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A strange angel: William Norman Illingworth [1902–1980] and Sangreal School – towards a history of conservative alternative schools in 20th-century Britain

David Limond
School of Education, Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland

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Abstract

Purpose – This work concerns William Norman Illingworth [1902–1980]. Disillusioned with teaching in conventional schools and inspired by Rudolf Steiner [1861–1925] he founded Sangreal School, in 1947, and operated this until the early 1970s. Sangreal was what I describe as a "conservative alternative school", employing methods and pursuing goals not found in most British schools of the period but, unlike avowedly progressive establishments, guided by socially conservative principles. The purposes of the work are both to rescue his/Sangreal's story from obscurity and to encourage research to establish if other such schools have existed and, if so, to describe and analyse them in an effort to give the category conservative alternative school the recognition it properly deserves.

Design/methodology/approach – The method is a combination of life history/biography and case study of a specific school.

Findings – The story is interesting in its own terms and points to the existence of a hitherto unnoticed category in history of education.

Research limitations/implications – This work may lead to the proper recognition of a neglected category.

Originality/value – This work deals with a school hitherto unknown to most people and may lead to the recognition of a new category.

Keywords Alternative schools, Britain, Conservatism, Progressivism, Sangreal School, Steiner/Waldorf, 20th century

Paper type Research paper

> An Ideal [sic] school would be a reflection and foretaste of heaven; but a dull middle-aged teacher is a strange token for an angel, and uncultivated boys make a sadly inglorious company of apostles (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 114p). [1]

Introduction

Sometimes, a story about a school is interesting in its own terms. It need not be interesting because the school illustrates or represents anything. It need not be interesting because the operation of the school led to anything. It need not be interesting because the school's history contradicts or confirms some theory or other. To be interesting a school does not need to be, or have been, large. It does not need to be, or have been, famous. It simply needs to be interesting.

I am grateful to the librarians and archivists of the Brotherton Library, University of Leeds, those of Trinity College, Dublin, where I obtained a rare copy of Illingworth, 1957/1982 and to anonymous referees for encouraging me to write a more focused work.

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I submit that the story of the Sangreal School, operated between 1947 and 1971 by William Norman Illingworth [1902–1980] in the northern English cathedral city of Durham is interesting in its own terms. It is interesting because he was interesting; a curious amalgam (I refer here to the man but the same could be said of the school) of the radical and the reactionary, even the sublime and the ridiculous.

That being said, the Sangreal/Illingworth story may also be interesting for pointing to the existence of a category or type of school hitherto largely unnoticed in British educational history (and perhaps the educational history of other countries). This category is one, for reasons to which I return below, I call the "conservative alternative school". In the course of the work that follows I attempt these things: first, I give an outline, as briefly as possible, of the salient features of the life of William Norman Illingworth; then, although it is rather difficult to disentangle the two because his school was so much an extension of the man and he, in turn, embodied it, I describe/analyse the operation of Sangreal School.

Along the way, taking an approach that is not strictly linear or chronological, I explore the anthroposophical beliefs of Rudolf Steiner [1861–1925] as these were central to Illingworth's work. I make the case that Sangreal was not, in any strict or narrow sense, a Steinerist school, any more than it was progressive, a slippery term or concept to the meaning of which I also return below. Finally, I consider whether a new label may be necessary for a school such as Sangreal and examine the possibility of there having been others like it.

Book, school, man

Sangreal School: Nine Years, 1947–1956 (Illingworth, 1957/1982) was clumsily produced: photocopied and crudely bound, more akin to a student's thesis than a book in appearance. It contained typewritten manuscripts, apparently originally issued in 1957 but added to in subsequent years, posthumously compiled by an editor representing a committee of the author's associates. A chance encounter with that book is where my interest in the writer and his strange school began [2].

Birth, youth and schooling

Illingworth was born in Leeds, an industrial city in northern England, on 23 June 1902, to a father described on his son's birth certificate as a grocer and his wife, their home being in the Potternewton district, then a prosperous part of the city (Grady, 2011, p. 21). His family was financially comfortable and he attended the fee-paying Leeds Modern School, where he obtained various academic and other awards, although he later dismissed these as "empty honours" (Papers of William Norman Illingworth, Brotherton Library, Special Collections Department [BLSCD], Illingworth, 1927) [3].

Christianity bulked large in his childhood and it was to church-going he attributed his first involvement in education, saying "I was fourteen when I first became a teacher. I bought a book on kindergarten teaching and worked in a Sunday-school" (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 106).

