

**Henry Morris: The Cambridgeshire Village Colleges and community education**, by David Rooney, Henry Morris Memorial Trust, 2013, 92 pp., £10 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-9515-5511-8

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The publication of a new biography of Henry Morris, a former Cambridgeshire Chief Education Officer, is timely. The English educational world is currently experiencing an unprecedented level of upheaval. Significant changes, driven predominantly by the Secretary of State, Michael Gove, are affecting all aspects of educational provision: school structures, inspection, examinations, curriculum, teacher training, local authorities, and universities. This has provoked a flood of publications, articles, and books, mainly written by former educational experts (retired inspectors, chief education officers, teacher trainers, and researchers) and the new experts (political think tanks). This torrent of publications is asking the same fundamental question: what is the purpose of education in the twenty-first century and in a rapidly changing world?

Henry Morris was asking similar questions nearly a century ago. The five main themes of his thinking were:

- opportunities for a good education should not depend on where you happen to be born nor on the social class to which you belong
- education is not just something that happens to you in schools between defined ages but is a journey throughout life ('from cradle to grave')
- the whole community is involved in education so the buildings provided by the state should be available to, and provide a service for, the community throughout the day and at weekends
- the buildings in which community education is provided should be attractive and well designed
- a good education is not confined to traditional academic disciplines but should embrace the arts and culture in their widest sense; the dispute between vocational and non-vocational education is a false dichotomy.

When Morris became Chief Education Officer in Cambridgeshire in 1924, he found a county where educational levels were low, where the disparity between rural and urban achievement was massive, and where educational aspiration was class based. On a practical level he observed that many of the buildings in which the rural poor were educated were in a very poor condition. His famous *Memorandum of 1925 (The Village College: Being a memorandum on the provision of educational and social facilities for the countryside, with special reference to Cambridgeshire)* is rightly described by David Rooney as 'one of the most significant and remarkable documents in English education in the 20<sup>th</sup> century' (16).

Rooney, himself a former Village College Warden, goes on to recount with admirable clarity and frankness the battles that Morris had to fight to implement his vision of the Village College as the focal point of community life. Not the least of his opponents were local councillors whose aim in life appeared to be to keep taxes low and spend as little as possible on education. Morris had to draw on all his personal skills (energy, commitment, bloody-mindedness), his contacts with influential friends, and his capacity to raise extra funds from charities and wealthy individuals.

By October 1930 Sawston Village College was ready and Morris managed to persuade the Prince of Wales, the future Edward VIII, to perform the opening ceremony, although it is suggested that he came by mistake, thinking he was opening a new college of the prestigious University!

Rooney goes on to recount how Morris gradually extended the Village College concept in the ring of communities round Cambridge, ensuring that each one was designed appropriately in its particular context and met the needs of the particular communities.

His influence was not confined to Cambridgeshire. This was a time when it was possible for a Chief Education Officer to be a powerful and influential individual and several attempted to replicate his ideals in other counties, though not always following exactly the same model. In post-war Britain Morris worked with the Ministry of Education in planning for education in the New Towns, not always successfully.

Rooney's biography is rightly positive about the outstanding contribution made to the educational thinking of the twentieth century by Henry Morris but he is also frank about Morris's limitations. He was clearly not an easy person to deal with. He had an intellectual attitude which irritated practical people, and he was 'over-bearing, self-righteous and eccentric' (Rée, 1973: 114). He had a close circle of friends who greatly admired him and enjoyed his company in Cambridge but he was not a person who was always easy to get on with. His personal life too was a source of some tension as he was openly homosexual at a time when society was a good deal less tolerant than it is today. His later years were unhappy through loneliness and increasing dementia.

The book's final chapter, entitled 'The enduring struggle for community education', puts the work and achievements of Henry Morris into perspective and brings us back to the timeliness of this publication.

Much, but not all, of what is happening today would infuriate Henry Morris. He would probably admire the drive to get wider educational involvement from charities, wealthy individuals, and private funding. He might even acknowledge that some of the characteristics of the present Secretary of State (highly focused determination to follow a specific ideology, unwillingness to listen to other alternatives, hostility to the role of local councillors) are not dissimilar to his own.

On the other hand, he would deplore the marginalization of the arts and cultural aspects of the curriculum and would be critical of the government's failure to bring vocational and non-vocational subjects into a coordinated system. He would criticize the reduced expenditure on school buildings and the recourse to the factory-built model. He would question whether the government is doing enough to overcome the educational handicap of family and financial disadvantage. As for the role of the head teacher, whereas he considered the Village College Warden to be a 'philosopher king' with a wider leadership responsibility to the whole community, the prevailing perception is of the head as the super manager, raising standards by implementing central government diktat and dancing to the tune of a repressive inspection regime.

What would Morris think of the dismantling of the local authority role? Although he did not always find local councillors helpful and compliant, given his commitment to the school serving the community he would probably prefer to see local democratic involvement rather than a system based on competition and market forces.

This book should be read widely, not just because it is a fitting tribute to a great if controversial educationalist, but because it raises challenging issues and aspirations which should inform the thinking of all political parties as they prepare their election manifestos.

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## Reference

Rée, H. (1973) *Educator Extraordinary: The life and achievement of Henry Morris*. London: Longman.