

Books

SUMMERHILL, by
A. S. Neill. Penguin, 336pp.,
\$1.20.

**RISINGHILL: DEATH OF A
COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL**,
by Leila Berg. Penguin,
287 pp., \$1.00.

TO ANYONE even vaguely interested in education, the appearance of A. S. Neill's *Summerhill* must seem long overdue. The original Gollancz hardback edition (1962) contained a foreword by Erich Fromm which is omitted here, but it was important more as a comment on Neill the man than as a prelude to the ideas which motivate him.

Essentially, *Summerhill* is a selection (made by Neill himself) from four of his previous nine books, and as such, can be safely regarded as a distillation of the ideas which he began to articulate in 1926, just five years after the founding of Summerhill. In this sense, *Summerhill* is a necessary book, for no other English educational experiment of this century has been so popularly discussed or so widely condemned, largely from a basis of ignorance and misinformation.

Some readers may be turned away by the rather dated Freudian concepts which are so liberally sprinkled throughout the book. They need not be, for it remains an important document that overrides the need for special pleading.

Summerhill revolves around the concept of "self-regulation" and its natural adjunct, the "free child". Neill is explicit in his definition:

"Self-regulation means the right . . . to live freely, without outside authority in things psychic and somatic . . . I believe that to impose anything by authority is wrong. The child should not do anything until he comes to the opinion — his own opinion — that it should be done."

Neill's object, of course, is to produce a happy child; one free of the neuroses and hang-ups he sees as the inherent product of any authoritarian system, however mild. The theory is laudable, and few could disagree with it. The practice, however, would seem to raise a few problems.

The first problem is an educational one. "Summerhill is a difficult place in which to study". The words are Neill's, and although he admits this, he offers no viable solution. To the child who genuinely chooses the self-discipline necessary for academic study, a barrier is raised. Rather, Neill skips away from the problem, citing the special case:

"Learning is important — but not to everyone. Nijinsky could not pass his school exams . . . and he could not enter the State Ballet without passing those exams . . . they faked an exam for him, giving him the answers with the papers — so a biography says. What a loss to the world if Nijinsky had had really to pass those exams."

The objection is not to the "faked exam" but to the fact that Neill concedes a bias in favour of creative activity. While admitting a need for concessions to aid creativity, he fails to admit that concessions may be necessary to aid intellectual curiosity.

Equally important is the social objection which must be made, for no matter how important Summerhill has become as an educational experiment, it cannot in any sense be regarded as a social one. To his credit, Neill admits this:

"When we opened the school, the difficulties were especially grave. We

could only take children from the upper and middle classes because we had to make ends meet . . . we have never been able to take the children of the very poor. That is a pity, for we have had to confine our study to only the children of the middle class."

The ramifications of this problem are self-evident and while they cannot be ignored, they do not necessarily detract from the value of the Summerhill concept. Neill's successes can help ameliorate the needless authoritarianisms of many of our schools; his failures (and their admissions) can remind us that idealism need not be allied with zealotry.

Leila Berg's *Risinghill*, by contrast, is a fine example of what could have been a major piece of social criticism, spoiled by undue partisanship and at times, ideological bigotry.

Risinghill is the story of the rise and fall of a new comprehensive school and of its headmaster, W. M. Duane. A friend and admirer of A. S. Neill, Duane attempted to apply some of his non-authoritarian principles to a school within the London County Council system. *Risinghill* came into being in 1960. In 1965 it was closed in the face of documented evidence which proved that Duane had not only raised the academic standards of the school, but had also lowered the number of students on police probation from ninety-eight to nine.

These issues are clear. Clear also is the fact that Duane needed a champion. Leila Berg obviously had the energy and the dedication to fill such a role. She was also wise enough to realise that the issues which caused the *Risinghill* controversy were not polarised around the refusal of W. M. Duane to use corporal punishment:

"Is it not worth underlining that the inspector who denounced the school

the first time was a man who was interested in 'grammar-school material' and a man who approved of corporal punishment, and that the inspector who denounced it the second time was a man who was opposed to comprehensive schools and to all large schools?"

