

Being somehow wounded□

Nick Duffell, himself what he calls 'a boarding school survivor,' suffered from inexplicable headaches in his thirties. He joined a series of therapeutic workshops for men, found they were useful to him and eventually agreed to help to lead one. There he made a surprising discovery.

The men who had been away to boarding school and had found it an ordeal, seemed able to recognise each other. This was not simply the exquisite British sensitivity to accents, or clannishness. It was more as if there existed among many men who had been away to school an unspoken bond of recognition, which differed from the popular image. It was not about self-confidence, inner discipline, leadership, elitism, team spirit or loyalty, though many had an intimate relationship with those qualities, rather a sense of being somehow wounded.

The Making of Them, p 3

Before long Duffell found himself running workshops specifically for men who had been damaged by their boarding-school experiences. 'People told stories which had never been spoken before; there were many tears, plenty of anger. . . Frequently people had thought that they were the only ones not to have been content, or that others must have had a worse time than them, or that it felt like a betrayal or weakness to say that they had suffered.' (*Ibid*, p 6)

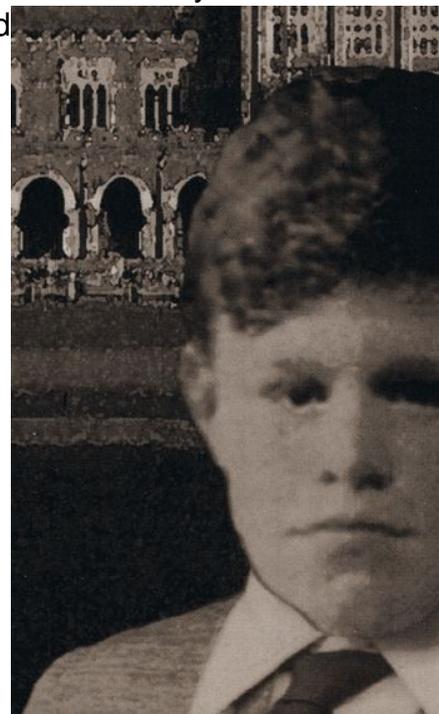
The more he went into it, the more he came to suspect that there was a particular British attitude towards children that was quite inexplicable to most foreigners.

This was an attitude which implied that it was really not OK to be a child at all. Children were inconvenient they were 'unmade' and in the way until they became civilised adults. It was an attitude which permitted very small children, sometimes from the age of four, but more often from seven or eight, being sent away from their families and raised in institutions which turned them into premature adults. The aim was that their families might feel certain of being identified with the right social class, and satisfied that they had done the best for their child. Whether the child might be adversely affected by this was immaterial compared to the enormous social advantage which this education conferred. The issue could be rationalised away in a culture which regards children as a mistake. This attitude, I reckoned, was part of our unconscious heritage. In other words, people are generally quite unaware that they might hold a mind-set of children as incompetent, 'un-made' and in the way.

The success of this set-up depended, I reasoned, on the children buying into the game, and

keeping quiet. Their silence needed to be enforced both internally as well as externally. Of the two, the internal was much the most powerful, and seemed to operate in two main ways. First, by the mixture of shame for letting their parents down and fear of losing more of their love (if they had already been sent away what might happen if they proved ungrateful?). And secondly, by the need to adapt and survive in school.

This surviving by keeping quiet was so successful in the majority of cases that 'old boys', even if they had suffered themselves, would not neglect to send their own children away when they were of 'school age'. I guessed that this was because they still feared



bringing shame upon themselves and provoking their parents' rage by implicitly challenging the decision made a generation earlier. Furthermore, they had survived and been 'made' into adults. The 'un-made' child was now their own son or daughter, and these children were now ready to be 'made'. If these parents were to admit that they themselves had suffered at school their own success at secretly surviving their ordeal might be called into question. Thus the system continued in a perfect cycle. It seemed unbreakable. Thinking about this took my breath away.

Ibid, pp 8,9

Nick Duffell's efforts to get this problem recognised led to a documentary film being made. It was called *The Making of Them*, and was shown by the BBC in their *40 Minutes* series in January 1994. This is how he describes the approach of the director, Colin Luke, and the reactions of his team.

His idea was to follow a group of small boys and their families through the first term of prep school. He was interested in our workshops and wanted me to provide some psychological commentary on what might be going on in the children's minds. His approach was totally neutral, which was how he was able to enlist the co-operation of both parents and schools. . . . The process of making the film . . . was extraordinary. The camera operators had also started out neutral. Film crews tend in general to be fairly hard-nosed, but these people soon became very distressed at what they saw. This included witnessing the attitude of the parents to their children and following the amazingly rapid process of adaptation and loss of spontaneity which the children underwent. I remember one session in the editing studio where even the technicians were getting angry at what they saw on their screens.

Ibid, p11

Boarding schools are day-schools to the power of ten, but nevertheless traditional day-schools have negative influences of their own. During the school day you have to conform just as rigorously as any boarding-school pupil, both to the official patterns created by the staff and the unofficial patterns created by the children. The main issue at school comes down to a matter of learning how to conform, how to avoid trouble, how to belong to the right group. Or alternatively learning how to cope with failing to conform, failing to avoid trouble, and not being accepted by the right group. Actually learning what the teachers are trying to teach is of secondary importance.