University

He left few other details of his childhood (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 114p) but after leaving school he undertook a diploma in education at Leeds University in 1923–1924. Prior to that he had studied history at Leeds, taking first a bachelor's and then a master's degree in this subject (University of Leeds, 1966, p. 228). He later mooted the possibility of attempting a master's degree in education [MEd], but did not do so, perhaps dissuaded by the academic to whom he confessed his interest, John Strong [1868–1945], saying "[t]he subject of [the proposed] . . . thesis as expressed by the title does not appear to be suitable for the MEd degree" (Strong, 1928).

Teaching practice and early jobs

For the purposes of his diploma he undertook teaching practice in the all-boys Leeds Central High School [CHS]. He made copious notes of his teaching plans, keeping a lesson journal for 1923–1924. This is quite revealing of the concerns that would inform his career and his life as a whole. For example, he could be laceratingly self-critical. His teaching, he once concluded, showed that he "had little confidence and ability" (Illingworth, 1923–1924a, p. 16). And he could also be highly critical of those who did not live up to standards he set for them. This is shown in two other documents.

Between March and May 1924 he produced a damning 10-page general memorandum, apparently intended for staff in the university's Department of Education (Illingworth, 1924a), on CHS and a more detailed outline of history teaching there (Illingworth, 1924b). In the former he set out an ideal of education he was later to try realising at Sangreal, insisting that "[a] secondary school . . . [must be] a place with a continuous and high-toned communal life"; he was convinced that CHS had failed to achieve such a high tone of communal life, being, instead, an establishment at which "mercenary" aims, specifically "gaining a [university] scholarship with the ulterior motive of being enabled to earn a living" dominated (Illingworth, 1924a, pp. 1 and 9, respectively). But as morally and intellectually high-minded as such observations might seem, there was a disquieting note on what he considered a special challenge at CHS, its large number of Jewish pupils, Leeds having had an appreciable Jewish community since the late 19th century (Appell, 2019). These pupils, he said, sapped the school's intellectual and cultural life as any Jewish pupil, he claimed, was "on English soil only as a wanderer", which had a detrimental effect on cohesion in the CHS (Illingworth, 1924a, p. 2). Such views were hardly uncommon in Britain in the 1920s and 1930s (compare a well-known author writing in 1933: "[o]ne could never tell whether a Jew was being a citizen or . . . just a Jew", Wells, 2005, p. 397), and Illingworth evidently had all the prejudices in the matter common to his class and culture. This, then, is our first encounter with the flawed figure whom Illingworth was in practice, a figure whom I do not intend here to sanitise, but of whom I want to give as full a picture as circumstances permit. However, obnoxious as they were and are, there is no evidence that he cleaved to such anti-Semitic views lifelong, although the possibility that he did remains but if I thought so, while I would still have written about him, I would have written something markedly different.

A mandatory spell in an elementary school when he was a student both exposed him to a world of which he had hitherto been largely unaware and gave a glimpse of the shape his early working life would actually take. He later wrote "[o]n Monday, June 16 [1924], I made the acquaintance, for the first time in my life, of the inside of an elementary school". So shocked was he, he went on that he gave serious thought to walking out at once (Illingworth, 1923–1924b, pp. 92–93). This was the start of three weeks confronting poverty, lack of hygiene, illiteracy and rowdiness in one of the more impoverished parts of Leeds. Fate determined it would not be his last.

After the completion of his teaching diploma, although armed with letters of reference from academics who had taught him (for example: Dainton, 1923; Welpton, 1924), he could not secure work as a secondary history teacher. Instead, he found himself teaching in a series of elementary schools. The years following were turbulent. He moved, not always willingly, from school to school, frequently clashing with heads and other teachers and often recording his dissatisfaction with the pupils whom he had to teach. In some pages he kept from the official logbook he was required to complete in one school he wrote chidingly of "the necessity of reforming the habits and general discipline of the class", adding "[t]he boys are not sullen or ill-natured; but disobedient and slack through carelessness and thoughtlessness . . . [they] are free, unrestrained and haphazard . . . [and] untidy" (Illingworth, 1924c, p. 37). And we can infer the substance of other complaints he made about his circumstances from replies he received to letters he sent to the head of the CHS, where, despite the damning memoranda he had written, he appears to have been happy, and in which he still hoped to be employed if a vacancy arose.

Specifically, he bemoaned his circumstances and complained of insanitary conditions in elementary schools, his pupils' low intelligence and lack of interest in learning (for example: Parsons, 1924a, b; extracts from a diary he kept at the time runs along similar lines: Illingworth, 1925). However, eventually, he found a better job outside, moving to Birkenhead, Merseyside, in north-west England in 1927, where he was more content (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 113).

