suggest a motivation for his later concerns with the experiences of children within the classroom and the stunting effects as he saw it of much mainstream education.[18] In 1895 he entered Keble College, Oxford, destined for a career in the church although a burgeoning interest in the stage meant that after four terms he transferred to Marcon's Hall and he graduated in 1899 with a third-class degree in English literature.[19] Although his early movements are difficult to trace, it is clear that MacMunn was involved initially in compiling various reference books of quotations for the layperson as well as undertaking work on local newspapers before spending a brief period of time working in two schools in Australia.[20] He then moved to neighbouring New Zealand where he served as a journalist and drama critic on the *Auckland Star* newspaper. There are records here of him acting in local Shakespeare productions as well as devising a scheme to set up an annual Overseas Dinner to raise money for the destitute of London: 'I should like, above all, to have the support of the working men of the colonies ... and I think that a sixpenny subscription should encourage a hearty and general support of the workers of the whole Empire'.[21] This proposal not only hints at his later experiments in schooling, which were designed explicitly to look after the downtrodden, but also the messianic zeal that affected those subsequent endeavours. One anonymous contemporary was indeed moved to refer to MacMunn as a 'hysterical individual' and a 'superiah [*sic*] imported bounder'.[22]

By July 1908, MacMunn was reported as being back in London with a plan to enter the journalistic profession, although by the following year he had made known his intention to travel to Lucerne as a language teacher with a view to studying the pedagogy of European dialects.[23] Whilst he still sent back occasional pieces to the *Star*, these soon tailed off and MacMunn was now committed to the cause of educational work. After teaching briefly in Paris as an English assistant at the Berlitz School and then a large Lycée he took up a post as French master at the King Edward VI Grammar School where he was appointed from September 1912. The records held within the school archive tell us that he was employed for just under two years and there is no doubt that, although his time there was brief, these were crucial months as his classrooms provided an ideal test bed by which he was able to

[17]MacMunn appears in H. R. Thomas and John Ryan, eds., *Wolverhampton Grammar School Register, 1515–1920* (Kendal, printed by Titus Wilson, 1927), 132.
[18]See MacMunn, 'Biographical Note', ix.
[19]See Basil St. G. Drennan, ed., *The Keble College Centenary Register, 1870–1970* (Oxford: Keble College, 1970), 94.
[20]See Norman MacMunn, ed., *The Companion Books of Reference no. 1: The Companion Dictionary of Quotations* (London: Grant Richards, 1901). The schools referred to were Scott's College, Perth, in 1901 and St Mark's Crescent, Sydney, in 1902. This information comes from his staff appointment form held in the King Edward VI School archive.
[21]Norman MacMunn, 'A Christmas Proposal: Overseas Dinner to London Children', *Auckland Star* XXVIII, no. 312 (December 31, 1907): 3.
[22]Anon, 'Advertisements Column', *NZ Truth* 134 (January 11, 1908): 7.
[23]See 'New Zealander's Abroad', *Auckland Star* 39, no. 178 (July 27, 1908): 8.

develop a new mode and system of education. Such a system rested on MacMunn's unique concepts of 'differentiation' and, as this became extended, the 'partnership method'. It was to be these which were to define his early legacy, and, utilising his gift for self-publicity, he soon hurried into print various publications raising awareness of his pedagogic experiments. These included a small book and a pamphlet outlining his new method as well as two sets of teaching materials deriving from his classroom lessons.[24]

Working initially in his own field of modern languages, MacMunn's experiments were designed to provide a rejoinder to the previous system of education whose basic method was to, 'give one lesson to a class, whether consisting of three or thirty boys'.[25] As such:

> The collective knowledge of the class under the old system was extraordinarily small. Ridiculously little ground was covered at each lesson, and the children, especially in a backward class, were discouraged not only individually, but collectively, by their utter inability to deal comprehensively with the subject they were handling.[26]

MacMunn's solution to this was therefore to pioneer a system of working whereby every boy in the class studied something unique to himself and which was distinct from the work being concurrently undertaken by his peers. In the case of English literature for example, MacMunn purchased bundles of cheap texts for each boy's recreational reading whilst in French every child was given their own exercise book which became filled with information of direct and personal relevance. Often this drew on their own outside interests and filling them in became facilitated by MacMunn's own efforts: 'It is not difficult to find readings about butterflies for the boy who collects them, about locomotives for another who is interested in engineering'.[27] MacMunn also spent a lot of his spare time cutting up English and French dictionaries and vocabulary books so these could then be mixed and matched to create a larger variety of word combinations. Engagement with the language and its vocabulary was thus being stimulated by appealing to the personal interest of the child.

Although the first premise of MacMunn's work stemmed from children working on their own individualised activity as a means to further learning, it rapidly – and perhaps logically – extended into children working together. The 'partnership method' as it became known was therefore for many observers the key element of MacMunn's classroom practice. This fact is indicated by a contemporary newspaper report at the time, which, having witnessed a practical demonstration put on by MacMunn at the local library, was moved to record that, 'In the schoolroom of the future: where work is unsundered from pride and play, where it is not "every man for himself", but for his partner too'.[28] It was, then, this new technique that was increasingly catching the eye of MacMunn's contemporaries, who were beginning to recognise it as an innovative experiment in practice.[29]

[24]See Norman MacMunn, *Differentialism, Differential Partnership as well as Oral Exercises on French Grammar: The Infinitive and the Participles* (London: G. Bell, 1914); and Norman MacMunn, *English through the Missing Word: Followed by Examples of the Same Principle Applied to General Knowledge* (London: G. Bell, 1915).
[25]MacMunn, *Differentialism*, 7.
[26]Ibid., 8.
[27]Ibid., 11.
[28]'Teaching through Partnerships', *Stratford-on-Avon Herald*, March 20, 1914, 2.
[29]See in particular H. Middleton, 'Class Teaching Through Partnership: King Edward VI. School, Stratford-on-Avon', in *The New Era in Education*, ed. Ernest Young (London: George Philip & Son, 1920), 72–79; and E. A. Craddock, *The Classroom Republic* (London: A. & C. Black, 1920).

