

The Kirkwood Papers

Colin Kirkwood with Gerri Kirkwood

Over many years, Colin and Gerri Kirkwood have made a significant, distinctive and influential contribution to the practice of community-based adult education in both Scotland and the UK as well as further afield. In this article, they provide a brief introduction to the archive of their work which has recently been established at the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow.

The Kirkwood Papers came into being as a result of an initiative taken in 2017 by Dr Eleanor Bell and Victoria Peters, respectively Postgraduate Research Director in the Department of Humanities, and University Archivist in the Library of the University of Strathclyde, to invite Colin and Gerri Kirkwood to donate their papers to the University, an invitation to which we readily agreed. The papers have now been catalogued and are held in the University's Archives and Special Collections.

The Kirkwood Papers is a comprehensive collection of the work and thinking of Colin and Gerri and some of their collaborators and friends, from the mid-1960s until 2020, covering approximately fifty-five years. It includes working papers, poems and stories, published articles and books, community newspapers, writers' workshop booklets, letters from friends, interviews, accounts of practice, action and reflection, and drafts and notes of talks and lectures given.

Gerri and Colin, although born in Scotland, both come from families originating in the north of Ireland: Gerri from a Catholic family in County Donegal, and Colin from a Presbyterian family with roots in County Antrim and County Down. They studied in the Universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh and later at the Scottish Institute of Human Relations. Gerri's initial interests were in European languages (French, German and Italian) and Arts and Architecture. Colin's early interests were in history, language and literature and poetry in particular. They

met in the old Fine Art Library in Glasgow University and got married in 1967. They have two children and five grandchildren.

It would have been difficult to predict what direction their working lives might take, and what contributions they might make.

A critical turning point for both of us was 1968-69: the year of *les evenements*, the events, the direct actions by young people throughout Europe, against patriarchy and authoritarian government, and for direct democracy - also the year our first child, Paul, was born. And it was the year we spend in the city of Treviso in north-east Italy, teaching English. A whole article could be written about that year - a temptation which must be resisted! That was the year we met and became lifelong friends with the Vaccario and Marcuzzo families, and were captivated by the art, architecture, culture and landscape of Italy.

We read the poetry of Dante and Eugenio Montale (some of which I translated into English). We visited the Accademia Art Gallery in Venice and were astonished by the *Storie de Cristo* sequence by 14th century painter, Paolo da Venezia which I converted into poems in English, and which were published in the annual Scottish Poetry anthology. Of equal importance that year, we witnessed directly in Treviso a march against authoritarian teaching in local secondary schools in favour of dialogical and mutually respectful teacher/student relationships. These were among the many inspiring experience which led to our decision to return to Britain to participate in the hoped-for transformation in teacher/student relations, employer/employee relations, and citizen/government relations in our own country: tasks to which we have devoted the rest of our lives.

The collection begins with letters from friends which I received and retained from my days of under- and post-graduate studies, and while I was writing poetry. These include letters from

people like Tom Leonard, Robert (Bob) Tait, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Edwin Morgan, David Godin, John Caughie and Angus and Barbara Somerville.

On our return from Treviso to London, I got the job of Area Principal for Adult Education in Staveley in North-East Derbyshire. Staveley was then a mining, steel and chemicals town, and previously also had railway workshops. There, Gerri gave birth to our second child Anna and we met Rob Hunter, a really great community worker with whom I collaborated. We also met one of Gerri's oldest women friends, Madie Mitchell. They met through taking their new babies to the mother and toddler group in the Catholic Church Hall. The key features of our work there were the do-it-yourself local newspaper *Staveley Now*, the equally remarkable Staveley Disabled Group, and the Staveley Festival. These were truly social creations. They were done by extraordinary local people: mothers like Joan Turner who ran the Barrow Hill Youth Club which was a Greebo Club, most of whose members were Hell's Angels. Joan asked me to come down to the club one night with the adult education tape recorder and, between us, we did the most astonishing interview with these lads, which transformed how they were seen in Staveley, and restored good relations between the Angels and some of the old folks in the town.