Illingworth in Durham before Sangreal

But Illingworth was ambitious to be more than a classroom teacher and so in 1932 he arrived in Durham, a picturesque northern city, to serve as head of the then newly founded Durham City Boys Senior School. However, the "schemes and good intentions" (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 108) he reported himself as having on his arrival quickly began to fall foul of what he considered a pernicious combination of malign influences. These influences included parents' and pupils' indifference, official intransigence and lack of ambition on the part of the many teachers in Durham who proved to be largely akin to those whom he had known already in Leeds (Illingworth, 1957/1982, pp. 108–114). These he described as being "not what I would consider free, in their thought, feelings or work . . . mere employees, suffering from a slave mentality [original emphasis]" (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 106). During his time in Durham he saw himself as locked in a struggle to avoid merely "looking after a so-called school whose only function evidently was to maintain the low cultural and social standards of an inferior caste" (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 108). He simultaneously fought a series of battles with educational officialdom over various issues, including a widespread tendency to condone premature school leaving/truancy to allow pupils to work in local businesses (Illingworth, 1957/1982, pp. 112–114).

Amidst these battles, struggling to bridge the contradictions between his ambitions and the realities of his work in Durham, he founded the special class that was Sangreal's precursor.

> [Circa 1934] I . . . devised a plan by which I hoped to preserve some of the standards I valued. I formed a special class, a tiny school, as it were, within the large one . . . [fostering] the close personal relationship that had always been my ideal (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 109).

The aim of the special class was to allow him to implement some of the ambitions being thwarted in his paid work and also to ensure that the standards to which he referred – moral, aesthetic and behavioural – were not compromised. Pupils participating in the special class, and their parents, would have entered into the implicit contract on which he thought education ought to be based: "[a] due sense of responsibility in the teacher [expressed as] . . . zeal and devotion . . . the parent and the older pupil . . . [giving] unstinting co-operation . . . [and] the younger pupil, loyal trust and obedience [in return]" (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 108). But by 1939 or 1940 he found himself "prostrated by a painful emotional experience" and seems to have turned to a combination of "strenuous thinking" and reading both poetry and "religious, historical and other literature" (Illingworth, 1957/1982, pp. 109–110).

In 1945 he found his way to Camphill in Aberdeenshire, Scotland (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 110). Camphill was founded in 1940 by Karl König [1902–1966], an Austrian medical doctor of Jewish descent who had also studied anthroposophy, after he fled rising European anti-Semitism. Illingworth was much impressed by what he saw there and by König personally, a fact suggestive of his having matured beyond his earlier anti-Semitic attitudes. Camphill specialised in the care and education of people with special educational needs, operating on similar lines to the Steiner-inspired Klinisch-Therapeutisches Institut and the Schloß Pilgrimshain (König, 2008; Jackson, 2009).

The relationship between establishments founded on the lines set down by König and Steiner schools, which I discuss in greater detail below, is not easily explained but it suffices to think of the former as part of an anthroposophical "family" of loosely associated institutions.

Illingworth's first visit to Camphill was not his last and what he saw there was the final piece in his decision to launch the Sangreal School, following anthroposophical principles.

Steiner, anthroposophy and schools

At this juncture, because they were so central to Illingworth's life and work, it may be useful to consider anthroposophy (literally: human wisdom). Rudolf Steiner, with whose works Illingworth first became familiar c. 1928 (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 107) was born in Austria, attending Vienna's Institute of Technology to study sciences. He was later to be editor of the works of Johann Goethe [1749–1832] and took a doctorate in philosophy in the University of Rostock in 1891 (Storr, 1996, pp. 65–82). In the 1890s he aligned himself with the Theosophical Society, founded in 1875 by Helena Blavatsky [neé Han von Rottenstern, 1831–1891]. Steiner split from Blavatsky in 1912, forming his own Anthroposophical Society (Steiner, 1988a). His beliefs (which have occasioned considerable controversy, though I do not touch on the causes of that in detail here; see: Dhondt *et al*., 2015; Lombard, 2003; Staudenmaier, 2008), are not easily summarised but, in essence, Steiner held that the human physical body is complemented by another, the etheric body, and that proper/natural development relies on carefully managing the complicated interactions between the aspects of the person that can be seen and those that cannot. This is coupled with a belief, derived from Blavatsky (Johnston, 2004), in evolution through reincarnation.