In some ways such work bore superficial similarities to the continuing endeavours of the English Froebelians, many of whom were junior or infant school heads and teachers and who were introducing practices that sought to give children freedom and autonomy in their learning. Often these were revisionist in their interpretation of Froebel's original ideas and, as Jane Read has shown, it was particularly project work that was their main means of allowing children to pursue their own interests.[30] Nevertheless, one of the key reasons why MacMunn's activities were so appealing was that they eschewed, at least for now, complex or esoteric theory and relied instead on a number of his own inventions in the classroom, which facilitated children being able to work together and, in turn, teach their peers. An example of this consisted of

> A collection of boxes, each enamelled in seven different colours. With each box were two books, one for each partner. One book asked and answered questions about the outside of the box and the other dealt with its contents. The use of these books taught French phrases and words.[31]

There were similar kinds of discussions in literature classes whereby the boys talked with their partners about the books they had read, and were then in turn encouraged to ask interrogatory questions.

MacMunn, as has been mentioned, was to publish these language activities for use by other teachers and they served as a precursor to later, and more commercially oriented, activity books. However, given that fact, it may appear surprising to note that he appeared loath to engage with the burgeoning academic community of practice that was forming around language teaching. As Nicola McLelland has charted, it was from 1892 and the foundation of the Modern Language Association that language teaching really took off; its journal, the *Modern Language Quarterly*, was founded five years later and this proved important in providing, 'a forum for discussing all aspects of teaching practice and principles, and a language teaching profession began to emerge'.[32] MacMunn, however, contributed nothing to its pages and, somewhat tellingly, an anonymous review of his pamphlets was damning in its tone: 'we have failed, possibly through stupidity, to understand exactly how the partnership is worked. Much more explicit details are necessary to show how the plan is worked.'[33]

Such dismissal should not downplay MacMunn's contribution to the wider arena of education at this time. Criticism of this kind was not wholly unexpected given that much of the thinking of the Association was underscored by the pragmatic ideas of Otto Siepmann as opposed to those of a more radical

[30]See Jane Read, 'Freeing the Child: Froebelians and the Transformation of Learning Through Play, Self-Activity and Project Work in English State Junior Classrooms, 1917–1952', in *Kindergarten Narratives in Froebelian Education: International Perspectives*, ed. Helen May, Kristen Nawrotzki and Larry Prochner (London: Bloomsbury, 2017); and Jane Read, 'Bringing Froebel into London's Infant Schools: The Reforming Practice of Two Headteachers, Elizabeth Shaw and Frances Roe, from the 1890s to the 1930s', *History of Education* 42, no. 6 (2013): 745–64.

[31]Middleton, *Class Teaching*, 76.

[32]Nicola McLelland, 'The History of Language Learning and Teaching in Britain', *Language Learning Journal* 46, no.1 (2018): 9.

[33]'Review of MacMunn, Differential Partnership Method', *Modern Language Teaching* 11, no. 1 (1915): 28.

persuasion such as his fellow émigré, Walter Rippmann or, for that matter, MacMunn.[34] Siepmann for example believed that language learning was best started later in a child's life (from 12 onwards), and he remained committed to the use of traditional learning methods such as accurate translation, examination and a firm grasp of the rules of grammar.[35] Suffice to say that this was clearly a polarised field and any opprobrium aimed at MacMunn may have been therefore attributable to intellectual disagreement rather than a judgement as to the overall merits of his efforts. Second, and of greater importance, was that there was clearly a different and less scientific spirit regarding the work of MacMunn in relation to that of Siepmann and Rippmann. In fact, it is possible to argue that MacMunn's experiments were not primarily concerned with getting the child to achieve early fluency and mastery in a foreign language. Although this was important, his experimental method seemed to be more about developing a wider range of skills such as self-confidence (gained through speaking) as well as the opportunity for self-correction. Indeed, the partnership method itself was not, in the main, about boys working together on the same task. Rather, it was both a chance to inculcate the principle of sharing – in this case the results of self-discovery between peers – and self-teaching as the boys discussed and created knowledge together. Where appropriate, the outcomes of such material could be disseminated to the whole class. Placing emphasis on this latter aspect, H. Middleton was in fact moved to note how 'The boys elected "editors" who kept their teacher supplied with news about their comrades, to be duly introduced into their class conversations'.[36] The overarching purpose of this activity was to avoid the 'intellectual barrenness' that was seen by MacMunn to blight much of the early education of many children.[37] It is telling, after that fashion, that his little theoretical pamphlet suggested ways in which his method could be applied to other subjects including mathematics, history and geography and so was clearly not seen as being narrowly confined to the one area (modern languages) he knew well.

Although constantly experimenting with different configurations of classroom activity remained of interest, having been convinced of the success of his experiments, MacMunn quickly moved to consider how these could be located within a far larger philosophy of education and progressive thinking. As 1912 and the first half of 1913 had been concerned with trialling and showcasing partnership work, so late 1913 and early 1914 saw him turning to more theoretical considerations. This is reflected both in the short paper on Montessori he presented at the inaugural New Ideals in Education conference, and,

[34]Otto Siepmann (1861–1947) moved to Britain in 1885 to take up a teaching post in Kent, then Inverness, before settling at Clifton College, Bristol in 1890, where he spent the next 31 years; he was naturalised as a British citizen in 1905. He became the founding head of modern languages at Clifton in 1900. As well as preparing specially translated editions of classic works, he also prepared a series of well-received language textbooks. Walter Ripmann (1869–1947) began as an assistant lecturer at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge. He moved to London in 1897 after his appointment as lecturer in German language and literature at Bedford College, London, a post he held in conjunction with a Professorship of German at Queen's College, where he stayed until 1912. From 1897, Rippmann was central to modern language teaching in Britain, as editor first of the *Modern Language Quarterly* (1897–1904), then *Modern Language Teaching*, from its inception in 1905 until 1911, when he stood down in order to take up the editorship of the journal of the Simplified Spelling Society.

[35]See Nicola McLelland, 'Walter Rippmann and Otto Siepmann as Reform Movement Textbook Authors: A Contribution to the History of Teaching and Learning German in the United Kingdom', *Language & History* 55, no. 2 (2012): 123–43.

[36]Middleton, *Class Teaching*, 74.

[37]See MacMunn, *Differentialism*, 24.

most important of all, in the first of two substantial works, which aimed to integrate those experiments in teaching into a wider nexus of ideas around child freedom.[38] It is to the substance of this seminal book that the article now turns.

