

2019-02-19

Book Review: Sharpe, C. (2018). A Shared Experience - John Cross, His Life, Thoughts and Writing. UK: Abbeyhill Press.

Noel Howard
nh99@eircom.net

Follow this and additional works at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijass>

Recommended Citation

Howard, Noel (2019) "Book Review: Sharpe, C. (2018). A Shared Experience - John Cross, His Life, Thoughts and Writing. UK: Abbeyhill Press.," *Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies*: Vol. 19: Iss. 1, Article 9.

doi:<https://doi.org/10.21427/ayxg-bd19>

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijass/vol19/iss1/9>

Sharpe, C. (2018). *A Shared Experience - John Cross, His Life, Thoughts and Writing*. UK: Abbeyhill Press.

Review by Noel Howard, Social Care Ireland, nh99@eircom.net

© Copyright Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies ISSN 1393-7022

Vol. 19(1), 2019, 87-89.

L.P. Hartley begins his wonderful novel, *The Go Between*, with the sentence ‘*The past is a foreign country, they do things differently there*’. Reading the life of John Cross by Charles Sharpe, one cannot but be struck by how much that sentence resonates.

In 1952, John Cross, following his national service wanted to take up a place at Durham University and become a politician. However, something that every social care student now undertakes, came in the way of that - a placement at Bodenham Manor School, Herefordshire, a therapeutic centre for maladjusted children changed the course of his life. There, Cross came under the influence of David Willis, a formidable and authoritarian character with whom Cross would subsequently differ. Despite differences, both had the best interests of children and adults at heart. On arrival, he knew that this was what his life’s work would be about. He trained as a teacher, then later as a psychotherapist and served as a magistrate in the Juvenile Justice system.

He worked in a number of residential centres, but it was as a founder member and Director of PETT (Planned Environment Therapy Trust) and Director of New Barns School in Gloucestershire, that his pioneering influence in working with the most troubled of children had most effect. PETT was founded to understand, support, develop and promote planned environment therapy and the therapeutic community approach to working and living.

One of Cross’ fundamental tenets was that children need good primary adult experiences which is another way of reflecting attachment theory. If they don’t have that and end up in the care system, those who work with them must compensate for what they never had. This truly was, and is, a gargantuan task. It certainly was in Cross’s lifetime and, if this book teaches us anything, it is that unless there is a supported space for such therapeutic care services, then the lives of children in the care system will be more blighted than righted.

Charles Sharpe, in writing about his subject, had the benefit of a number of interviews with Cross, as well as access to letters and archival material. Extracts show the difficult and demanding path that those at PETT and other therapeutic units had to follow, and, most importantly, must follow in today’s highly regulated and bureaucratic system, in order to heal the hurt that neglect and abuse inflict on young lives. Sharpe notes that Cross, while understanding that they could not be easily dismissed, had “neither sympathy for hierarchical structures nor reliance on theoretical matters” (Sharpe, 2018, p.35).

Sadly, and with great consequences for troubled children with particular needs, the establishment and continuation of therapeutic communities today face near impossible demands. Cross believed that there were too many externally imposed regulations, established with the intention of protecting children, which do not necessarily achieve that aim, but, instead, deprive troubled children of the kind of relationship they really need.

He also made an interesting point, applicable very much today in Ireland, relating to children of seven or eight who would not be considered for residential group placement, and, yet, who

would struggle in the best of foster families. Indeed, a former Minister for Children, Frances Fitzgerald, when referring to a report on the deaths of children in care said early intervention was vital and that we needed to get its concept “into our psyche”. Cross believed that the older the child on referral, the more formidable the task facing the therapeutic community. This is a logical assumption, but one which quite a good number of professionals and agencies, well intentioned no doubt, do not agree with on ideological grounds, believing that they are somehow benefitting the child, hoping things will change. We have situations of children entering the care system in Ireland because at age 15 or 16 they have become “a problem” while the reality is that problems were quite clearly emerging for all to see when they were much younger. A good, effective residential placement, might well have nipped future, serious difficulties in the bud.

Cross was also quite cognisant of the risks that do occur in residential care, as in any profession, but in the therapeutic communities he favoured, he believed “it should be very unlikely to recruit the wrong adult, or for the community to fail at an early stage to pick up any undesirable behaviour or attitudes” (Sharpe, 2018, p.121).