The implications of these beliefs (which belong to the category generally referred to as the esoteric or mystical, meaning that they are religious in character but not associated with any large church or other body and that they stress the existence of wisdom knowable by select initiates) are various, and Steiner's voluminous publications touched on numerous subjects, including education, although sending one's child[ren] to a Steiner school has never relied on embracing the totality of Steiner's views and some anecdotal evidence strongly suggests that most "Steiner parents" are not anthroposophists (Lombard, 2003).

Steiner was convinced that "[m]any false assumptions have entered modern culture, and these act most disastrously in education" (Steiner, 1996, p. 105) and committed follower and wealthy industrialist Emil Molt [1876–1936] invited him to establish what would be the first of the Waldorf schools, named after the factory to which it was attached, being intended to serve the children of employees. This opened in 1919 (Molt, 1991). The movement quickly spread through the world (Freunde der Erziehungskunst Rudolf Steiners, 2024; Stehlik, 2019). Armed with this basic knowledge of Steiner's ideas and the nature of the schools associated with those ideas, it is now possible to return to the discussion of Sangreal, understanding the latter in the light of the former.

Illingworth and the Sangreal School in practice

The core of the school in its first years was constituted by pupils who had previously been in the special class, he having resolved ("thirteen years late") "to turn . . . [the] Special Class into what it ought to have been from the first, a private school" (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 114). This he opened in the house he then rented at 47 South Street.

Illingworth described 47 as being in a part of Durham characterised by: "decayed respectability", facing an orchard and with a view of its cathedral. Various of its rooms were converted to hold classes, although he went on living there, but, he lamented, fees being charged on a means-tested scale, relying on parents' honesty (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 109), in very straitened financial circumstances (for example: Illingworth, 1957/1982, pp. 103–105).

Sangreal's pupils, who attended from the age of about seven and left by 16 at the latest, wore "dark blue blazers and grey shorts" (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 5) and were, in keeping with Illingworth's ideals, expected to maintain a high standard of manners and discipline at school, although he frequently despaired that they did not. Initially there were 10 pupils

attending daily (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 114). Sangreal was not boarding, though Illingworth would have preferred if it had been so, describing his ideal school as comparable to an ashram (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 114g). But he was, by the standards of the mid-20th century, unconventional in being unmarried in middle age and seemingly had no romantic/sexual entanglements.

Sangreal's numbers had increased by 1949 (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 15) but had fallen again by 1954 (Illingworth, 1957/1982, pp. 16 and 104). There was a risk of closure but the crisis of 1954–1955 was averted by a donation from a supporter (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 197). A further crisis in 1958–1959 was also avoided with a second injection of cash coming from a coalition of former pupils and parents (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 198). By 1956–1957 more than 30 pupils had attended the school.

While we lack precise details of pupils' numbers, we can speak with reasonable confidence of the daily life of Sangreal which Illingworth described at length, and religion, or perhaps it would be more apt to say *religiosity*, was at the heart of Sangreal, featuring as the first item on his list of "features which differentiate[d]" it from other schools (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 118). Proceedings began with a religious service (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 5).

Superficially, this worship appeared Christian but for Steiner "Christ is never regarded . . . as the Second Person of the Christian Trinity; instead he pictured Christ as a hierarchic being at the rank of an Elohim [a semi-divine entity/angel]" (Tousomou, 2004, p. 259) with Illingworth's own expression of Steiner's teachings being to say that "Christ . . . [has] a cosmic aspect, with . . . [which] the entire future of the human race, as a whole, is bound up" (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 61). Hence, what ensued was not orthodox Christian worship. The practical aspects of the services conducted at Sangreal were based on examples he had observed at Camphill (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 58) involving reverential silence and "meditations" on topics such as "the sun and stars; human thinking, feeling and willing; the phenomena of growth and ripening; the duty of work and the divine presence and protection", all topics closely linked to Steiner's anthroposophical philosophy and mystical cosmology (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 59; cf. Steiner, 1981, pp. 41–44). In the more elaborate weekly service he was gowned and spoke individually to each pupil in something he considered "correspond[ed] . . . to the act of Communion" (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 59). But the daily prayer ("Teach us to know the Truth/To love the Beautiful/To do the Good/For Christ's sake. Amen", Illingworth, 1957/1982, pp. 34 and 58) shows evidence of mystical neo-Platonism overlayed on Christian devotion, something of a homespun philosophy on Illingworth's part and not necessarily conventional anthroposophy either as Steiner for his part was sometimes critical of Platonic ontology (Steiner, 1985, especially: Part 1.2).

Thus, at the very heart of its operation, in its religious life, Sangreal was unconventional or alternative, not simply because it deviated from conventional Christian norms in its anthroposophical character, but because it deviated from anthroposophical norms *also*.