Theorising the partnership method

By his own admission, and as has been mentioned, MacMunn's pamphlets outlining his experiments had been written in haste and it was only in *A Path to Freedom in the School* (1914) that he began to flesh out his classroom activity into a coherent philosophy of education. Although dedicated to the boys at King Edward VI, there were two main academic sources of inspiration for the book: Harriet Finlay-Johnson (whose own seminal account of her teaching experiences had been published only three years before) and Maria Montessori.[39] After having read the work of Montessori, MacMunn claimed that it had made him feel like 'a shipwrecked mariner who had reached land at last' and, as we shall see, it was his reflections on her recently published work that were to provide the basis for his most important educational contributions.[40] The tried and proven partnership method – which to this point had generated only local interest – now moved from being merely a limited pedagogic tool to a key plank of thinking around the broader concept of freedom and what, in practice, a free school could look like.

Before coming to the finer points of MacMunn's thinking, we should note that he was not alone at the time in seeking to understand the meaning and application of 'freedom' in the classroom. Indeed, this quest was rapidly gaining momentum not least of all due to the ending of the system of payment by results in schools, which, as Roy Lowe has made clear, led to 'a long period in which the classroom teacher was seen as being autonomous in terms of both teaching method and the details of the curriculum'.[41] In conjunction too with the emergence of educational psychology, which promised new opportunities in the science of teaching, many thinkers and practitioners thus became inspired in seeking to explain the limits and possibilities offered by this world in which, 'the only uniformity of practice that the Board of Education desire to see in the teaching of the public elementary schools is that each teacher shall think for himself'.[42]

As such, many of those drawn to these ideas ended up 'groping their way towards a satisfying conception of Freedom in education', although often those early conceptions took a very particular slant.[43] Either freedom was seen as a means to allow the natural instincts of the child – such as the desire to communicate or be creative – to take root and flourish, or else it became used as a catch-all term to describe teachers' attempts to increase understanding and awareness in a specific academic subject. A well-known case where children were permitted to display their creativity was in the Perse School, Cambridge, where Caldwell Cook's innovative teaching methods allowed them greater

[38]See MacMunn, *Path to Freedom*.
[39]Harriet Finlay-Johnson, *The Dramatic Method of Teaching* (London: James Nisbet and Company, 1911).
[40]MacMunn, *Montessorism*, 78.
[41]Roy Lowe, *The Death of Progressive Education: How Teachers Lost Control of the Classroom* (London: Routledge 2007), 12.
[42]Board of Education, *Suggestions for the Consideration of Teachers and others Concerned in the Work of Public Elementary Schools* (London: HMSO, 1905), 6.
[43]J. H. Simpson, *Schoolmaster's Harvest: Some Findings of Fifty Years, 1894–1944* (London: Faber & Faber, 1945), 178.

opportunities for self-expression in acting and creative writing.[44] In contrast, and indicative of the second interpretation of freedom, papers presented at the nascent New Ideals conferences saw it simply as a means to promote engagement in a range of different and alternative curriculum areas such as music, handicraft and geometry.[45]

Freed as they now were from the shackles of Whitehall, this general emboldening of educational thinkers and practitioners to ask searching questions around the nature of freedom meant that some began to interrogate in a more forensic way the general condition of contemporary education. We have earlier mentioned one example of this in the case of the English Froebelians, whose initiatives had begun in earnest in the second half of the nineteenth century.[46] Whilst their work continued, occasionally finding acceptance within the mainstream, it was from 1914 onwards that a more radical slew of critiques emerged, which sought to try and offer greater substantive explanation for the rotten state of much pedagogic practice, the consequence of which had led to swathes of young children becoming inhibited and deadened in the classroom. A case in point here was the contributions of the mystics Edmond Holmes and Victor Lytton. The former famously linked the extant educational malady to a normalisation of what he termed 'mechanical obedience', which deadened the child's natural impulses through the strict regulation of their behaviour via rote-learning and drill. In a similar vein, Lytton saw educational problems as being a hangover from ancient theological moralising and discourses, which continued to promote Original Sin. Less esoteric although no less important were those individuals – of whom the acerbic Homer Lane was the best known – who preferred to point to the dangerous repression of a child's natural instincts brought about by lack of parental love.[47]

MacMunn was writing therefore at a febrile time and his innovation lay in taking a very different path from those previous accounts. Shrouding his argument in language that would have appeared shocking even to his fellow progressives – education being seen as 'one of the cases in which revolution is better than evolution' – he was to draw heavily from the work of Montessori in developing a highly novel understanding of freedom.[48] In this he was, once again, paralleling wider developments. Unquestionably there was a deep and burgeoning academic interest in Montessori's ideas, particularly amongst the key players in British progressivism, many of whom had the opportunity to witness her education in action first-hand. The aforementioned Edmond Holmes for one had spent time observing her *casa dei bambini* (trans: 'children's house') in Rome and penned

[44]See John Howlett, 'Henry Caldwell Cook, Creativity and Democratic Learning', *History of Education Review* 48, no. 2 (2019): 227–41.

[45]These conferences, which ran initially from 1914 to 1923, were important interdisciplinary gatherings that celebrated and shared the new ideas around child-centredness. The first of these in 1914 was organised by the Montessori Society of Great Britain and attended by MacMunn. See T. H. Yorke Trotter, 'The Place of Music in Education', in *New Ideals in Education: 2nd Conference Papers* (London: New Ideals Committee, 1915), 123–34; Henry Wilson, 'The Value and Importance of Handicraft in Education', in *New Ideals in Education: 3rd Conference Papers* (London: New Ideals Committee, 1916), 32–44; and W. G. W. Mitchell, 'Some New Ideals in Geometry Teaching', in *New Ideals in Education: 4th Conference Papers* (London: New Ideals Committee, 1917), 99–104.

[46]See Kristen Dombkowski, 'Kindergarten Teacher Training in England and the United States 1850–1918', *History of Education* 31, no. 5 (2002): 475–89; and Jane Read, 'Froebelian Women: Networking to Promote Professional Status and Educational Change in the Nineteenth Century', *History of Education* 32, 1 (2003): 17–33.

[47]See Edmond Holmes, *What Is and What Might Be* (London: Constable, 1910), especially 3–149; Victor Bulwer-Lytton, *New Treasure: A Study of the Psychology of Love* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1934); and Homer Lane, *Talks to Parents and Teachers* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1928).

