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Victor Acker, *The French Educator Célestin Freinet (1896-1966): An Inquiry into How His Ideas Shaped Education*. Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2007. xvi + 108 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$55.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-7391-1923-0 / 978-0-7391-1923-5; \$22.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-7391-1924-9 / 978-0-7391-1924-2.

Review by David Clandfield, University of Toronto.

Célestin Freinet was one of the most influential twentieth-century teachers associated with the European progressive education movement *L'Éducation Nouvelle*. His "Modern School" movement (*la pédagogie Freinet*) grew from his experiences as an elementary schoolteacher from 1920 to the 1960s in the back-country of the southern French *département* of Alpes-Maritimes. Like most of his progressive contemporaries he practiced and promoted a child-centered education predicated on the close observation of his pupils' learning practices and motivations. He favored the use of simplified but modern communications technologies of his time, such as pupil-operated printing presses and movie cameras. He also developed a wide range of collaborative classroom procedures and techniques from the production and circulation of school magazines and the display of school work for the community to classroom organization and the administration of discipline. He firmly believed in this modern school as an agent for progressive social change in a world shaken by wars, intolerance and poverty.

Although there is now a growing body of English-language scholarship on Freinet's educational writings and career, the record is still sparse given both the volume of his writings and the place that he occupies in French-language scholarship on twentieth-century pedagogy, not to mention elsewhere in Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America. Over the last thirty years or so, William B. Lee has written about Freinet, periodically musing on why the movement has not penetrated the North American consciousness.[1] Since the 1990s, Nicholas Beattie in England has been making it his business to explain the failure of Freinet pedagogy to take hold there.[2] The first significant translations of Freinet's writings began appearing in English in 1990.[3]

Victor Acker has joined those who have been unearthing Freinet pedagogy and bringing it to English-language readers. In eight years he has produced books in English and French derived from his doctoral thesis.[4] Now, he has moved on from his thesis to a book focusing on two cornerstones of Freinet's pedagogy.

This book is refreshingly short as eighty-eight pages of discursive text precede a selected, un-annotated bibliography (Chapter Six). However, this bibliography, like those of his earlier work, reveals both the strength of Acker's contribution to Freinet scholarship as well as its shortcomings. He has clearly familiarized himself with Freinet's writings very well, tracking down little known articles and critiques alongside the standard texts. These are amply quoted throughout the book, much in the way that Freinet's wife Elise punctuated her own accounts. But the study is marred by some surprising omissions. Only two of Elise's three accounts are listed and the most important of the three is absent.[5] More serious, however, is the systematic omission of any work published in English, except for his own. That extends to the omission of references to the existing English translations of Freinet's work, an inexplicable lapse for a book apparently intended to help English readers become more familiar with Freinet's work.[6]

This said, the reader of the main body of the book will discover a brisk and highly enthusiastic account of what Acker calls the two "major educational initiatives" that Freinet brought to life: printing in the classroom (Acker's translation of *L'imprimerie à l'école*, the name of Freinet's first periodical in the 1920s and for many years of the movement itself) and interscholastic exchanges (*Les correspondances interscolaires*). This is hardly enough to provide the "complete overview of the influence of this seminal figure" promised on the cover. But it can serve as an introduction to Freinet's pedagogy for those who are encountering it for the first time.

Chapter One, entitled "Researching Célestin Freinet," places these two initiatives in a historical context. Anyone familiar with Acker's first English book will find parts of this chapter oddly familiar. In fact, at least one third of it is recycled from his earlier work with minor editorial changes and, in many cases, verbatim. It begins with a sketchy history of Freinet's life through which are threaded lists of Freinet's extensive publications, in periodicals and monographs. The latter are unfortunately reduced to thumbnails such as "Details the new education," "Studies the growth of personality," and "Explains his pedagogy." Following this is a section on Freinet's pedagogical tenets, the intellectual framework for the two great pedagogical initiatives. Yet Acker breaks off his exposition in order to detail the archival collections he consulted and the individual interviews he conducted as the basis for his study. There is plenty here to convey the fun of the archival explorer but it would be better placed in a longer preface, incorporating the dedicatory "Preface and Acknowledgements" (pp. xiii, xv). A page or two of documenting Freinet's first experiments with interscholastic exchanges and classroom printing concludes the introduction.