Religion aside, the school made use of various devices taken from Steiner's teaching, including one of the most distinctive aspects of anthroposophical pedagogy, the main lesson, a practice that combines pedagogy, curriculum and moral approach to education. The main lesson typically lasted for 90 minutes and involved teaching the same topic each day for several weeks at a time. For example, as is common in Steiner schools, Sangreal pupils might concentrate on art for a protracted period each day. This would usually involve the specifically Steinerist practice of painting on damp paper, intended, in Steiner's view, to allow pupils special aesthetic and moral insight through the blurring of colours. Illingworth explained the benefits of the practice thus "in our wet painting we challenge the pupil to exert his [sic] full energy to bring definiteness out of what confronts him as chaos" (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 143).

And Sangreal also stood apart from anthroposophical practice over art, with Illingworth drawing on other influences. For example, he embraced aspects of the work of Franz Cižek [1865–1946], a lecturer in Vienna's School of Applied Arts who, from the 1890s to the 1940s, offered free art classes to Viennese children (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 128). Steiner wrote

extensively on ways of stimulating creativity (see, for example: Steiner, 1988b, 1988c, 1988d) yet, though it is unclear how he was introduced to the work of Cižek, Illingworth evidently felt the need to go beyond specifically anthroposophical ideas/practices in pursuit of what he considered best for his school's pupils.

Music, which had been a major aspects of his own life since his mother rhapsodised to him when he was a child about the performances she had heard and enjoyed (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 114p) also played a huge part in the life of Sangreal. The South Street house was home to an aged piano (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 27, footnote), pupils were taught to play the recorder (Illingworth, 1957/1982, pp. 204a–204b) and Illingworth considered daily episodes of singing to be one of the school's most distinctive features (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 118). Visiting teachers provided instrumental instruction and pupils attended musical recitals after school (Illingworth, 1957/1982, pp. 26–27). The pupils also staged plays (Illingworth, 1957/1982, pp. 114b–114c).

Aside from these activities there was a range of subjects and opportunities on offer, including the study of literature, history and science, the last of these always through the prism of Steiner's ideas which were, in turn, derived from those of Goethe who, in a work first published in 1810, had developed an elaborate theory of light and colour, concerned not so much with colours' physical nature as with their psychological effects (Goethe, 1982). Illingworth called Goethe "the supreme example in modern times of a . . . scientist with the intuition of a poet [original emphasis]" (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 46) and defended the teaching of Goethean and other pseudo-scientific ideas, saying: "[o]ur boys are told of Newton's [Isaac Newton, 1643–1727] theory of colour; but they are also told of the very different one of Goethe" (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 8).

Ultimately, like both Steiner and Goethe, Illingworth sought to see "[e]xperiments, measurements and language suited to the physical sciences . . . replaced by [emphasis on] inner experience, intuitive observation, and expression in proverbs, poetry, myths and religious formulas" (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 133). Thus, science (or pseudo-science) merged with art, with pupils encouraged to produce works on "subjects . . . generally related to the four [classical] elements (Fire, Air, Water, Earth)" (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 123).

Was Sangreal a Steiner/Waldorf school?

Yes and no is probably never a very helpful answer to any question, but it seems appropriate here. Manifestly, Illingworth was significantly influenced by Steiner and his ideas. Yet his school had no formal affiliation to the movement Steiner spawned. Like Camphill, it might be better to think of it belonging to the Steiner family but more as second cousin than brother or sister, perhaps. That is partly because such formal affiliation was not possible until the early 1970s, around the time Illingworth closed Sangreal (Freunde der Erziehungskunst Rudolf Steiners, 2024; Stehlik, 2019) but it is also because it seems to me that there was enough different about Sangreal to set it apart from pure or "obvious" Steiner schools. Another way to answer my question here would be to say that Sangreal was not "really" a Steiner school. Such features of Sangreal as its neo-Platonist religious services and his incorporation of the ideas and practices of Cižek into Sangreal's art classes justifying this claim. But there is simply a generalised sense, which it is perhaps hard to convey to anyone who had not read his book (and by 2024/2025 that was probably more or less everyone in the world, except me) or experienced his teaching (a handful of surviving former pupils, essentially those who attended the school in later years) that he kept Sangreal apart from "pure" Steiner/Waldorf education.

While I accept he was fervent in his general attachment to anthroposophy, Illingworth was not trying to convert his pupils to Steinerism and the work he attempted at Sangreal went beyond practising/promoting anthroposophy.

Was Sangreal a progressive school?

