CHILDREN AND PES

WORTHWHILE as these various activities were, it was with children—particularly the children of the poor—that the Passmore Edwards Settlement was to make its major impact on London (and world) history. Here again, humble Marchmont showed the path. In 1894 Miss Mary Neal, a local Church social worker, had begun a Saturday morning 'playroom' for children in the cramped Marchmont premises. A born teacher (and a leading authority on morris dancing), Neal had used the hall's old upright piano to organize traditional dances and sing-songs, and had devised an impromptu programme of games and stories to keep her children amused.

Mary Ward had registered Miss Neal's success as something to build on. The first Saturday (16 October 1898) after the new settlement opened, she had her daughters Dorothy and Janet don their serge work smocks and troop off to Tavistock Square with Bessie Churcher (Mrs Ward's personal secretary) to set up the inaugural play hour in the big front hall of the settlement building. Janet Ward (who was 18) recorded in her diary the 'perfect pandemonium' which met them: 'there were at least 120 children to deal with. We also had to give each child a pair of list slippers to put on over its own boots, and this was a tremendous business and took over half an hour. Miss Neal made them a little speech before we began the games, and then we all formed rings and played Looby Loo and others of that stamp for nearly an hour more.'

Things rapidly became better organized; principally by breaking the mass down into small sections of ten or so children, run by 'helpers' (and elder sisters) under the general supervision of the Misses Ward and the Misses Neal and Churcher (who formed themselves into a 'Women's Work Committee'). 'Drills'—quasi-military routines—were devised for keeping order. 'Story telling hours' were introduced, to soothe the children and tranquilize them before they were loosed back into the streets. By the end of the first year, 650 children were coming to each Saturday session. By October 1898 there were 800 attendances. It was the size of any school in England, a fact that had not escaped Mary Ward. She mused to her brother Willie, 'sometimes I wonder whether Grandpapa's 6th. form system could be adapted'. It was a bizarre thought, but indicative of how she saw what she was doing as something essentially Arnoldian.

In 1899, the Associates' Report noted that 'the place seems always to be full of children, sometimes tattered, not over clean, but always

bright, eager and vociferously grateful.' By 1902 no fewer than 1,200 children were being taken care of, the most even the new building could hold in safety. Saturday mornings had been supplemented almost from the first by weekday evening sessions, from 5.30 to 7 o'clock. These were designed to keep children off the streets in those dangerous hours before their parents got back from work.

The success of PES's recreation (or 'play') centre attracted official notice. In 1904 a small committee of four MPs and Mrs Ward was set up. They proposed that school premises be lent after-hours, free of charge, by the LCC, for the purpose of PES-style play centres in other needy parts of London. At the same time Mary Ward personally persuaded schools in the St Pancras and King's Cross district to set up play centres to ease the strain on PES. Initially teachers supervised these new play centres, aided by voluntary helpers. In 1905—when the pressure to set up more centres had become irresistible—the system was brought under the central control of a cadre of monitoring and steering committees.

In 1907 the so-called 'Mary Ward Clause' was inserted in the Education Bill. This permitted local authorities to spend money on Play Centres and Vacation Schools. It produced a huge increase in play centre attendances between 1907 and 1908. (156,732 for the three concluding months of 1907 in London; 242,617 for the corresponding months in 1908.) By 1908, there were twelve London centres administered or advised centrally by PES: Battersea, Bethnal Green, Bow (where the playground was on the roof), Fulham, Hoxton, Islington, Latimer Road, Poplar, Ratcliff, Stepney, Somers Town, Walworth. Each had a roll of around 600–800 children. They were routinely open five nights a week, 5.30 to 7.30 p.m., and for an hour-and-a-half on Sunday mornings. At this period, children called their play centres by the nickname 'Passmores' (public libraries at the same time were called 'Carnegies'—after the American philanthropist). It would be interesting to know how long the usage survived.

By 1914 there were 1.5 million play centre attendances recorded in the London area and, finally, the whole apparatus was handed over to the London County Council to administer in 1942. By this date, the servant class had disappeared from English society and the now nannyless bourgeoisie wanted to buy into this child-minding facility. It had another surge in the 1970s, when it became routine for middle-class mothers to work (as working-class mothers always had) and when single parent families became more the norm. In the 1980s, the service pioneered in a small room in Marchmont Street