

At the end of my inspiring visit to Vancouver Island to attend the last Reunion, I promised that I would let you know my thoughts and reflections. I'm sorry it has taken so long, but there has been a lot of reading and reflecting to go through before I felt able to 'put pen to paper'. These then are my conclusions *at the moment*. I say that because I am sure there is more to be said – Pat Skidmore's wonderful book about Marjorie proves that already. I have a request therefore. If you could find the time to read through what I have written and send your comments – things you think are right/wrong (particularly the latter); things I've missed out; any incidents that you feel able to share with me; in short, anything that would make my eventual writing of this important part of my father's life more accurate, a *true* reflection of what the Cowichan experience was like – I would be very, very grateful. Anything you tell me will, of course, be treated as completely confidential. My email address is will_garnett@hotmail.com

Thank you

Will

Thoughts on Fairbridge

Fairbridge and Empire: the FFS were the last of many child emigrant schemes designed to relieve Britain of some of the 'problem' children created by the Victorian industrial revolution, which had led to overcrowding in the cities. Combined with this was a desire to populate the empty areas of the Dominions (Canada, Australia etc) because other countries were tempted to move in. There was a genuine belief that children would have a better life if they were trained to be agricultural labourers or maids in their adopted countries but that wasn't the primary reason for sending children out. 'Peopling the empty spaces' of the large land masses of the Empire was an inspiring phrase. It sat well on the tongue, it was concise, well-balanced ... BUT .. what did it mean *in practice*? What were the practical implications of the phrase? Fairbridge idealists never properly thought this through. They assumed that the way to solve contemporary social problems was to take the 'problem people' away from their social environment to a different, often distant, place. Rarely, if ever, were those being transported to the new and 'promised' land, consulted – because they were deemed incapable of having opinions worthy of note.

The Fairbridge organisation: FFS was different to other schemes in that it was very much an upper-class inspired scheme. Started with money from the Prince of Wales, and supported by the rich and powerful. Kingsley Fairbridge himself built Pinjarra, but that was the only site that had his, or any other leading supporter's, actual physical input. Thereafter, individual farm schools were built by local contractors (often helped by the children themselves, who also did many of the daily tasks), and were run by local committees responsible to London. There was continual friction between the local and London committees over policy – especially as London held most of the purse strings, and was reluctant (once the individual farm school was established) to release as much as the local committees would have liked. The local committees in turn were under constant pressure from the Principal of each school for extra funds

If there was a problem at the school – of whatever nature – London didn't want to know. It was up to the Principal to run each school as he saw fit; and to deal with problems in the way he thought best. Public image was seen as vitally important – to ensure that funds kept coming into the Fairbridge coffers - so bad publicity was not welcome. In any case, most of the people who ran the London committees had been brought up to believe that people from working-class backgrounds were always the perpetrators of problems – it was never the situation they found themselves in that was to blame. The creators of the FFS believed that the children came from appalling backgrounds in the UK and that the new life they would have in the Dominions would give them a sound foundation on which to build.

In addition, the creators of FFS had been born into a section of society that, by choice, sent its sons (and sometimes daughters) to be inculcated into a public school system which meant that they were away from home, living in uncomfortable dormitory conditions, subjected to all the varied personal stresses that this entailed; and brought up in a system which emphasised loyalty to the organisation at every level. Team spirit was the essence: individuals should subvert their own personal wishes/whims to the general good of the whole. Each individual should know his place in the pecking order, and stick to it.

Top-down, they believed, was the only way to run an organisation: the children obeyed the staff, the staff obeyed the Principal, the Principal obeyed the local committee, and it obeyed London. Appointments at each school were nominally the responsibility of the local committee, but day to day events came under the responsibility of the Principal. Getting the right staff was vital to the success of each school; and it was one of the biggest areas of failure. While some individuals brought real skills and commitment to work for the benefit of their charges, many were poorly paid, untrained, and unsympathetic – while others were sadists or paedophiles who saw the pupils as easy targets. Many pupils were abused; few were loved. The way in which the schools were organised meant that vulnerable children, far removed from whatever family they had once had (and therefore more in need of security, affection or just plain warmth), were left with memories of their experiences which 60 years and more later they are just beginning to come to terms with.