Chapter Two provides details about the protocols and routines of the exchanges. But having stoked our enthusiasm for this "initiative," Acker uses a third of the chapter to detail its antecedents (Buisson's *Dictionnaire Pédagogique*, Paul Robin and Ovide Decroly). While historians will be interested in Freinet's precursors, it delays the detailed descriptions which are the chapter's focus. Even more inexplicably, these ten pages also are taken almost verbatim from Acker's first book. However, once he does get to the point, he usefully documents the technique by quoting directly (in his own translation) from a variety of Freinet movement sources. As a result the concreteness of the Freinet materials is allowed to emerge and could even help teachers organize exchanges in this way. This, alongside the pedagogical rationale for each aspect of the technique, is abundantly spelt out.

Acker next turns to "Printing in the Classroom." This is half as long as the previous chapter and does not import material previously published. He describes the physical processes involved and the evolution of the simple printing technology that Freinet used. He spells out the technique of free text production, although he could have elaborated the co-operative editing process which follows the collective choice of a text to print. And he describes two of the most significant outputs, the *Livre de Vie* which he translates as "Book of Life" but which most contemporary teachers would call a portfolio, and the School Journal. The chapter concludes with the psychological and pedagogical advantages of pupil-made school journals and an account of their recognition as journals eligible for preferential postal rates in the early 1950s. The concreteness of the accounts and their justification are the strong points of the chapter again.

The seven pages of Chapter Four leaves pedagogical techniques for a statement of the principles by which Freinet teachers operate and how these principles are expected to be implemented. However, the chapter ruthlessly condenses the "many interpretations of how the Freinet-based schools in France implement his technique [*sic*]" (p.75). It calls out for detailed references but there are none. Acker refers to the Charter of the Modern School, but the reader must look elsewhere to know what it contains.[7] This is all the more frustrating as the rest of the chapter would have effectively flowed from it. A much clearer description is provided in Lee and John Sivell's unacknowledged book on Freinet.[8] The rest of the chapter is a how-to manual on the cooperative organization and management of Freinet teacher teams, but it is so heavy with lists and bullet points that it resembles a set of workshop overheads rather

than his normal discursive prose. A judicious pruning of earlier extraneous text would have enabled this chapter to have been developed more fully.

The conclusion in Chapter Five still has some surprises for us. Instead of synthesizing the earlier discussion, Acker branches into new material. He introduces us to one of the last periodicals launched by Freinet: *Techniques de Vie* (1954-1963) and the efforts Freinet made to engage with the academy after a career of steering clear of it.[9] This leads to a short discussion of Freinet's later life interest in Teilhard de Chardin, a field better suited to Acker's earlier intellectual biography of Freinet. It adds little to the pedagogical techniques providing the backbone to this book. There follows a tantalizingly brief mention of the impact of new information technologies, especially the Internet, upon Freinet classrooms and teachers. The last two paragraphs finish with a flourish, with mixed metaphors and elaborate claims, but few will be persuaded that Freinet was the indispensable harbinger of educational computing.

For the reader coming to Freinet for the first time, this book provides an introduction to some of his most important pedagogical techniques. It does, however, require a very indulgent reader to cope with the serious flaws that mar its value. Acker regularly strays from his stated objectives, albeit with a cheerful enthusiasm for his research discoveries that sometimes almost redeems the effort. But then there are times when he introduces a new topic without seeming to remember that it had already been introduced before.[10] Sometimes, the information changes in the process. For instance, we are told that Freinet was assigned to teach at the elementary school of [Le] Bar-sur-Loup in October 1920 (giving him little time for the activities he wrote about and published in that month) (p. 34). Later on the date is changed (correctly) to January 1, 1920 (p. 54). There is also evidence that the order of chapters two and three was changed very late and without correcting references to them in their original order (pp. 20, 59).

Overall the writing is in serious need of a thorough copyedit. It is full of sentence fragments, run-on sentences, syntactical errors and clumsy phraseology. The translation of the French text frequently betrays an uneasy mastery of the target language.[11] Acker decides to translate French département names into English, but in doing so he confuses the reader by muddling them up.[12] It is difficult to imagine that peer review and a serious publishing house would let so much get through. This is unfortunate as Acker has performed a signal service by unearthing so many archival documents and made the effort to share his enthusiasm. But it would have helped his readers if he could have pointed them towards the already existent English-language scholarship and one would think more highly of Lexington Books and their pre-publication review process if the published text had been more thoroughly edited.