[48]MacMunn, *Path to Freedom*, 157.

a number of articles in broad support of her ideas.[49] Similarly, the first New Ideals in Education conference, which included speakers such as Bertram Hawker, Homer Lane and T. H. Yorke Trotter, was an open celebration of Montessori and her thinking, with Montessori-style classrooms attached to the conference hall to allow the delegates a chance to see schoolchildren at work.

The experiments in Rome eulogised by Holmes, as well as translations of Montessori's key works, were then to inspire MacMunn, particularly her contention that the children in her school would freely undertake activity without the need for any external stimuli such as rewards or punishments: 'Man, disciplined through liberty, begins to desire the true and only prize which will never belittle or disappoint him,– the birth of human power and liberty within that inner life of his from which his activities must spring'.[50] For Montessori, the proof for this statement came from watching children work through the sequential stages of her specially tailored Apparatus, which, although being undertaken in a playful and engaged manner and in a supportive environment, was nevertheless centred on the active completion of a task. In its way, this served to provide a wholly new theoretical framework, one in opposition to long-held views that had seen play simply as the dissipation or replenishment of surplus energy or else as a pre-condition for later survival.[51]

This is not to say, however, that concerns were not raised over Montessori's teaching, in particular the amount of freedom and creativity the children were allowed to display, especially when it came to using the Apparatus – itself tellingly labelled as 'didactic'. Such Apparatus was often presented to children before they were allowed to work with it and, even then, it was only permitted to be used in a certain way. The role of the teacher (or directress) also entailed an element of intervention in relation to the child's activity, even when it came to more esoteric and intellectual forms of learning: 'The directress must *intervene* to lead the child from sensations to ideas – from the concrete to the abstract' (emphasis added).[52] These limitations were understood not only by Holmes but also crucially by MacMunn, who pointedly acknowledged that, 'liberty in the Montessori sense means liberty in a limited and controlled environment'.[53]

However, alive as he was to the possible limits to Montessori's work, MacMunn was able to skilfully navigate these such that its key principles became used to buttress and explain his own evolving conception of classroom freedom, which had emerged from his experiments in Stratford. For example, by accepting Montessori's belief in play as a mental state of being rather than as a specific 'thing' needed to facilitate a pre-designated goal (the release of energy, the ability to survive and so on), it surely became possible for the categories of play and activity to be collapsed together and thus considered indistinguishable from one another.

[49]See for example Edmond Holmes, 'Introduction', in *A Montessori Mother*, ed. Dorothy Canfield Fisher (London: Constable & Co, 1913), xvii–xlviii; and Edmond Holmes, 'Drudgery and Education. A Defence of Montessorian Ideals', *Hibbert Journal* 15 (April): 419–33.

[50]Maria Montessori, *The Montessori Method*, 7th ed., trans. Anne E. George (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1912), 101.

[51]See for example Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Psychology* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1855); Moritz Lazarus, *Über die Reize des Spiels* (Berlin: F. Dümmler, 1883); and Karl Groos, *The Play of Animals* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1898).

[52]Montessori, *Method*, 224.

[53]MacMunn, *Path to Freedom*, 23.

Montessori herself was to speak of 'the delight that children find in working' and, whilst we should be alive to the limitations of her Apparatus, the joyful atmosphere in which her children worked was to have a great impact on MacMunn.[54]

In particular, it is this sense of pleasure in work that the inspired MacMunn was to use as his basis for a wider set of ideas that hooked up his own teaching practices with a broader model of educational autonomy. At its heart, true and proper freedom was presented to his readership as a 'contingent' rather than 'purposive' entity, in other words, as a state of being in which work and play were no longer seen as distinct from one another.[55] He argued, somewhat grandiosely, that this went against the centuries-old view in which the two had been kept distantly apart such that:

> the schoolmaster has spent thousands of years in teaching children to loaf when they wanted to work. All they asked for was work in activity. The schoolmaster replied: 'You must work in passivity or not at all. What you call work in activity I call play. And as I know everything it is play. And if you play you shall be punished'.[56]

One of the consequences of this separation was that it had led to many of the stultifying effects of modern education, which included children being discouraged from engaging fully in many facets of their learning as they were, '*taught to regard work as something so diametrically opposed to play such that it took on an ineradicably disagreeable association*' (emphasis in the original).[57] Children thereby saw as impossible many tasks that were in fact quite within their reach; they had simply been made to understand them under the wrong aspect. By breaking down this division, MacMunn believed that even the most complex ideas and concepts could be taught to any child provided they were presented in the right way, that is as a form of enjoyable play rather than as the drudgery of work. It was only when this condition had been achieved that a child could be understood as properly free.

Accordingly, and deriving from this principle, was to come MacMunn's diagnosis of the wider educational and social malaise that, in contrast to more abstruse explanations mentioned earlier, located it as a consequence of the cleavage between work and play. In the milieu this was highly novel and MacMunn was to be equally as bold in pointing the finger of blame at previous generations: 'That many centuries of child study should have resulted in so little essential change in the method of teaching is one of the most saddening features in the social history of Europe'.[58] Such strident claims also lend additional weight to the point made by Sol Cohen that MacMunn, 'dared not hold back for one minute … from the work of spreading the truths on which Montessorianism depended for its existence'.[59] In making this point Cohen did not go far enough; indeed, it is a further contention of this article that MacMunn was to make more original and expansive use of Montessori's ideas than any of her other British disciples. His claim that his system of education was akin to 'the power of Nature to restore both the moral and the intellectual

[54]Maria Montessori, *The Child in the Family* [originally trans. Nancy Rockmore Cirilo] (Chicago: H. Regnery Co, 1970; originally published in 1923), 49.

[55]This distinction comes from David McNear, 'A Critical Examination of Definitions for Progressive Education', *Clearing House* 1, no. 52 (1978): 37–40. Although they did not use this exact terminology, many of MacMunn's contemporaries were undoubtedly 'purposive' in the sense of equating freedom with having a particular known purpose.

[56]MacMunn, *Path to Freedom*, 19.

[57]Ibid., 28.

[58]Ibid., 32–3.

