



LOSS of our TRADITIONAL NATURE CONNECTION

by Roger Orgill, MBE

This is the challenge for our sector as a multitude of factors are combining to accelerate the losing of the nature connection particularly in the lives of children and young people.

Prompted by the Horizons article, “Wheel of the Year Native Traditions of our Islands”, I offer the following contribution which supports awareness of this tradition and the growing counter culture of technology and the virtual world.

The ‘Wheel’ provides a basis for celebration and understanding. Above all it is a tradition, indeed an indigenous inheritance, which every child deserves to be aware of. Starting in Kindergarten, seasons and traditions feature in a variety of ways and practices through middle and into upper school years.

This – ‘wheel of change’ is recognised and celebrated in the world movement of Steiner Waldorf Education and by many teachers.

The importance of continuing cultivation of this inheritance is paramount, as the distraction or obsession with techno screen use, expanding exponentially, together with computer gaming addiction are combining to removing children from the world of the natural to the world of the indoors and virtual.

The 2005 US best seller Richard Louv's, 'Last Child in the Woods': Saving our Children from Nature-deficit Disorder' was a timely and persuasive book which drew attention to the changing nature of society and the modern day child's environment,

"A whole generation of today's children the pleasures of free-range childhood are missing, their indoor habits contributing to epidemic obesity, attention disorder, isolation and childhood depression"

Or as Theodore Roszak put it:

"No separation is more pervasive in this Age of Anxiety than our disconnection from the natural world".

The changing environment and historic transition from largely rural to urban living and impact on health and wellbeing generally, is perhaps identified and articulated first by Dr G.M.Trevelyan, O.M. President of the YHA 1930-'50 who stated,

"There is nothing of greater importance to our civilisation than the love of nature and the ability to indulge and develop it on holiday"

He went on to say:

"Our ancestors, for countless ages, lived and worked in the country, influenced in their everyday life, some consciously, others unconsciously, by surrounding scenes, by country sights and sounds. That was what inspired our higher literature and poetry, and the commoner songs and music of Elizabethan and other periods, and gave spiritual force to their religious and intellectual activities. More generally speaking, the presence of nature reconciled man to his life.

The modern Englishman, though he is taught more in school and reads and hears more news than his forefathers, lacks something which they had in all ages past.

The physiological ailments of our time, our discontent and failure to accept and enjoy life, are largely due to this imprisonment of our population in the cities far from all natural sight and sounds.

If man has been a country dweller for hundreds of thousands of years, he cannot in a single century, be cut off from nature without suffering harm"

More recently something rather alarmingly appears in 'Landmarks' a recent book by Robert Macfarlane in which he draws attention to a new edition of the Junior Oxford Dictionary and the culling of words associated with nature and substitution of others. Macfarlane stated that 'under pressure' Oxford University Press revealed a list of the entries it no longer felt to be relevant to modern-day childhood!

The deletion included; acorn, adder, ash, beech, bluebell, buttercup, catkin, conker, cowslip, cygnet, dandelion, fern, hazel, heather, heron, ivy, kingfisher, lark, mistletoe, nectar, newt, otter, pasture and willow.

New words included were; attachment, block-graph, blog, broadband, bullet-point, celebrity, chatroom, committee, cut-and-paste, MP3player, and voicemail.

The author goes on to say:

"while being a significant symptom of the increasingly simulated life we live, children are now (and valuably) adept

ecologists of the technoscape, with numerous terms for file types but few for different trees and creatures. For blackberry read Black Berry. The basic literacy of landscape is falling away up and down the ages. A common language - a language of the commons- is getting rarer. And what is lost along with this literacy is something precious: a kind of word magic, the power that certain terms possess to enchant our relations with nature and place".

In an earlier age of 'Outdoor Education', literacy and word magic were found in what young people wrote in diaries to capture their observations and feelings from the outdoor experience. Understandably this was something more easily achieved when children were in a residential situation, a practice fostered by the then HMI Outdoor Education Adviser's Panel. Capturing feelings and observation also featured in the programmes of Acclimatisation introduced to this country Steve Van Maitre.

David Attenborough and Professor Brian Cox have done much to create and develop a sense of wonderment and awe of both nature and the universe, something I sense we might be losing in the skills and professionalism of outdoor learning today.

It is now more generally accepted that we are not apart from but rather part of nature or as Evelyn Nolt rightly stated in 'The Glory which is Earth',

*Man, tread softly on the Earth
What looks like dust
Is also stuff of which galaxies are made.
The green of Earth's great trees and simple grasses
Is the same music played in red
Throughout our trunks and limbs. ■*

References:

- Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship Ltd. www.steinerwaldorf.org
- Youth Hostel Story, Oliver Coburn. National Council of Social Services. (1950)
- Landmarks by Robert Macfarlane. Penguin Random House UK (20015)



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Roger Orgill. For over 40 years Roger has been active in the field of outdoor education, adventure and recreation training, serving for some years as Chief Instructor at Plas y Brenin. He chaired the National Association for Outdoor Education 1980-90 and later helped establish and chair the Foundation for Outdoor Adventure while contributing to the emergence of IoL. Acting as Director of Adventure Activities for the Sports Council's Action Sport programme developing urban-based adventure opportunities, a collaborative partnership venture with other agencies in urban regeneration programmes, he received an

MBE in 1990 for services to outdoor education.

Taking early retirement in 1996 as Sports Council's head of Countryside and Water recreation, he served on many government working parties and acted in an advisory role to the youth service and, on retirement was invited to serve on the board of the New Opportunities Fund of the National Lottery responsible for Adventure Sports. He was until very recently a Trustee of the NGO -World Youth Service and Enterprise and the Global News Education Trust, the charitable arm of the newspaper Positive News – now a Co-operative. He acted as chair of a Steiner Waldorf School which later became the first state funded – Steiner Academy Hereford with which he retains a close link.

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