Keswick Hall College of Education: Geography Teacher Training 1947-1997
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GEOGRAPHY_TEACHER-TRAINING IN NORFOLK, 1947 - 1997

Some memories from David R. Wright (Keswick Hall 1969-81; UEA 1981-94)

Before the memory plays any more tricks on me, I thought I'd attempt a first draft of the long, unfinished, unsung story of training Geography teachers in Norfolk. I'll omit the first 110 years or so from 1839. Everything is open for correction, addition and deletion.... I hope that this account will encourage former students to record their own memories - which may well be much more interesting.....

From 1947 onwards, Gwen Gibbons was "the" Geographer at Norwich Training College, then at the re-named Keswick Hall College of Education. I only know 1% of her work, which makes for admirable brevity but regrettable lack of detail. She was highly regarded throughout East Anglia, and her loyal former students still sent her Christmas cards every year. She retired in 1968, thus creating a vacancy that I filled in 1969, as the fourth Geographer in a strong Geography department. I used to wonder how she ever coped as the only Geographer - little did I realise that just 12 years later, from 1981 onwards, I was to experience the same thing: being the ONLY Geog-ed person.

The 'Cert. Ed' course was a teacher-training course, in which student-teachers specialised in one subject. Geography was a popular choice, and Norwich was a popular location. Thus there was considerable competition to be admitted. There were infant, junior and junior-secondary courses. The "J-Sec" course ostensibly offered "9 to 13", but in practice was used by students who wished to teach in Secondary schools. It offered something no longer available: invaluable experience of the enthusiasm and 'quickness' of the 7 - 11 age-group as well as experience of working with teenagers.

Thanks to Gwen, the course was particularly strong on local studies (30 years before the National Curriculum!), but it also ranged widely and gave a coherent view of Geography as a varied, interesting and worthwhile subject of study. Gwen also encouraged students to see the contribution of geography to pupils' social and moral education - 30 years before school inspections required this.

In the early 1960s, Gwen was one of the willing volunteers on the great Land Use Survey of the UK - and her name is recorded on the maps. Her account of land use in a 200 square km area of South Norfolk, published in the booklet entitled "Panorama", is a masterpiece of clarity, brevity, accuracy - and sheer hard work: Geographical writing at its best. But Gwen preferred interacting with real people and helping students - so her range of published writing is small.

In the Colleges of Education, the '60s were not the 'Swinging Sixties' but the "Growing Sixties" - a massive growth of numbers, plus the move from a 2-year course to a 3-year course, plus the start of a PGCE course. Into this context of growth, Tony Cartwright arrived in 1962, to be the second Geographer. As a 'CNS' schoolteacher and co-author of an innovative textbook, "The Norfolk we live in" (Jarrolds 1958), he was already well-known in Norfolk education. He became Head of Department when Gwen retired in 1968. In 1966, Frank Beesley joined the
department. He was a deputy head teacher from Notts. and co-author of “Practical Geography” - a brilliant blend of Geography and what we now call ‘Design Technology’ in schools. Mrs. Mali Smith joined the growing department in 1967 as a part-time lecturer, and full-time from 1968, having previously taught in Lichfield and Wisbech. The Geography staff had grown from 1 to 4, in 7 years.

In the 1960s and early 70s, each lecturer took charge of one-year-group and ‘saw it through’ from start to finish. Over thirty years later, the students still say “I was one of Gwen’s students...”. The excellent one-day field study visits undertaken in Norfolk still live on as clear memories: the Coast; the Brecks; the Fens; the Broads; the urban studies in Norwich, Yarmouth and Thetford. There were fieldweeks in other regions too: Lake District, Peak District, North Yorks Moors, South Wales, Birmingham, Sheffield: meet any Keswick Hall Geographer, and they’ll soon be regaling you with anecdotes from these fieldweeks. We ventured further afield too: Iceland and North Africa. Several unbelievable stories about these expeditions are actually true.....

Keswick Geographers do not stop when they retire..... After her retirement, Gwen pursued her fascination for Geography in every way she could. For over 25 years, she travelled widely, often staying with ex-students. For many years she was Chairperson and leading light in the Norfolk branch of the Geographical Association. When invited in the 1970s to be President for a year, her immediate reaction was “Oh - I could never manage a Presidential Address!” But, of course, she did an excellent address, comparing Spain in the 1930s with the 1970s - from her own personal experience. She continued to attend the Norfolk GA up to 1997. And she was present at a ‘30 years on’ gathering of ‘her’ Geographers in the Summer of 1997. Only three months later, many of them came to her funeral.

It’s difficult to separate objective facts about the 1970s from subjective memories - but two outside assessments from the mid-1970s may help. First, our external examiner (Rex Walford) wrote in his report, “It must be one of the best departments of its kind in the country”. And in a Geographical Magazine article discussing the contribution of Colleges of Education to the development of Geographical education in the UK, Keswick Hall was one of only two colleges to get TWO mentions. The ‘Advanced Mains’ course stretched the best students on the Certificate Course, and a few students went on to do a fourth year at Cambridge University, and gain a BEd. In 1994, at a gathering of the “Sept 1969 arrivals” to celebrate “25 years on”, no fewer than 14 of the 23 Geographers of that year arrived. Several had travelled hundreds of miles to do so. Such nice people! Of course, the history should be about the students more than the lecturers: over to you.......
In the early 1970s, we developed a B.Ed. that was a one-year “add on” to the three year Certificate course, and some excellent students from other Colleges of Education in the region joined the college for a year. This course included a Geography in Education unit, which helped students and staff to think through what the teaching of Geography was all about. Mali Smith developed urban geography; Tony Cartwright rural and environmental themes; David Allison ‘Quaternary Studies’, and David Wright ‘Development Studies’. Jill Wright and Haydn Perrett fulfilled short-term contracts during study leaves.

