

Tanner, D. (1991). *Crusade for democracy: Progressive education at the crossroads*. Albany: SUNY Press, 133 pp., \$24.50 (hardcover).

Daniel Tanner's history of the John Dewey Society for the Study of Education from its origins in 1935 through the publication of the last yearbook in 1962 is both interesting scholarship and an affectionate birthday tribute. Produced to commemorate the 55th anniversary of the John Dewey Society, Tanner has constructed a readable text and a scholarly contribution to the history of educational thought in North America.

The task of constructing a cohesive history of the Society was obviously a challenge for Tanner, given the scarcity of available resources. With scant historical records of the proceedings of the Society existing, Tanner relies on past accounts of the origins of the Dewey Society, the correspondence of key members of the Society, and the personal reminiscences of charter members as sources of information. Given these limited materials, Tanner maximizes the information to offer some interesting conclusions regarding the origins of the Society and its role as defender of the call to educate for democracy, even in decades when "progressive" ideas in education were in popular disfavor, if not politically suspect.

Tanner disputes the contention first promoted by Harold Rugg that the John Dewey Society was an outgrowth of William H. Kilpatrick's study group of experientialist educators at Teachers College, Columbia University. Tanner details how the origin of the Dewey Society can be traced to a correspondence between Henry Harap to Paul Hanna of Teachers College whose purpose was to construct a list of people to invite to a gathering during the National Education Association's Department of Superintendence meeting at Cleveland in February of 1934. From this beginning, other meetings were held over the course of a year whose purpose, as articulated by Newlon, was "to organize a society dedicated to the scholarly investigation of the relations of school and society, particularly to the function of education in the process of social change" (p. 8).

It is interesting that Harap, Hanna, and Newlon provided the initial impetus for the founding of the Society and not figures more closely associated with Dewey's thought. Both Harap and Hanna might best be described as "progressive conciliarists," advocates of modest reform in the American school rather than strong proponents of experientialism in the Deweyan tradition. Newlon was in nearer affinity with the social thought of George Counts than of Dewey. What the three agents held in common was an interest in furthering the influence of progressive educational thought on current practice and the impact of schooling on the dynamics of the social order. The original design of the Society would appear then to be neither a promotion of Dewey's educational

thought nor a forum for the open discussion of educational philosophy and policy, but rather a society for an exchange among progressive education's theorists and practitioners on the social purpose of education.

It was at an October, 1934 meeting which followed this initial gathering that Harold Rugg and George Counts assumed leadership with Newlon for the formation of the Society. Despite Tanner's argument that the John Dewey Society was a national organization, the influence of Teachers College on the Society is well evidenced with 18 of 67 charter members affiliated with this one institution. In February, 1935, William H. Kilpatrick, perhaps the most noted proponent of popular individual learner progressivism, assumed the presidency of the nascent organization, a role he held for two decades.

Tanner portrays a significant activity of the Society over the next two decades as coming to the defense of two periodicals which served as vehicles for proponents of democratic education, *The Social Frontier* and *Progressive Education*. These publications indicate a tension which existed in the "progressive" movement between those who emphasized the role public education in the United States could assume in promoting a new democratic socialist world order and progressive educators whose primary concern was for a learner interest-based curriculum and instructional methods. *The Social Frontier* provided a forum for social-centered experientialists; *Progressive Education* was a forum for learner-centered experientialists and for those who aspired to reconcile learner interest-based instruction with mainstream education. The John Dewey Society took control of *The Social Frontier* in October, 1937 and provided editorial direction until the periodical ceased publication. Tanner does not comment on the editorial changes which the reconstructionist *The Social Frontier* underwent as a result of John Dewey Society sponsorship.

An evolution in the identity of the John Dewey Society in the first 20 years of its existence is evident in Tanner's exploration of the relationship of the Society with the Progressive Education Association. In 1940, a suggested merger of the John Dewey Society with the Progressive Education Association was narrowly voted down with Tanner suggesting that the failure of the Progressive Education Association to support a platform for social change was a significant factor in the failure to consolidate efforts. However, during the next five years the political climate had changed and so had the political inclinations of the leadership of the John Dewey Society and the Progressive Education Association. By 1946 the American Progressive Association had become the American Education Fellowship and was under the leadership of reconstructionist Theodore Brameld and Joan DeBoer. In a revelatory letter from Kilpatrick, president of the John Dewey Society, to W.O. Stanley, Kilpatrick states reservations about affiliating the John Dewey Society with the left-leaning American Education Fellowship and even suggests the possibility of

a "membership test" to ensure that communist association with the organization is purged. Social reform is no longer a clarion call of the Society. The Society's modest effort to salvage the renamed Progressive Education Association's *Progressive Education* in 1956-57 during its final days reflects this understated political profile.

Despite limited membership and financial resources, Tanner credits the yearbook series of the John Dewey Society as a lasting contribution to American educational thought, a series which consistently included a representation of important contemporary scholars in educational thought.

Tanner's insights regarding the origins of the John Dewey Society, its evolution of identity, and its involvement in "crusading" for the expansion of democracy in American education provide anchors for the construction of his narrative. Nonetheless, new questions arise from reading the history that Tanner does not address. One striking curiosity is how William Kilpatrick came to extend such a long and pervasive influence on the John Dewey Society. This is particularly intriguing since, as Tanner notes:

Although Kilpatrick was to play a leading role in the activities of the John Dewey Society, his name was absent from the original lists of persons compiled by Harap and Newlon to be invited to the Cleveland meeting of February 25, 1934. (p. 17)

Another question unanswered is how Kilpatrick and the John Dewey Society gained editorial control of *The Social Frontier*, a periodical associated with advocates of social reconstruction, a platform somewhat distanced from Kilpatrick's educational perspective.

It is also interesting to note that Boyd Bode, despite his prominence in experientialist education at the time, was absent from the charter membership roster, although Bode as well as Dewey and other important figures in American liberal thought were installed as "outside fellows." Bode was engaged in John Dewey Society activities as presenter at meetings, contributor to the Yearbook series, and discussant, by Ralph Tyler's account, in the Ohio State University meetings of the John Dewey Society members. That Bode was apparently not a subscribing member of the John Dewey Society is an interesting situation on which Tanner does not speculate.

These points for further inquiry do not, however, detract from either the quality of Tanner's scholarship or his narrative. *Crusade for Democracy* is a fine retrospective on the dynamic character of an organization that has had a significant impact on educational thought in North America.

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