The key orientation we adopted was to encourage ordinary people to speak out directly, loud and clear, in their own voices. Too many so-called community newspapers in those days were full of reports from bureaucratised institutions, which often hit the ground with a thud, because real differences were swept under the carpet. People need to be allowed to argue things out from all viewpoints. We achieved that open pluralism by encouraging local poets to contribute, and reminiscences at length from old people whose prose was as good as that of Jane Austen. *Pride and Prejudice*, it should be remembered, succeeds because it allows radical misunderstandings to be worked out to the point of resolution and, finally, reconciliation. All the issues of *Staveley Now* can be read in the collection.

Our next move was to Castlemilk, the largest housing scheme in Glasgow. Gerri exercised her right as a native Glaswegian to apply for a council house. We were told that we could take any one of the many unoccupied flats in the scheme, and we chose a ground floor flat in Ardencraig Road. At this point, Gerry and I (who had briefly tried job sharing) went the whole hog and reversed roles. We were only 28. I became a house husband, looking after our kids, taking them to school, doing the shopping, washing the clothes and doing the garden as well as engaging in various forms of community action. Gerri became a Reporter to Children's Panels, a bold attempt to replace the Juvenile Courts with popular participation. The day we moved in, we were visited in our flat by Archie Hamilton, local organiser of the Communist Part (which I joined), and by John Miller, Minister of Castlemilk East Church of Scotland, who had also just moved into the scheme with his wife Mary and their two young children. John and Mary and their family lived and worked in Castlemilk for over thirty years and were widely admired. Mary, with Carol Cooper and Irene Graham, were the moving spirits behind the Jeely Piece Club, a children's play scheme organised and run by mothers and fathers. Carol's husband John was an active participant in various forms of community action including another great do-it-yourself local newspaper *Castlemilk Today*, all the issues of which can be read in the collection. Likewise, you can read the three issues of *Scottish Tenant*, the newspaper of the Scottish and Glasgow Councils of Tenants' Associations which led the campaign against the Housing Finance Act.

You can also read the very interesting draft of part of a PhD dissertation by a young Strathclyde University researcher, Chris Clarke, who went on to work with Tom Lovett and Avila Kilmurray in the struggle to bridge the sectarian gap in Northern Ireland. And - again in the pages of *Castlemilk Today* - you can read the brilliantly funny contributions by Pat Devitt, Communist and train guard. And polemics about Community Councils. This was real

democracy, unlike the contributions of some of the representatives of so-called representative democracy who seemed to spend most of their time holed up in the Labour Club, possibly the only source of alcohol in the scheme. It was while we were living in Castlemilk that the famous work-in by the workers in the Upper Clyde Shipyards (UCS), led by Jimmy Ried, Sammy Barr and Jimmy Airlie, occurred. What a brave inspiring movement! And there was no bevvying!

Gerri later decided she would give up the Reporter to Children's Panel job so that I could do a Masters' degree in Adult Education and Community Development at Edinburgh University. That year (1975/6) was another turning point for both of us. I read a lot and began writing again. Prose this time. I was reading colonial literature on community development, which I thought was fascinating but deeply patronising, and at the same time I was reading books by Paulo Freire, whose work I deeply admired. In the course of that year, we realised that Gerri and I had a lot to teach as well as to learn. I am reminded of the (modified) Chaucer quote: 'and gladly would they learn, and gladly teach'.

In the autumn of 1976, I got the job of WEA Tutor Organiser in South-East Scotland, based in Edinburgh. Three years later, Gerry got one of three jobs as Community Education Worker on the Adult Learning Project (ALP) in the inner-city area of Gorgie Dalry, also in Edinburgh, based on Freire's ideas and methods. During those interim years, as soon as we had arrived in Edinburgh, I began to teach the first of three courses on Freire's work. I realised that much of what we had learning in Italy, and then applied in Staveley and Castlemilk, chimed in or overlapped with Freire's thinking, although developed independently of it. The first course was a *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* reading group. It took place in our flat, in our sitting room which was also our bedroom. The second was a much larger course entitled Community Action and the Pedagogy of the Oppressed. All three courses attracted field workers and area managers from Lothian Regional Council's Community Education and Social Work

Departments and various voluntary organisations and individuals. It was clear that we had struck a chord.