In 1976, Tony Cartwright became Co-Director of the new four-year B.Ed. course; at the same time the cuts began to bite. The next 20 years saw a succession of cuts and more cuts. By 1976, subject departments had lost the word “department”; thus David Wright became ‘Head of Geography’, with no extra pay. Numbers of students were about to shrink, along with numbers of staff. Those who stayed had to shoulder new responsibilities - for example, the Middle Years PGCE was led by Mali Smith in one year.

The “4-year B.Ed” was “primary only” - no more were there any “J-Secs”. Students opted for units on a year-by-year basis, and many students chose a different subject each year. Geography continued to survive - even, perhaps, to thrive in a few respects, though by 1980 we had scarcely-viable numbers for some of the Geography units in the B.Ed. degree. There were some excellent students on both the B.Ed. and the PGCE courses. We helped them to develop a geography that was interesting, relevant and enjoyable to their pupils. This is a subjective judgment - but who can be totally objective about such things? They are too close to the heart for a totally rational analysis.

The long-delayed merger with UEA in 1981 came with “bargain offers” that were better than anything before or since. Both Tony and Mali received the ‘Crombie’ award, and later on Tony moved to Cornwall and Mali to Wales. Tony died in 2000.

So, from 1981, Geog-ed was back to “one person” - as in the 1950s. The B.Ed. was quickly phased out. The new BA(Ed) had virtually no recognisable “Teaching of Geography” in it, but there was an interesting “Landscape and Land Use” unit taught jointly with the Historians. The BA(Ed) died within a few years, so the primary and secondary PGCE courses rapidly became the dominant occupation, along with in-service and MA work.

The PGCE had bright spots - despite massive time pressures. The students were of high calibre, and almost all enjoyed the experience of becoming a teacher. The names of students of some of these years are recorded for their part in curriculum development in Geography - for example, in articles on “Teaching about the Greenhouse Effect” in the Times Ed. Supp. (1989); on “Sexism in Geography” (1985) and on “Idealism in Geography” (1994), both in ‘Teaching Geography’. In all, there are over 50 articles on the teaching of Geography which originate in Norfolk; most have direct links to working with geography student-teachers.
The ‘low’ spots in the 1980s were largely produced by a climate of cuts and of negative criticisms of schools and of teacher-training. The low spots included leaving the excellent Geography rooms at Keswick Hall in 1984 for cramped breeze-blocks at UEA. Another ‘low spot’ was a term’s sick leave in 1988 following a cancer operation.

It is easy to overemphasise the bad things; there were lots of good things, too. Even the stress of ‘leading’ the Secondary PGCE for over two years had many positive moments. Schools were happy to have our students, and glad to recruit them when a vacancy arose. Helping students to become good teachers had more joys than frustrations. Giving papers at conferences in Germany, Italy, Mexico and Australia, as well as several papers to UK conferences added to the variety. Overall, the cuts and traumas of the 1980s and early 1990s were survived, and the bright spots were greater than the low spots.

In 1994 a “bargain offer” was too good to resist, especially as it coincided with opportunities for becoming a school inspector and developing Geographical writing further. 25 years in teacher-training is a fair chunk of a life.

It was a great joy to find that the person appointed in 1994 was a student of Gwen Gibbons from the 1960s. Jeff Battersby was appointed for 3 years with leave of absence from his 11-16 school in Cambridge. He was already co-author of attractive school textbooks. Only a year after his appointment, he was put in charge of the whole PGCE Secondary Course for a year - a massive challenge, with Ofsted et al breathing down UEA’s neck. He not only coped well with this, but also brought out a book on the teaching of Geography 11-14 - a remarkable achievement…..all the time commuting from Cambridge, too! He also maintained the strong tradition of pastoral care of student-teachers: time-consuming, but one of the most valued (even if least known) aspects of our work. In 1997 he gained a permanent post, and became President of the Norfolk branch of the Geographical Association for a year: a successor to Gwen Gibbons, Tony Cartwright and David Wright - but Jeff achieved the honour in a tenth of the time…!

There will never be an end to critics of teacher-training, because few realise how many challenges and conflicting demands teachers face in every lesson. We have not escaped criticism, but much of it has been positive. The schools have (mostly) welcomed our student-teachers; the student-teachers have (mostly) welcomed the help we have tried to give. And it is good to realise that Ofsted’s ‘new’ emphasis on “spiritual and moral” education has been present for many decades in Norfolk.

This history is an unsung history, because it is all for the sake of the children and teenagers, and their parents, so the purpose is indirect. Ultimately it’s to do with ‘service’, in the positive sense of serving others. The Keswick Hall motto SERVIRE EST REGNARE is a concept that could still enlighten all education, just as it has enlightened Norfolk’s teacher-trainers.
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