[59]Cohen, *The Montessori Movement*, 55.

balance of the individual once her restorative power has been allowed full play' indicates how far he was to go in seeking to advance her key concepts as the basis for a much wider theory around teacher/pupil and, for that matter, human relations.[60]

If Montessori thereby provided the theoretical 'launch pad' to be used as the basis for his own theories, further evidence for MacMunn's originality comes when locating his practice in relation to concurrent experiments in freedom. Harriet Finlay-Johnson, the other inspiration for the book, provides a pertinent example here. Although recently retired, Finlay-Johnson had been a teacher at Sompting School in Sussex where she had taught a lot of the curriculum, including history and geography, through the medium of drama.[61] Though MacMunn's background was in modern languages he nevertheless saw much in her method that overlapped with his own thinking, chiefly when it came to their shared understanding of children's a priori instincts towards activity and the essentiality of cultivating these in an environment free from external punishment and reward. It was this which made him sympathetic to her efforts and he spoke warmly of Sompting as representing 'one of the most interesting and convincing educational experiments ever carried out'.[62] In particular, he saw it as reflecting the young child's innate need to want to engage in forms of make-believe play.

However, whilst she was to be admired, as was the case in his assessment of Montessori, Finlay-Johnson's cultivation of the dramatic impulse did not for MacMunn go far enough as it somewhat narrowly overlooked the 'constructive and research instincts', which he saw as equally important in the development of the growing child.[63] Indeed, like her fellow drama pioneer Caldwell Cook (who has been referred to previously), Finlay-Johnson's classrooms involved an element of teacher guidance and control. Her view that the teacher should be an 'enthusiastic team-manager, coaching from the sidelines' was one that prevailed among even those as radical as Edmond Holmes.[64] It was these types of opinions in particular that MacMunn wished to repudiate: 'the natural boy . . . has an intense love of doing everything for himself'.[65] There was therefore much in his book that was highly innovative in the way it re-shaped the role of the teacher, whose place was that of a 'self-effacing, sympathetic inspirer of the spontaneous work of his pupils'.[66] It is little wonder that the more radical A. S. Neill was to be such an admirer of MacMunn and, when considering that he was still two years away from embarking on his own writing career, further suggests something of MacMunn's pioneering status.[67]

In therefore seeking to break down the distinction between work and play, MacMunn was not thinking merely in terms of his own classroom but also the possibility of creating an entire school in which those two notions could be productively brought together under a common aspect. This he more fulsomely discussed in the final part of his book, in which the sharing of knowledge and resources as demanded by the partnership method was broadened out to be an underpinning principle of an establishment – 'The

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[60]MacMunn, *Path to Freedom*, 24–5.
[61]See Bowmaker, *A Little School*.
[62]MacMunn, *Path to Freedom*, 45.
[63]Ibid., 47.
[64]Gavin Bolton, *Acting in Classroom Drama: A Critical Analysis* (Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books, 1998), 15.
[65]MacMunn, *Path to Freedom*, 55.
[66]Ibid., 79.
[67]See Jonathan Croall, *Neill of Summerhill: The Permanent Rebel* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 104.

Commonwealth School' – in which 'The only restraints will be those imposed on the individual boy by the collective will of his fellows'.[68] Pupils in such a place would have opportunities to choose both within and between subjects whilst external forms of discipline were no longer needed, as children would have full control over their own learning, in terms of both the form and the content. As much as such a model was clearly utopian, it nonetheless remained to this point only tentatively sketched out (a mere 13 pages in total) and MacMunn was still aware, albeit grudgingly, of the need to connect his ambitions to the more prosaic demands of wider society: 'No system of education is likely to win among many contending systems unless it can show that one of its first advantages is to be able to fit boys to respond to the calls of modern life.'[69]

Intentionally connecting his thinking to the needs of the wider world in this way undoubtedly helped to make his esoteric ideas more tangible but also attractive to those who may ordinarily have been sceptical. As a result, MacMunn's newly published work generated increased enthusiasm in intellectual circles and was widely reviewed. A case in point was *The Athenaeum* journal whose earlier sniffy review of his partnership method ('Mr. MacMunn's enthusiasm has, in this instance, outrun his judgement'[70]) was now overtaken by a note of fulsome praise: 'He deserves, emphatically, a hearing, and we shall await with interest the adoption of his system in other educational institutions'.[71] Although such notices were encouraging and clearly welcome, Stratford nonetheless remained conservative and parochial by comparison and, as his educational vision was to expand, so was MacMunn keen to move on. In light of this, the following section of the article therefore considers the next phase of his career.

Revising freedom: from Montessori to Lane

In the autumn of 1914 MacMunn applied for war service but was rejected on three occasions on account of his night blindness and asthma. All the same, he was soon offered a post at West Downs preparatory school, which was at the time under the dynamic headship of Lionel Helbert. Although we cannot know the precise reason for his departure from King Edward's, MacMunn hinted that it was down to growing conflicts with other staff members:

> I have been labouring under the very great disadvantage of having, so to say, to graft my way of teaching on to the collective system of education pursued by the other masters in the school. Thus two methods of instruction were liable to clash, leaving the boys a little lost and confused.[72]

Nonetheless, his new institution was very different and MacMunn was drawn naturally to its headmaster, who had not only founded the school in 1897 but shared an interest in ideas around child emancipation: 'From first to last and from top to bottom, in form and in spirit, West Downs reflected that vivid, sanguine, inventive, magnetic, mercurial, rash, but above all things loving and unselfish personality which was Lionel

[68]MacMunn, *Path to Freedom*, 151.
[69]Ibid., 69.
[70]Review of Norman MacMunn, 'Differentialism, a New Method of Class Self-Teaching', *Athenaeum* no. 4473 (July 13, 1913): 60.
[71]'Literature: New Experiments in Education', *Athenaeum* no. 4522 (June 27, 1914): 881.
[72]Macmunn, *Path to Freedom*, 94–5.

Helbert'.[73] Frustratingly, aside from a handful of photographs, there are no extant archives relating to the school (which closed in 1988) although its official historian, who compiled his research mostly from personal reminiscences, does note that the 'gentle, mildly eccentric idealist with progressive views' occasionally inspired scenes of apparent anarchy in his classroom, even prompting the shocked headmaster of Harrow to remove one of his sons from the premises![74] This did not seem to greatly trouble Helbert, who gave MacMunn free rein to develop his schemes and he set up clubs for science, literature and painting.