NOTES

[1] On the difficulties of establishing the Freinet movement in the United States, see William B. Lee, "The Ecole Moderne, an international movement. What are the ingredients for successful import?" in Yannick Lefranc ed., *Plaisir d'Apprendre et Travail Coopératif: Les méthodes éducatives et la philosophie pratique de Célestin Freinet*, Actes du séminaire international à l'Alliance Française de Londres, June 6-7, 1997, réunis et présentés par Yannick Lefranc, Service Culturel de l'Ambassade de France, London, 2000, pp. 80-86 (last consulted at <http://ecolesdifferentes.free.fr/Lee.htm> 09:30 EDT, June 29, 2007). This work also lists ten of Lee's earlier articles on Freinet in English.

[2] See Nicholas Beattie, *The Freinet Movements of France, Italy, and Germany, 1920-2000* (Lewiston, NY and Oxford: Edwin Mellen, 2002), esp. Chapter Ten.

[3] See Célestin Freinet, *The Wisdom of Matthew*, trans., John Sivell (Lewiston NY: Edwin Mellen,

1990) and Célestin Freinet, *Cooperative Learning and Social Changes: Selected Writings of Célestin Freinet*, ed and trans., David Clandfield and John Sivell, (Toronto: Our Schools/Ourselves, 1990). These were followed by Célestin Freinet, *Education Through Work*, trans., John Sivell (Lewiston NY: Edwin Mellen, 1993).

[4] Victor Acker, *Célestin Freinet* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000), and *Célestin Freinet 1896-1966: L'histoire d'un jeune intellectuel* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006). The latter work bears the same title as his thesis of 1997 for the Université de Rennes under the direction of Patrick Boumard.

[5] Elise Freinet, *Naissance d'une pédagogie populaire* (Cannes: Editions de l'Ecole Moderne, 1949); with subsequent editions published in Paris by François Maspéro in 1968 and 1981, a historical account up to the Second World War. There is an incomplete reference to it in Acker, *The French Educator*, p. 73. The two works listed by Acker are Elise Freinet, *L'école Freinet réserve d'enfants* (Paris: François Maspéro, 1974) which recounts the story of Freinet's independent school in the late 1930s, and *L'Itinéraire de Célestin Freinet* (Paris: Payot, 1977), a retrospective synthesis of Freinet's pedagogical trajectory after his death.

[6] It is difficult to believe that Acker is unaware of the English-language material, since his 2006 French book (see note 4 above) lists the prospective publisher of this book as Mellen Press, who had already published four works in English by or on Freinet as of 2002. The omission of any reference to the work of Jim Cummins and Dennis Sayers, *Brave New Schools: Challenging Cultural Illiteracy through Global Learning Networks* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995/1997) is also odd, since Sayers does appear as one of his favorite people on the dedication page "for introducing me to Célestin Freinet" (p. xv).

[7] See *Le Nouvel Educateur* 81 (September 1996), pp. 44-45. It may also be consulted on the web at <http://freinet.org/pef/charte.htm>

[8] William B. Lee and John Sivell *French Elementary Education and the Ecole Moderne* (Bloomington: Phi Delta Kappa Education Foundation, 2000), p. 74.

[9] On page 84, Acker unfortunately first identifies this journal by the name *Tagore* (although no such journal of that name can be found in France during this period). The internal evidence of Acker's text shows that this is a typographical error.

[10] E.g., the CINUP printing press that he first bought for his school in 1924 (see pp. 13, 55, 66).

[11] Almost comically, the Biblical text *Et la lumière fut!* (p. 56) is translated in a footnote as "And the light went up!"

[12] Freinet was a native son of Gars, attended secondary school in Grasse, did his teachers' training in Nice, substituted in Saint-Cézaire, took up teacher positions in Le Bar-sur-Loup, Saint-Paul and Vence, and established his co-op center in Cannes. In other words, his personal and professional life was based almost entirely in les Alpes-Maritimes (06), which Acker translates reasonably enough as Maritime-Alps (shortened sometimes to M-A). But later, on page 72, Freinet becomes a native of a village of the "High-Alps" (Hautes-Alpes, another département much further to the north) and on page 85 his school at Vence is transplanted to the woods of the High-Alps of Provence (which sounds like Alpes-de-Haute-Provence, a third département lying between the other two and known as Basses-Alpes until 1970). As we reach the last page and read that "We are no longer in a 1924 rural French village in the High-Alps," one has to remember that in 1924, Freinet was not in one either.

David Clandfield
University of Toronto
clandfie@chass.utoronto.ca