

Lewis Mumford and Patrick Geddes

The following material relates to a filmed interview with Lewis Mumford by interviewers and film crew Recorded. 24.5.69 at BBC New York. Material used TV Film on Geddes 'Eye to the Future.' Transcript from typed material provided by James Wilson (in 2006) who wrote and produced the Film on Patrick Geddes entitled " Eye to the Future " Transmission BBC2 Colour Saturday 12th September 1970

1. Mumford in Study

It's very hard to place Patrick Geddes - a man like him whose whole life is his work can't be reduced to one or two features. In that way he is something like Leonardo da Vinci. If you look at Leonardo da Vinci's life as a whole - except for a few pictures you'd almost say he was a failure but actually he was one of the great personages of his age, and the thought of Leonardo means more to us today - three hundred years later - than it did to his contemporaries.

It's going to be that way probably with Geddes who made very little impression upon people around him, but as time goes on more and more people are aware of his work and in many different fields - he was no specialist - therefore only part of it is known to any one section of the public.

2. Mumford

Patrick Geddes was one of those giants whose whole life is greater than any particular part of it. In this he is like Leonardo da Vinci or Goethe - not a specialist, nor confined to any one side of life, but able to master the whole of it as very few people in his time were able to even think of doing.

My first encounter with Patrick Geddes was through his books and that came about as early as 1914 or 1915. This began our correspondence which lasted through his lifetime but I didn't actually meet him in person until 1923 when he was an old man, a man of 69 and yet so full of vigour, so full of immense mental energy that no people - that no minds that I've met, had met up to that time - could compare with him.

We got along rather doubtfully at first. He thought of me as a successor to his dead son, Alastair, who'd been killed in the war. I realised that I was not his son, had no real resemblance to him, and so there was a little tension remained almost to the end. On the other hand he was a man, extremely generous, magnanimous, even after a quarrel he would have an insight into our relation and speak to me with the tenderness and love that a father might to his son.

He was hard in some ways to get along with, he was absorbed in his own ideas, he was a hard man to interrupt, a harder man to reply to, conversation wasn't easy with him, and even listening wasn't easy because he had a fine voice but a muffled one, muffled by his beard - he never could speak effectively to an audience of more than 20 people and he was unaware of the fact that he had to be more careful when addressing a larger group of people. So, although he was an oral teacher - did most of his teaching directly, face to face, he'd talk to anybody and talk (at) length to them about his most important ideas - nevertheless he

never was able to put his thoughts in order in such a fashion that they would flow easily into a book. In fact, he somewhat distrusted books.

In some ways Geddes was very affable, very easy to meet, no one easier as a matter of fact, always ready to fall into conversation. On the other hand, especially in his old age, he was interested in having you listen to his ideas and absorb them and make something of them, and other people with different careers, with different interests from Geddes, sometimes shied away from him, perhaps because after he'd reached his old age they'd heard his particular message too often, or thought they had heard it. Perhaps they were deaf to it but they didn't want to listen any more. On the other hand those who appreciated Geddes got an enormous amount out of him and perhaps the real difficulty was that he had too much to give.

He was a man of immense vitality - this is the thing that struck me as soon as I met him. He had a level of mental energy that few of us are able to maintain, so that even after a 6 hour day with him I would be entirely exhausted and unable to go on with any other work of my own.

This extended to all his work and yet it alternated with periods of great inertia, passivity, almost laziness, these two things very often go together in the same temperament. When I first met Geddes in 1923 I had the intention of getting the material for his biography. He was a little averse to my doing this, he wasn't patient enough to go over the details of his life at that time - he was interested in his own thoughts and said that could wait till later - he didn't want me to spend my time in enquiring about the minutiae of his life. Later on the idea of writing his biography occurred to me and it occurred to him, because in his will he appointed me as his official biographer. On the other, in the meanwhile, I realised that I wasn't the man to do full justice to Geddes. My own way of thinking had departed from his, I couldn't write a biography without being critical of a certain part of his work much though I admired it, great though my debt was to him in almost every department of my life, he changed my whole life, my whole future was determined really from my first encounter with Geddes - And YET I was doubtful whether it would be possible for me to write the biography though I never completely surrendered the idea until around 1940 when the second world war made me see that it would be impossible for me to visit the scenes of his life and to do the kind of thorough biography that was necessary. In fact, I had work of my own to do. In some ways I greatly regret that I did not live to do this. On the other hand I have been able to be of some help to the man who is now doing a new biography of Geddes and I think the full story of his life and a critical appraisal of it will be made by a more objective mind than mine.

It's always hard to say what's the critical moment in one's life, but I think the most critical moment was the time when I first read Geddes' contribution to a book called "Evolution" which he'd written with J. Arthur Thomson, and picked out his contribution as one that deeply stirred me. He gave me a new view of the world in which cities and country were equally important, where the phenomena of life in all its forms was the great wonder of man's existence. Geddes had a sense of life that very few people could surpass, and there again he was very much like Goethe who had the same open attitude toward every part of life. There was nothing that Geddes rejected, he was a thinker of the first rank but he also felt that the emotional life was important, and he thought that neither the emotions nor ideas were - (or) could be completely effective until they moved into action. This was the note that struck, the

note that stirred me and the very central part of his - of his philosophy that drew me on into my own work.