If it was not a Steiner school, was Sangreal simply a progressive school, comparable to others that may be better known, such as, to borrow only from Britain's history of these, the Summerhill of A[lexander] S[utherland] Neill [1883–1973], or Beacon Hill a school founded and operated by Bertrand Russell [1872–1970] and Dora Russell [née Black, 1894–1986] between 1927 and 1943 (see, respectively: Neill, 1992; Russell, B, 1946, 1968; Russell, D, 1932, 1934)? Answering this requires some definitions, although certain authors recoil from the prospect of such work: "Where to begin with progressive education?" despairs one (Howlett, 2013, p. 15), while what may still be the most comprehensive history of both the ideas/practices in which it consists (first published in 1967) readily admits that the language is slippery: "[w]e have given serious thought to calling [such schools] . . . 'experimental' or 'radical', but neither word is appropriate for different reasons" (Stewart and McCann, 1967/2000, p. xiv). Indeed, the closer one looks the more confusion proliferates, with the same authors admitting: "here and there we use the terms 'progressive', 'experimental', and 'radical' almost interchangeably, but where stricter definition is involved we have sought some variant of the term 'innovating'" (Stewart and McCann, 1967/2000, p. xiv).

Experimental, innovative, progressive, radical, alternative (McCluskey and Mills, 2018), child-centred (Darling, 1994) and older names such as modern schooling (Blewitt, 1932), and several more terms besides (perhaps including therapeutic education, Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009), not to mention names in other languages, including éducation nouvelle and reformpädagogik, jockey for attention. However, taking a range of attempted definitions over roughly 50 years we find that education/schooling of this general sort has been described variously as:

> concerned with more than classwork . . . [and viewed] as a process of "drawing out" rather than "putting in" . . . [with] the pupils' "natural" instincts . . . given maximum scope . . . permissive legislation rather than direct force . . . [being] the order of the day . . . . . [coupled with a desire] to take the pupil not only outside the classroom but outside the school community itself (Skidelsky, 1969, pp. 21–22);

> [education that shows] original[ity] in . . . approach to what is taught and how it is taught . . . [coupled with] recognition of the pupil as initiator and the teacher as guide rather than authoritarian (Stewart and McCann, 1967/2000, p. xv);

> [education] understood [not] in terms of things that should be known, rules that should be followed, or adult characteristics that ought to be adopted . . . [but] as a gradual and "natural" progression which is best aided by adults who have an appreciation of and a respect for the ways of children (Darling, 1994, p. 3);

> a cluster of doctrines concerning pedagogy, aims and the curriculum . . . characterised by a distrust of authority in education and by an emphasis on the individual child (Winch and Gingell, 1999, p. 183);

> [education that values] personalized [sic] learning, small classes and small school rolls, student choice, voice and agency, active engagement in learning, informal relationships between teacher and student, and flexible, local systems of governance (McCluskey and Mills, 2018, p. 1).

One author, who is critical of the concept, seeks to approach definition through questions. We can infer his definition: anti-authority, skills-based, examination free, undisciplined.

> Should children learn from the wisdom of an authoritative teacher, or should they learn independently and discover things for themselves? Should children learn an academic curriculum, or is this just filling their heads with "mere knowledge" where "skills" would be more useful? Should children be driven by the structure of rewards and examinations, or should they be motivated by lessons that are "relevant" and "fun"? Should children be sanctioned for misbehaving and not working, or is such a practice cruel and authoritarian? (Peal, 2014, p. 1).

From all of this we might extract five points: being anti-authority (for example: Darling, 1994; Peal, 2014; Winch and Gingell, 1999); being informal (McCluskey and Mills, 2018;

Skidelsky, 1969); learning in ways that are, or are said to be, natural (Darling, 1994; Skidelsky, 1969); teachers only guiding (Stewart and McCann, 1967/2000; Darling, 1994) and self-discipline being preferred (Peal, 2014; Skidelsky, 1969). Of course, we could arrive at a somewhat different set of criteria if we examined a selection of first-hand accounts of running such schools (for example: Neill, 1992; Russell, B, 1946, 1968; Russell, D, 1932, 1934).

However, let this short list suffice, representing as it does a core of "progressiveness" in education, by whatever name we call it. With the exception of teaching along natural lines (the lines for supposedly "proper" human development laid down by Steiner's pseudo-science), Illingworth neither advocated nor practiced any of these five things. Illingworth's ways, and those of Sangreal, were as starchy and formal as the uniforms the pupils wore. He did not practice corporal punishment but he expected pupils to conform to high standards of discipline (for example: Illingworth, 1957/1982, pp. 115–117 and 119–120). He sought to unleash pupils' creativity but he was clear he was the authority to whose knowledge and wisdom he expected deference (for example: Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 112).