The years spent at West Downs were happy ones, and presumably busy ones too as MacMunn did not publish anything save one last pedagogic exercise book.[75] After four years, though, MacMunn was ready to strike out on his own and in September 1918 he took out a lease on Tiptree Hall in Inworth, Essex in order to set up a school for war orphans. In part aided by a sum of money raised by the members of West Downs, he carried out a lot of the rebuilding work on the Hall himself:

> It is at once a registered war charity and an experiment in education . . . the guiding principle of the community will be one of freedom in education, allowing children to create and discover for themselves rather than imposing upon them the knowledge of teachers.[76]

The whole enterprise was conceived of more broadly as a Community of Children, with initial funding being bequeathed by Lord Glenconner and with a general advisory committee including such luminaries as Margaret Macmillan, Lord Sandwich, Lady Betty Balfour, E. Sharwood Smith and the Earl of Lytton, with MacMunn himself as the self-styled 'Chief Advisor'. Through the burgeoning New Education Fellowship and the New Ideals conferences there was an increasing emphasis on the *international* dissemination of ideas, and news of the proposed experiment even reached as far as Australia: 'the opportunity of putting new theories to the one found test, that of practice, has a decided attraction, and many will watch with great interest the results'.[77] One consequence of this was that Tiptree became, for a short time, an object of great curiosity, attracting visitors from a wide range of intellectual fields. These included the pioneering feminist Stella Browne as well as the science journalist J. G. Crowther, the latter being employed briefly as a teacher.[78]

The school opened in January 1919 with 20 boys and girls, but after a year the girls had gone and MacMunn was left with only a few of the poorest boys. Part of the problem MacMunn faced was that he had no other means of funding the project and so the school was always struggling for capital; his widow rather pathetically recalled how two of the eldest boys 'volunteered to go to London by themselves and visit the homes of various rich people whom we thought might sympathize'.[79] The fact that the boys undertook such a trip indicates their

[73]Nowell Smith, ed., *Memorials of Lionel Helbert: Founder & Head of West Downs School* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), 63.
[74]Mark Hitchens, *West Downs: A Portrait of an English Prep School* (Edinburgh: Pentland Press, 1992), 81.
[75]Norman MacMunn, *English through the Written Word: Followed by Examples of the Same Principle Applied to General Knowledge* (London: G. Bell, 1915).
[76]Maria Therese Earle, 'Children of the Fallen: To the Editor of the "Westminster Gazette"', *Westminster Gazette*, June 6, 1918.
[77]*The Queenslander*, August 31, 1918, 4.
[78]See Lesley A. Hall, *The Life and Times of Stella Browne: Feminist and Free Spirit* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co, 2011), 116; and Oliver Hill-Andrews, 'Interpreting Science: J.G. Crowther and the Making of British Interwar Culture' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sussex, 2015), 52.
[79]MacMunn, 'Biographical Note', xvii.

devotion to MacMunn but it was not enough and, by July 1920, he had not only to find homes for his nine remaining orphans but also to take on fee-paying pupils to make up the shortfall. This he did only with great reluctance, as he believed that parents would inevitably interfere with his running of the school. As with West Downs, no extant records or archives exist relating to Tiptree and its practices; consequently the few details we have of day-to-day life can be gleaned only from secondary sources.[80] The most detailed of these accounts highlight important new developments in MacMunn's practice. One such development was the 'card encyclopaedia', a card catalogue of words and information constructed collaboratively by MacMunn and the children:

> On lettered cards are words such as 'indicate'. This card has a picture upon it which illustrates the use of the word. This leads to the next word, 'indicator', upon another card, and again an illustration. The names of cities, of the countries of the world, and many other things, were in that wonderful catalogue.[81]

The significance of this device is suggested by the fact that it was brought back to England after MacMunn's death and he even referred to it himself as 'the real centre of things'.[82]

With around 14,000 cards in total the amount of information the card catalogue contained was both extensive and yet also embodied a very important principle around the nature of knowledge. By being organised as a 'mix and match' compendium that was constantly being added to by the children, it defied the easy classification of knowledge into strictly demarcated subject areas and was instead a far more organic entity. In so being, it encouraged a sort of learning MacMunn referred to as 'The Over Subject', that is, those ways of thinking which were not caught up in substantive detail but rather drew connections between and within subjects.[83] These could occasionally be configured in unusual combinations: 'How children love to compare a chimney with a wasp, showing first its differences and then its resemblances, and then to take two similar flowers and see first their resemblances and then their differences!'[84] This sort of knowledge was thereby 'over', as it was seen to exist over and above individual academic curriculum areas. In describing it, MacMunn's language seemed to prefigure what today is referred to as 'inter-disciplinarity' or 'critical thinking' and the card index, along with other devices such as his sentence-building machine, were designed to facilitate this way of understanding. Synthesising knowledge was not to be undertaken in the rigid, linear way of the textbook but, rather, utilising the multiple and complex ways of the child's mind: 'the child, and not the textbook, is the proper synthesizer, and that the formal prearranged synthesis is so much against the nature of the child that it will have to be abandoned in favour of inductive methods based on experiment'.[85]

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[80]Local history groups contacted by the author were unaware of Tiptree Hall's use as a school after the First World War nor were the current occupiers, the confectioners Wilkin and & Sons Ltd, whose chairman now lives in the Hall. The only document relating to the school is *Our Education Aim: Manifesto of the Tiptree Hall Community* (n.d.) which was cited in Selleck, *English Primary Education and the Progressives 1914–1939*. This has, despite the author's best efforts, also been impossible to trace.
[81]Josephine Ransom, *Schools of To-morrow in England* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1919), 117–18.
[82]MacMunn, *Child's Path*, 117.
[83]Ibid., 113.
[84]Ibid., 115.
[85]Ibid., 69.