Geddes had an influence in many different fields, a far greater influence than most people realise, partly because he had no talent for publicity, he had nothing but contempt for the usual methods of getting attention in the public eye. He preferred to work quietly therefore other people who have achieved quite a reputation in town planning and education and other fields have repeated Geddes' ideas, sometimes without even knowing where they came from, without giving Geddes the credit for being the originator. There is no doubt that his influence has penetrated far more widely than people realise.

At the same time it's very easy to meet someone in Scotland, particularly in Edinburgh, the town which was the seed of his - of some of his most famous activities - he was the man who created the student hostels which hadn't existed in Edinburgh - he did a hundred things which should have given him a great reputation there, but he had the good fortune to be called elsewhere to India for - during the period from 1914 to 1924 and the rest of his life he spent most of his time in Montpellier, so he wasn't so well known to a new generation growing up in Edinburgh and the city has never given him the honour that he deserves. There was a series of events in Geddes' life which were critical for his development. The first of them was a long walking tour which he took as a boy of 15 or 16 with his father through the valleys of Scotland. This gave him the original idea for the regional survey and the importance of taking in a whole environment and not just a single fragment of it. Then shortly after that when he was ready for the University, and thought he was going to become a chemist, he came upon a book of Thomas Henry Huxley's which made him - which opened the world of biology for him and he went, instead of studying at the University of Edinburgh which he loathed at the time, he went down to London to study directly under Huxley, and it was in Huxley's laboratory that he met the great biologists of his own age including Charles Darwin.

Then as a young man after becoming a biologist, doing everything necessary except taking a degree, because he was one of the people who felt - one of the first students to feel that degrees were unimportant. The real question was how much knowledge you had and how capable you were. He went to Mexico on an exploratory exhibition and there he was overcome by blindness and had to spend a couple of months in a darkened room on the advice of Mexican doctors in order to recover his sight.

It was there he invented the method of thinking with squared paper which he was to perfect and use as the key to many short-cuts in the organising his thoughts and ideas. Thinking on squared paper instead of thinking serially the way we do when we talk, was one of Geddes' contributions and again this is something which is coming into use in our day with a much wider use of graphs and diagrams instead of depending purely upon verbal - eh verbal organisation of knowledge.

These were critical things - blindness was a very important element in his life and it perhaps made him over-value his diagrams because they were what pulled him out of his misery and despair when he thought he might be blind for life.

Again his blindness made him desert the microscope and turned him to the study of sociology and he began it directly, by first-hand contact with his own city - Edinburgh - and it was in

the Outlook Tower, that he founded there, that he elaborated his conception of a new kind of education, a new kind of sociology, a new kind of politics, which would begin with the local region and finally extend its survey over the entire world.

He wasn't a man confined to a single department of life or to a single region of life. The planet as a whole, the cosmos, was his environment although he always began with the local neighbourhood, with the family, with the region.

In 1914 Geddes was invited to India for the purposes of planning Indian cities. Various Maharajahs thought the time had come to introduce town planning into India. And on the voyage there - a long one by boat - he wrote a memorable letter, which is still in existence, describing, at the turn of his life, at the age of 60, what the prospects were before him, what he saw in the landscape around and what he expected to find when he got to India - a memorable letter which was published in one of the biographies.

When he reached India he had an enormous amount of work to do. He planned some 50 cities in India and introduced fresh ideas, which weren't as yet introduced in any European country. He introduced them to India in a series of printed reports the greatest of which is his report on Indore - a two volume classic - in which he sets forth not merely plans for the improvement of Indore itself but for the improvement of higher education everywhere - a critique of the old - fashioned university and a proposal for a different kind of university, a university that anticipated, by many years, the ones that the students of America and other parts of the world are in a fumbling and sometimes mindless way trying to introduce into their own countries.

In this respect India was an eye-opener for Geddes and it gave him immense opportunity although he found the part of the Indians unresponsive, they were brought up on formal British education, and he didn't get from them quite the response that he hoped for. On the other he got a great deal from India. He saw the side of Eastern thought, its innerness, its - eh - its eh - thinking of the ultimate problems of life, putting the ultimate problems before the immediate and practical ones. He saw this as a necessary complement to the Western way of thought which put the practical and immediate in the first place.

And so when he came back to India, if he hadn't been disabled by serious illness while he was there, he was at the point of combining and reconciling these two attitudes toward life, making them part of his own philosophy. They'd been there nominally but now he'd had the experience of meeting great Indian scientists, like Bose or great Indian poets, like Tagore, from both of whom he learned a great deal.

Looked at superficially, Patrick Geddes' whole life might seem to be a series of failures; looked at in depth one finds just the opposite. His failures are due to the fact that he was always 50 to 100, perhaps 200, years before his time and, as in the case of Leonardo, it's a - it's the later generation that begins to appreciate him. He's now more widely known, more fully appreciated than he certainly was in his lifetime, and I think that his influence, far from diminishing, will grow, because it's a general influence, it doesn't derive from any single contribution of his but from the example, the wonderful example, of his whole life.

I've had the good fortune to meet a few men of outstanding genius in my life one of them was Frank Lloyd Wright, another was Thomas Mann, and the third was Patrick Geddes. Of the three Geddes strikes me as the man whose work will tower more and more as time goes on. He was the utmost expression of life's possibilities that I've seen in my own generation.