He also believed that bad experiences are an essential part of how a child can benefit from good experiences and that growth and survival come from good experiences counteracting and compensating for bad ones. He poses the question, “Who wants to live a life of just good experiences?” (Sharpe, 2018, p.65). A former staff member notes that Cross, when discussing the need to punish ‘damaged’ children, would say “You don’t help people to deal with bad experiences by giving them bad experiences, you fill them with good experiences in the hope they will be strong enough” (Sharpe 2018 p.314). Interestingly, he placed great emphasis on the importance of the term “children” (regardless of chronological age), as opposed to “kids” or “young people” (Sharpe 2018 p. 110).

The writings and extracts in this book, reflect Cross’s past, his political and professional development, as well as his views on justice, residential care replacing the family, the personal conflicts and tensions with which adults have to deal with when working with disturbed children, what “acting out” is about and much more, are definitely worth discussion for the social care worker, no matter how seasoned and experienced he or she may be. He makes the point that “acting out” or as we often euphemistically refer to it as “challenging behaviour” is not in itself cathartic and “does not heal or release the disturbance” a view that is challenging and worthy of unravelling further. He teases out the concept of “therapeutic community” which he suggests is often a cliched one and believed it was not a matter of “staff”, “house-parents” living and dealing with “pupils” or “patients”, but rather the “adults” living with the “children” (Sharpe 2018 p.264). Residential care, he also argued, is not a cure, but an intervention, and just a part in the continuum of living for a child coming from a certain situation and going back to a certain situation. Yet, referring agencies, either corporate or personal, often see themselves as hiving off, often conveniently, a problem child in the unrealistic and mistaken belief that what will emerge is a child minus the problem.

In John Cross, we see a man directing and influencing the lives of children and adults in a most positive and life changing way at New Barns for 27 years. Then, a catastrophic development occurred. In 1992, it emerged that Peter Righton, Vice Chairman of the Board of Governors of New Barns, had been found in possession of child pornography. Much, much more was to emerge about this man over time, but in his role as Vice Chairman, he did not engage with the children. However, in the media frenzy around child abuse that characterised much of the 1990s in the UK, questions began to be asked about the safety of the children in New Barns. Seven others were arrested and underwent a tortuous four-month trial. Jim Nichol, who defended the

Birmingham Six, directed the defence, largely because of how impressed he was after speaking with two of the ancillary staff at New Barns. Eve Foster and Maureen Ward told him of the kindness, sensitivity and thoughtfulness of the New Barns staff and he was convinced of their innocence.

The prosecution case collapsed. Following the trial, the jury wrote to the court to say the case should never have come to court in the first place. Cross, though under great pressure, maintained his dignity and composure, displaying a remarkable lack of bitterness and resentment. However, what hurt him very much was the fact that the children, called by the prosecution as witnesses, were manipulated with suggestions that they would get monetary compensation. Yet, only one boy, significantly and sadly, who claimed to have been mistreated in New Barns, had actually written after he had left, requesting to be allowed return, as it was the only place he felt happy. Cross' view ultimately was that, in the end, the trial had made victims of the children as much as the adults.

The damage had been done. Ten local authorities withdrew children from the school and a decision was made to close New Barns. Poignantly, one boy on being removed from the school, said to Cross, "John, you said I could always live here".

John Cross, a modest man, grew up in a political family and had political ambitions himself until his early placement in a residential centre, which led him to a life that was perhaps political in a very different way. His Quakerism had a deep influence in all he did. He died in 2017.

Charles Sharpe's book is a personal tribute to a man he only got to know in 2008. The book is a virtual treasure trove of what the essence of therapeutic care is all about and plumbs the depths of a concept that is often spoken about and aspired to, but seldom practised, with the depth and understanding that John Cross brought to it. As an examination of a man and a lived experience in real care and service to children, it deserves a wide audience for those in social care and social work. Maybe, more importantly, as we lurch uncertainly toward the commodification of care, it is a book from which "the powers that be" might learn much to their advantage.

Noel Howard worked as a Social Care Worker and Manager in the juvenile system until his retirement in 2008. He is a member of the board of Social Care Ireland and edits the association's publications.