There was nothing progressive about Sangreal by any reasonable standard. It was (using these words in their more general senses and *not* as synonyms for progressivism in matters educational) alternative, experimental, innovative and many more things. Progressive it assuredly was not.

What *was* Sangreal?

To understand Sangreal, and thus answer this question, we have to return to Illingworth himself. It was what he was: very significantly influenced by anthroposophy but not, strictly, anthroposophical and, at every turn, profoundly conservative. Through anthroposophy Illingworth found a language to express his convictions; for their *origin* we must look elsewhere, noting that he said "[f]rom the age of fourteen I have always inspired myself with mental pictures of ideal ways of living" adding that he had developed "manly and altruistic ideals … [out of] childish, romantic dreams" (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 114e). His were conservative dreams. For Illingworth's close contemporary Michael Oakeshott [1901–1990], writing originally in 1956, a conservative was somebody who:

> prefer[red] the familiar to the unknown … the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss (Oakeshott, 1967, p. 169).

Admittedly, anthroposophy is essentially utopian: imagining the future that will come when all embrace its teachings but I submit that he sufficiently resembles Oakeshott's ideal conservative to qualify for that description. This much was revealed when he listed works and authors who had influenced him when he was a student and young teacher, before turning to Steiner (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 106). These included Edmund Burke [1729–1797] and presumably included his arch-conservative manifesto of 1790 (Burke, 1969). He explicitly mentioned the novels of Benjamin Disraeli [1804–1881] which promoted his paternalistic "one nation conservatism", a philosophy involving an organicist view of society and belief in the importance of aristocratic noblesse oblige. These values and interests were clearly reflected in the moral tone Illingworth set for the school, repeatedly stressing his aversion to many aspects of modernity, including "comic papers, jazz music, modern so-called 'dancing', crooning, [musical] 'gang shows', football pools, home television, popular newspapers, pantomimes, and other idlenesses [sic], vulgarities and stupidities of the present day" (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 120; cf. for example: pp. 206–207).

His 26-point list (Illingworth, 1957/1982, pp. 116–117) of mannerly practices that children and adolescents ought to adopt, a curious mixture of the Victorian and Edwardian conduct manual ("10 … take the outer side of the pavement when walking with a lady or older person"), naked socio-linguistic prejudice ("4 … pronounce vowels clearly and beautifully"), anthroposophical doctrine and personal idiosyncrasy and obsession ("15 … walk erect and

springingly [sic] when going up and down a staircase or along a street . . .”), implicitly made his case against the “vulgarities and stupidities of the present day” (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 119).

What he sought was an educated, cultivated society, although this was not a thing to be achieved by fostering any kind of school in particular because, as he put it, expressing himself in angry, defiant capitals “NO SCHOOL CAN EDUCATE. No educational system can educate. Only parents can educate . . . . . [the] school co-operat[ing]” (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 189). Thus, he advocated for a plethora of small, independent schools such as his but following whatever principles parents wanted, not anthroposophy specifically (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 177). Essentially, he was a romantic, anti-modernist conservative, a counter-revolutionary, or counter-progressive, trying not to change the world but to *change it back* (see, for example: Illingworth, 1957/1982, pp. 8, 30, 115–117, 119–120, 169, 180 and 206–207). Sangreal was a tool to that end. One Sangreal pupil, one uncultivated boy, at a time he sought to restore what he remembered as the better managed, more orderly and genteel middle-class Leeds of his youth.

Conclusion

Illingworth closed Sangreal in 1971, presumably for personal reasons, he was certainly past retirement age and may have been in increasingly poor health, worn out by running the school largely alone. He died of bronchopneumonia nine years later [4], shown by his death certificate still to be lodged in the house at 47 South Street, apparently survived only by an unmarried sister. He was deeply flawed and my account of him and his work is not remotely intended to be hagiographical. Indeed, since first stumbling on his book I have spent several years, on and off, “living with him” as I searched for both primary sources and secondary literature relevant to his life and school and on other schools such as Sangreal, finding little of the former and none of the latter.