A key mover and shaker in the creation of ALP was our friend Fraser Patrick, also from Glasgow. He persuaded the Scottish Office (this was long before the Scottish Parliament was in place, although it was already being proposed) to fund a three-year Urban Aid project in Edinburgh based on the thinking that was developed on those courses. ALP lasted not three years, but forty years, thanks to the creativity and relational genius of Stan Reeves, Fiona McCall and Gerri Kirkwood, and their many collaborators. They made it all happen on so many fronts: the Scots Music Group, the Gorgie Dalry Writers' Workshop, Play in the Terraces, the Skills Exchange, The Family Today, You and the School, On being Scottish, and Women and Wellbeing. You can read all about that work in the Open University Press book, *Living Adult Education: Freire in Scotland*, which Gerri and I wrote in 1989, and which was updated and republished in Spanish and Catalan by the Paulo Freire Institute and in English by Sense/Brill in 2011.

In this period also, the WEA District Committee asked me to create two major projects in addition to supporting the Freirean work of ALP. These were the courses for unemployed men and women, and the Writers Workshop movement. The unemployed work was researched in advance with meticulous care. We interviewed 31 unemployed men and women about the experiences of life, family, housing, work and education. You can read the summary of our findings in the first chapter of *Adult education and the Unemployed*, (edited by myself and Sally Griffiths, WEA, 1984) entitled 'Some Unemployed Adults and Education', in the collection. The rest of the book is written by the outstanding teachers involved in the unemployed programme: Janet Hassan (child psychotherapist and former inspector of List D schools) and Susan Maciver, who taught the Human Relations component, Stephen Maxwell

who taught Politics and Society, Sally Griffiths and Tony Graham who taught literacy, History teachers Susan Moffat and Gerry de Groot, Colin White (who also designed the book) and Harry Ayers who developed the innovative approach to numeracy. Helen Main, Sally Griffiths and I facilitated the Writers Workshops. Susan Moffat also taught study skills. That book sold a huge number of copies throughout Britain and beyond: all the income earned from sales went straight back into supporting the adult education work.

New concepts emerged and caught on: co-investigation, people's themes, codifications, saying your own word, dialogue and action outcomes like the Skills Exchange and the Parents' Centre. It was a period of great creativity, social hope, community, and genuine collaboration between organisations. Between them, I contend that ALP and the WEA Unemployed Courses and the Writers Workshop movement changed the shape of adult education in Britain.

The full text of the long interview/dialogue with my friend, the poet Tom Leonard, in the mid 1980s, has been transcribed and is included in the collection.

Gerry left ALP in 1989 after ten years, and became Assistant Head of Wester Hailes Education Centre, a community secondary school where she hoped to develop a Freirean approach to adult learning in a peripheral housing estate. That aspiration was effectively blocked, and instead she went on a few years later to play a leading role in teaching English and hosting international students.

After ten years with the WEA, I went on to train in Human Relations, Counselling, and Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy, and then to write and head the dialogical programme of post-graduate studies in Counselling at Moray House School of Education of the University of Edinburgh for a further ten years. The dialogue is between the person-centred approach and psychodynamic perspectives. (From 1987 I had spent three years with the Scottish Association

for Counselling and the Scottish Health Education Group, researching counselling and psychotherapy practice and training agencies throughout Scotland. This was published in two volumes and as a database. It is no longer available and is not included in the collection).

I wrote and published four more books, a research report and many articles, all of which are included in the collection. The books are *Community Work and Adult Education in Staveley, North-East Derbyshire, 1969-1972* (Brill, 2020), *Vulgar Eloquence: From Labour to Liberation - Essays on Education, Community and Politics* (Polygon, 1990), *The Persons in Relation Perspective - in Counselling, Psychotherapy and Community Adult Learning* (Sense/Brill, 2012), a research report entitled *The Development of Counselling in Shetland: a study of counselling in society* (COSCA AND BAC, 2000), and a book of poetry entitled *From Boy to Man* (WordPower Books, 2015)

Colin Kirkwood, Edinburgh 2024