The importance of such devices clearly lay then in their pedagogic purpose, which related to the nature of knowledge and learning. Nevertheless, although that was important, they also represented a distinct philosophical shift in MacMunn's understanding of freedom and activity in the classroom. It was this shift in understanding that formed the basis of MacMunn's second major book, *The Child's Path to Freedom*, published in 1921. Although branded as a heavy re-write of his earlier, similarly titled volume it was, in reality, completely distinct and contained several new developments, not the least of which was that it had the benefit of drawing on the results of his continuing work at West Downs and Tiptree. In effect, these amounted to 'six further years of experimentation' that had 'widened the educational outlook of the author'.[86]

In this widening he was not alone; the immediate aftermath of the First World War saw many of his fellow progressives, their earlier optimism now tempered, seeking to understand how education could be used as a means to militate against future catastrophes and MacMunn was to declaim this point early on in his book: 'the world can be saved from still worse catastrophes [than the First World War] only through its children, and this by nothing less than a new and fundamental conception of education'.[87] Indeed, for MacMunn, it was precisely those older ways of education that were guilty in generating the enthusiasm for particular sorts of militarism and nationalism that had in turn whetted the appetite for conflict. For him, harsh school discipline, 'easily turns the victim of the cane to one of those disastrous people who, with especial zest, prepare the world for the "next war"'.[88] Despite such soundings, some progressives, notably those still drawing on Montessori and increasingly John Dewey, persisted in rooting their optimism in vaguely communitarian and democratic principles.[89] MacMunn, however, was to subtly distance himself from these ideals, which he did by moving away from the earlier partnership method to instead focus on what he called *auto-education*. Although by no means reneging on the cooperative spirit, this meant greater appreciation of the place that children's innate desires and inclinations could have on their learning.[90] MacMunn in fact was to make the point that each child was capable of, 'work[ing] out its own destinies in its own way, and to be continually seeking means to self-development'.[91]

Why did this shift in emphasis occur? In part, it was to do with a child's age: the partnership method was less suited to boys under the age of 12 and it was these younger demographics that formed the bulk of the students at Tiptree. This ideological shift also represented something of MacMunn's evolving views on the concept of freedom. Increasingly – and in light perhaps of his wider experiments at West Downs, which was an institution saturated in progressive principles – he was by now convinced that freedom was to be equated not simply with types of classroom activity but as a form of

[86]Ibid., 7.
[87]Ibid., 12.
[88]Norman MacMunn, 'The Wisdom of Educational Experiment', *Hibbert Journal* XX (1921–1922): 742.
[89]The drama pioneer Caldwell Cook is one such example. See Howlett, 'Henry Caldwell Cook'.
[90]The idea that a child had within him/herself an innate capability to be sociable as well as creative was to be given greater articulation by a later generation of thinkers, most notably, in this context, Susan Isaacs. Whilst MacMunn's work was driven by a more philosophical and spiritual faith in children's faculties, those such as Isaacs (albeit working with younger children) were to give this more scientific legitimacy, particularly through her belief in the 'super ego', which represented the child's need for self-expression. See in particular Susan Isaacs, *Intellectual Growth in Young Children* (London: Routledge, 1930); and Susan Isaacs, *Social Development in Young Children; A Study of Beginnings* (London: Routledge, 1933).
[91]MacMunn, *Child's Path*, 25.

self-realisation. This meant in practice that education could only truly be understood as 'free' when it was underpinned by the means of allowing an individual's innate instincts to flourish rather than simply being part of a system in which activity, although driven by interest, was nevertheless still constrained by structure. Such structure could be the individual lesson (which itself was constricted by the timetable to a finite amount of time), the layout of the class or the overarching set of institutional rules.

We can further identify two possible inspirations for this shift towards self-realisation, the first of which would be the creeping influence of the New Psychology movement and in particular the ideas of Émile Coué. Although Coué's work on self-improvement stemming from auto-suggestion had been around since the opening of his clinic in Nancy, as Dean R. Rapp tells us, by 1918 such ideas amounted to a 'psychological craze' and 'the latest sensation to sweep through London's high society, and ultimately the general public'.[92] In light of this it was not surprising that the field of education was similarly touched by this fad and a short yet important article penned by the Frenchman for the *New Era* journal – which MacMunn would have read as he was an occasional contributor and also fluent in French – exemplified the cross-fertilisation between disciplines.[93] Coué's ideas were equally inspiring to others in MacMunn's circle such as Beatrice Ensor who, as editor of the *New Era*, was perceptive in picking up on the connection between the two:

> Mr. Norman MacMunn, of Tiptree Hall, is carrying out a similar experiment with difficult boys. The results have been astounding. At morning assembly his pupils put themselves in a quiescent state and Mr. MacMunn repeats the Coué formula, after which he enumerates the qualities to be awakened.[94]

His belief that humans could use their will to direct particular courses of action thus sat comfortably alongside MacMunn's precept that the very best education must be that which took account of, 'Nature's mysterious workings, [for] her secret education of endless unconscious and half-conscious processes, her efforts to build on intuitions and on all sorts of strange relationships between physical and sensory and intellectual'.[95] MacMunn understood all too well the impulse of children to be creative and, by the engagement of their will which was a subconscious aspect, to appreciate work as a manifestation of play.

The second inspiration behind MacMunn's philosophical shift lay in the growing impact of his friend Edmond Holmes' writing. Holmes' seminal treatise *What Is and What Might Be* (first published in 1911) had achieved great popularity going through various reprints and he was a key player in setting up the New Ideals in Education conferences, the first of which MacMunn attended in 1914 and which had proved so influential on his thinking. Holmes therefore acted as an intellectual barometer and during the war years his work had migrated away from the narrow field of education to become increasingly esoteric, with the school being seen as one part of a much broader framework of human spiritual development.[96] Central to his new thinking was

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[92]Dean R. Rapp, '"Better and Better": Couéism as a Psychological Craze of the Twenties in England', *Studies in Popular Culture* 10, no. 2 (1987): 17.
[93]Émile Coué, 'L'autosuggestion et l'Éducation', *Education for the New Era* 3 (1922): 4–6.
[94]Beatrice Ensor, 'The Outlook Tower', *Education for the New Era* 3 (1922): 99.
[95]MacMunn, *Child's Path*, 75.
[96]See Edmond Holmes, *A Problem of the Soul: A Tract for Teachers* (London: Constable & Co, 1917); *Sonnets to the Universe* (London: A. L. Humphreys, 1918); and *The Secret of Happiness* (London: Constable & Co, 1919).

a conviction that the ultimate stage of Man's evolution would be when 'Man recognized that his soul was one with the soul of the Universe' thereby breaking down the false dichotomy – as Holmes saw it – between the external material world and the internal world of the spirit.[97] Although MacMunn was never as openly abstruse, and eschewed Holmes' wilder flights of fancy into Buddhism, there was significant overlap in how they saw ideas around 'soul growth' as intersecting with practice. Holmes believed that the steps needed to achieve such a state of self-realisation involved allowing the full expression of children's innate instincts, which included, amongst others, the creative, artistic, and communicative. Only then, according to Holmes, were children truly to be considered as free. Such a belief intersected with MacMunn's newly fashioned thinking, which, in language and tone reminiscent of the former Chief Inspector, was increasingly drawn to focusing on the more intangible aspects of pupil growth. In rationalising the development of the whole child for example, MacMunn was to make the point that, 'education ought to train for leisure as well as livelihood'.[98] He likewise acknowledged that a natural upbringing arose from, 'more scope for natural activities, free co-operation and immunity from dictatorial authority'.[99]