I think I know his flaws better than anyone but I have come neither to bury nor to praise him, though I cannot resist finding his dogged determination to enact his vision somewhat praiseworthy. Thus, I do not comment on his expressed socio-political views (beyond repeating that I think it wrong to imagine him a lifelong, committed anti-Semite because he subscribed to fashionable orthodoxies in his youth), I simply note these as key to understanding him. His anthroposophical views were, I unhesitatingly contend, *mistaken* but not utterly reprehensible and there can be no doubt that he valued and sought to cultivate intellectual rigour and disciplined behaviour in himself and others, not unworthy priorities. I am of the view that in embracing pseudo-scientific anthroposophy he was guilty of putting a good mind to the service of a bad cause. However, he did not deviate from his principles – political or metaphysical – at any stage, although he struggled with the idea that his life and work could be accounted failures and was always convinced that his efforts were futile, once wistfully insisting that “Sangreal School does not exist yet [original emphasis]” (Illingworth, 1957/1982, p. 193). The school he wanted was never the school he had; nor could it ever be.

The pursuit of schools comparable to Sangreal, not simply other Steiner/Waldorf establishments but schools of a kind which, in an admittedly crude attempt to catch their very ambiguous status, I propose calling “conservative alternative”, through the traces they have left in archives, libraries and memory could be short-lived. Perhaps there simply were and are no more. But is the game not worth the candle, the possibility worth investigating? I submit it *is* worth investigating. Sangreal was *not* a progressive school but (although those two things can mean the same thing) it *was* alternative in the sense that it was as much as an *alternative to progressivism* as it was to other forms of schooling and it was manifestly conservative.

Comparable examples may prove hard to find but one possibility is a contribution to a series of polemical publications, the Black Papers, of 1969–1977. Edited initially by Charles Brian Cox [1928–2008] and Anthony Edward Dyson [1928–2002], subsequently Cox and Rhodes Boyson [1925–2012], these gave voice to authors who opposed progressive practices and

other changes in British schools. The period c. 1960–1980 was one of often febrile educational debate in Britain. Much written in that period and that has been written about it since has been highly partisan (Wright, 1977, especially: pp. 140–173, cf. Limond, 2012; Peal, 2014, pp. 40–73). For some saying anything that might seem to endorse the "Black Paperists'" views is anathema, however my point here is not to endorse their educational or socio-political/cultural politics. I simply say that they may provide an example of a school operating at the time that was perhaps, in some ways, comparable to Sangreal. Thus, one author, in the second Black Paper, described using experimental methods without progressive intent in a conservative school. However, as he wrote pseudonymously ("Preparatory School Headmaster", 1969) a name may be difficult to obtain, although some details may be in Cox's papers in the University of Manchester. Another case might be a school run in conjunction with a commune, The Teachers, led, c. 1970s–1980s, by the self-styled "Kevin of The Teachers" ("Kevin of The Teachers", 1978; the pseudonym of Kevin O'Byrne against whom accusations of abusive behaviour were later made, although I can find no evidence he was convicted or even charged and accusations against him, if true, may not invalidate all the group's ideas, meaning the school can still be worthy of study, Chaudhary, 1993). This sat at the intersection of three types of commune identified in one influential typology, first published in 1974, as: the self-actualising, the activist and the practical (Rigby, 2023).

Discipline in the school was certainly strict and its teaching emphasised the value of rigorous work, features the conservative Illingworth might well have applauded (The Teachers, 1978, 1981; cf. Illingworth, 1957/1982, pp. 115–117 and 119–120, for example). Alternative? Yes. Conservative? Perhaps. A priori theorisation will not be as much use as empirical research in developing this category.

In an optimistic assessment of how its author's efforts would be remembered, Illingworth's book's editor wrote to Trinity's librarian (unusually, the letter was retained with the shelved copy) "I trust that this unusual work, published as a memorial to a teacher of great devotion and insight . . . will prove of interest to your library" [5]. This is touchingly naive because, although I cannot be sure, my strong suspicion is that until I stumbled on it nobody had looked at the book since it was catalogued. Alas for him, Illingworth's relentlessly downbeat assessment of the impact of his work seems more justified. He was a quixotic, tragi-comic failure. But all his efforts may not have been in vain if my fortuitous discovery opens up new avenues of research. Something productive may yet come from the story of Sangreal School and its founder, the ironically self-styled "strange . . . angel" of Durham, William Norman Illingworth.

Notes

1. The book's pagination is eccentric. Additional sections were inserted between pages by the editor and to avoid disrupting the existing numbers those pages were designated with letters.
2. He may have written more, but the only other work I have been able to trace is: Illingworth (1964). It adds nothing.
3. See: https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/search/archives/246011d9-4af5-35a2-b939-0b56b6c5da01 and https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/search/archives/8b811fac-17da-39eb-b540-3d2a8de53d61.
4. 25 November 1980.
5. 3 November 1982.

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Corresponding author
David Limond can be contacted at: limondd@tcd.ie