Bill's impact on FFS

Can be seen as two separate experiences. **1938-42** he was an idealist; fully committed to the FFS philosophy; determined to do what he could to progress it, and to build and improve. He found Colonel Logan hard to work with, and hated individual members of staff, though he never wrote in detail about the reasons for this disgust. He was given enormous responsibility right from the start (when Logan was away elsewhere), and had to do all his learning on the job – since no-one else there had any relevant experience anyway. This was one of the real flaws of the FFS system: to succeed it needed staff of enormous ability: sensitive, caring, positive, able to deal with the many and varied problems created by the very system itself – and on a pitiful salary. Though huge sums of money were raised for the FFS scheme, they were actually hopelessly inadequate.

He found boys easier to deal with than girls, whom he never really understood. He introduced the House system, which was the bedrock of the public schools, and which offered individuals the opportunity to work with others in a supportive team effort. He emphasised games, hard physical work, team spirit, He tried to bring a love of the country and an awareness of the world around to pupils. He punished individuals who had broken school rules, using a strap to do this on occasion (often?). Andy Buglass' farewell poem (when he left to join the RCN) suggests he was more of a 'Now don't do that again' person, trying to see the positives in a pupil.

1945-49 is completely different. His wartime letters show an awareness of the problems of the FFS aims; and an uncertainty about returning to the undoubted stresses of dealing with the FFS system. Wartime service amongst U-boats in the wild Atlantic was a positive experience: he was fighting the fight, and he was doing it in the company of other adults, all with the same common aim. There was a genuine reluctance to pick up the reins again – until he met and married Jo. As a married man with an immediate family (his first son was born Feb 46), he must have the stability of a secure job and a secure base. But from the very start, he realised that as Principal he was in a different role, He was doing more punishing – and the pupils were therefore scared of him. So there was less chance of tapping into the positives. He had to lead a team of staff, and sort out the problems that that entailed. And he had to deal with the local committee – and London.

His correspondence with Sir Charles Hambro broke all the rules of the FFS system. He identified himself to London as one who would not play the team spirit game; he would stand for what he believed in, and they *would* listen. FFS postwar was in fact a period in which his own life was transformed, his own focus shifted from the FFS ideal (which he was now far less committed to?) to the responsibilities of family. The eventual bust-up with both the local and the London committees was inevitable.

FFS and former pupils

Reading through the literature from the 1980s onwards, it is possible to identify three emerging trends. In the early Newsletters, from the time of the 50th Reunion onwards, there is a reflection on *the results for former pupils of being brought to Canada*. There is a focus on the successes individuals have had as a result of staying in Canada at a time of healthy employment and good job prospects. There are comments to the effect that individuals don't know why they were chosen to have the 'Fairbridge experience' but are thankful for the opportunity it gave them. There are occasional warnings that TV companies are 'on the prowl' seeking to 'stir things up'.

By the 1990s, however, books were beginning to emerge which looked more closely at the dynamics of the FFSchools in different parts of the Commonwealth, particularly Australia, and of their relationship to those in the 'receiving' countries. Patrick Dunae in 2001 brought the focus for the first time on the VI FFS, showing how BC Social Workers had identified serious concerns about the way in which the Cowichan Station school was run; and had worked tirelessly for its eventual closure. At the same time, writers were beginning to interview individuals about their experiences while at the schools. Again, the focus so far has been principally on

Australia; we await with interest the publication of the detailed memories of more of the VI former pupils. Indications are that it will reflect and confirm many of the recent revelations from Australia – that children were taken advantage of, were abused, were maltreated by individuals; that they were failed by a system that, while professing to be centred on their individual development ‘to the maximum of their physical and mental vigour and their moral beauty’ – in fact assumed that, because they were working class, they had no aspiration beyond the minimum. And it has taken over half a century for these individuals’ stories to be told; for all this time, they have had to cope on their own, often thinking that they alone had been abused (and that they therefore must have brought it on themselves; little thinking that they were one among many).

Many, many former pupils of the FFS, Cowichan *have* achieved great things in their adult lives in Canada and elsewhere. They return to Cowichan Station every second year, not to re-visit a school site but to re-affirm their sense of solidarity with those who also suffered – and survived. The outstanding conclusion is that they have achieved this *despite* rather than *because of* their time at the school.