What had then started out as a pedagogic method had, by the time of the publication of *The Child's Path to Freedom* in 1921, morphed into a fully-fledged theory of human relations and conduct with education, unsurprisingly, at its centre. In his final piece of published writing, which acted as a coda, MacMunn was to speak of the free boy as one drawing heavily from his 'primitive unconscious' and stated that 'the freeing of the human spirit is the greatest task that lies before man'.[100] In thus equating many of the concurrent problems of civilisation with a lack of freedom, MacMunn was adding his voice to a burgeoning clamour of dissent. His was a belief system deeply rooted in the redemptive power of freedom and this freedom was to be associated with cooperation, spontaneity and unconscious activity. Furthermore, in recognising the falsity in the division between work and play, he had created a new and original system of education and one that accorded with his forceful personality as much as his commitment to new forms of emancipation.

Final years and conclusion

In January 1924 MacMunn migrated his school to Rapallo, Italy, before moving again in December of that year to San Remo, further west along the Ligurian coast. Although initially travelling with only four boys, this number soon went up to 12 before, once again, arguments with parents led to withdrawals. As ever, this disagreement centred on the amount of freedom children should be afforded. Despite these limited numbers, MacMunn's continuing experiments carried on unabated; his boys devised the idea of creating professorships for different subjects, and under these monikers they set about fully assuming the mantle of teacher for that subject and were responsible for teaching the rest of the class. MacMunn also invented several fascinating-sounding 'electrical devices for self-teaching', although we are left to speculate as to what they consisted of.[101]

[97]Howlett, *Edmond Holmes*, 73.
[98]MacMunn, *Child's Path*, 131.
[99]Ibid., 136.
[100]Norman MacMunn, 'Eight Years of Child Freedom', *Sackbut* 2, no. 2 (July 1921): 15–16.
[101]MacMunn, 'Biographical Note', xix.

Being sequestered abroad in this way perhaps contributed to the sense of community and thus the precept of auto-education spread to the group's living arrangements, with the boys living alongside each other and MacMunn in a self-sufficient little enclave. By the end there was but one boy – a Professor of Natural History, no less – who had been with MacMunn all of his school life although his aspiration to enter university was cut short by his teacher's untimely death from a recurring bout of pneumonia in October 1925. The MacMunn experiment was over.

It took less than a decade after his demise for MacMunn's ideas to vanish, almost without trace. Aside from the very occasional mention it was, for subsequent educational reformers, as if he and his efforts had never existed and he was bypassed when writers on progressivism came to consider those who had gone before.[102] However, as this article has shown, this is to shamefully downplay his significance. First, we must appreciate the influence that he had on his contemporaries, many of whom from a slightly younger generation regarded him as a pioneer. For example, J. H. Simpson, whilst a young housemaster at Rugby School, was to speak of his first meeting with MacMunn as showing him 'that a *Form* [class] could be used as the unit for valuable experiments in emancipative education'.[103] It was this spirit that drove much of Simpson's later pioneering work at Rendcomb College. Similarly, A. S. Neill visited MacMunn in Tiptree Hall and was impressed by what he saw, as also did Helen Pankhurst, who claimed that it was hearing about his work which inspired her to formulate her influential Dalton Plan.[104]

As important as the impact exerted on his contemporaries are the ways in which MacMunn's ideas find ghostly echoes in later pedagogic thinking. His key concept of differentiation, for example, which argued for children in a class being engaged on tasks appropriate to their interests and aptitudes, is now used widely (albeit in a modified form) in much educational language and practice. There is a whole industry of writing around the area including both academic and non-academic guides and manuals.[105] Likewise, its terminology has even entered into official discourse, with the recently altered teachers' standards describing one of the necessary attributes of a successful teacher as, 'know[ing] when and how to differentiate appropriately, using approaches which enable pupils to be taught effectively'.[106] One might also tentatively draw connections between the collaborative work of MacMunn's students and recent writing around learning communities. An example of this might be found in Etienne Wenger, whose account of such groups stresses that effective knowledge-creation must stem from mutual engagement around joint enterprises and a respect for the particularity of experience, both precepts central to MacMunn's own work.[107]

[102]See for instance W. H. G. Armytage, 'Psycho-Analysis and Teacher Education II', *British Journal of Teacher Education* 1, no. 3 (1975): 317–34; and J. Hare, 'Notes on a Group Work French Teaching Project', *System* 2, no. 3 (1974): 27–30.
[103]J. H. Simpson, *An Adventure in Educational Self-Government* (Liverpool: Henry Young & Sons, 1916), 10.
[104]See Croall, *Neill of Summerhill*, 104; and MacMunn, 'Biographical Note', xviii.
[105]As cases in point see variously Sue Cowley, *The Ultimate Guide to Differentiation: Achieving Excellence for All* (London: Bloomsbury Education, 2018); Daniel Sobel and Sara Alston, *The Inclusive Classroom: A New Approach to Differentiation* (London: Bloomsbury Education, 2021); and Sylvia McNamara and Gill Moreton, *Understanding Differentiation: A Teacher's Guide* (London: David Fulton, 1997).
[106]Department for Education, *Teachers' Standards: Guidance for School Leaders, School Staff and Governing Bodies* (London: HMSO, 2013), 11, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/665520/Teachers__Standards.pdf.
[107]See Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

Similarly, democracy – often through councils and leadership committees – is now integral to the mission statements of many state schools, and who could argue against affording children dignity and respect such that they are free to pursue with vigour their passions and interests? Ultimately, regardless of the extent to which we feel we can connect his older ideas with aspects of the present – which can be problematic – and notwithstanding his occasional tendency towards messianism, MacMunn's belief that learning should appeal directly to the interests of the child, that this can be a shared experience, and that work carried out within the school should never, where possible, be seen as work/drudgery are surely concerns congruent to all subsequent pedagogic practice.

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