Although assured otherwise when offered the job at *Risinghill*, Duane entered a school which was doomed from its beginnings. Here the picture becomes cloudy. This is due in part to the difficulty in getting adequate information from the L.C.C., but Mrs. Berg must take a large amount of the blame. The extent to which the L.C.C. was determined to close *Risinghill* in spite of, rather than because of Duane, is not easy to ascertain, but Mrs. Berg obscures the issue by using the book to pillory anyone who does not agree with her very definite views on authoritarianism. Hence all "authoritarian" teachers are lumped together and charged with the same fault:

"Since the authoritarian teachers were horrified at the idea of going into the English children's homes, they were scarcely likely to visit the immigrants."

No exceptions? Apparently not, and the implication that "authoritarian" equals "bigoted" is left to stand. Nor is the example an isolated instance. When a school governor laments that the *Risinghill* children don't behave like those in Hampstead, Leila Berg parenthetically comments "This cry, slightly varied, was to be passed like a sad bean-bag from one authoritarian socialist to another". Socialist equals authoritarian?

Just as damaging to *Risinghill* as a valid document are the credibility problems. When marshalling evidence in favour of her own principles, Mrs. Berg is careful to denote time and place. When the need arises, however, she will resort to gossip and innuendo:

"Intriguingly (pun?), some of the most rigid authoritarians, the most bitter opponents of Mr. Duane were Communists. Roughly speaking, within the district, English Communists tended to oppose Mr. Duane, while foreign Communists (by which I do not mean Russian or Chinese; I never saw a Russian or Chinese in Islington) warmly supported him. But those Communists who opposed him did so in a much more organised way than any other of his opponents bar the L.C.C."

There is no question of citing dates or places here, just a blanket accusation which Leila Berg's needs seem to demand.

Risinghill school *was* closed. Education suffered, the community suffered, W. M. Duane suffered and the children suffered, but what could have been a needed indictment and a handbook to prevent its recurrence is marred by authorial intrusion. Unlike Jonathan Kozol's *Death at an Early Age* (an objective yet human analysis of the segregated schools in Boston) Mrs. Berg's book fails because her polemics dominate the analysis.

GRANT MCGREGOR.

THE MAKING OF THE ENGLISH WORKING CLASSES, by E. P. Thompson. Penguin, 958pp., \$3.05.

THE PERIOD between 1780 and 1832 seemed to have been saturated with studies some years before the first publication of Thompson's book in 1963. So much takes place that it is reasonable to see this epoch as more influential than any other in the shaping of modern English history: the Industrial Revolution, the French wars, Romanticism, the French Revolution, Utilitarianism, the organisation of an independent America and the years leading up to the Reform Bill,

Marx, Toynbee, the Webbs, the Hammonds, Dr. Dorothy George, Clapham, Bryant, Hobsbawm, Rogers, Ashton, Hayek and many more have been fatally attracted and in many cases equally fatally betrayed.

Being a period in which the modern class struggle was becoming clearly defined — the rise of the working classes, the consolidation of middle class power — it is especially open to biased interpretation. On one hand, the early historians who were also social reformers, Thorold Rogers, Toynbee and the Hammonds for instance, allowed their sympathy for the oppressed elements of the working classes to distort their historical perspective. On the other hand, there are historians like Professor Ashton whose more recent works read suspiciously like special pleading, who suggest that a certain amount of oppression is inevitable and justifiable and who go out of their way to defend the virtues of middle class capitalism. Somewhere off on a limb of his own is Arthur Bryant. His three books on the years between 1792 and 1822 are impressionistic, occasionally brilliant works, with a distinct propagandist intention. Patriotism, gentlemanship, sterling British soldiery, beef and John Bull; he does not evade the problem of working class suffering but he minimises it. His belief in British character, which in some ways is reminiscent of Thomas Arnold, leads him into suggesting that the legacy of the past has been well fulfilled in the future, that everything turned out for the best.

This is not Thompson's view, and while asking for complete objectivity from a historian is asking too much, it is necessary to point out the limitation of his bias. There is a slight but persistent undertone of anger. The working classes, Thompson maintains rightly, have been betrayed. In dealing with the early history of Radicalism he is necessarily dealing with oppres-