Hugh Miller (1802–1856) and the Crucible of Childhood

By David Alston

In June 1853 Hugh Miller – geologist, folklore collector, writer, evangelical churchman and editor of the Free Church newspaper *The Witness* – began to publish, in serial form, his autobiographical *My Schools and Schoolmasters: or The Story of My Education*. It appeared as a book in March 1854 and was to be his most popular work – often regarded as a classic story of self-education and self-improvement, with the message that true education is much more than formal schooling. Miller's conclusion still resonates for twenty-first-century ears – the more so if we adjust the pronouns to make them inclusive:

> *Life itself is a school and […] [a person] who keeps [their] eyes and [their] mind open will always find fitting, though, it may be, hard schoolteachers, to speed [them] on in [their] lifelong education.*[1]

But the book, especially in its title, abounds with ambiguity and irony. Miller was expelled from school, aged about sixteen, after a brawl with his schoolmaster. Of the book's twenty-five chapters only six deal with his schooldays. And the book stops abruptly with his departure from Cromarty for Edinburgh in 1839, saying nothing of his achievements in the next quarter of a century. It is an odd point to end a book which was received as a manifesto for self-improvement. Its final paragraph is instead self-deprecating: he compares himself to a wild fruit tree, rich in leaf and blossom when young, but producing only a few small and imperfect fruits.

Looking back on his early years, Miller wrote about himself with the same acute powers of observation that he turned on the natural world and on the people around him. By the end of his schooldays, he saw that he had become an insubordinate teenager who had run wild. He skived off school, encouraged others to do the same and was the leader of a gang, whose members he later called his 'cave companions' after their den in one of the caves in the coastal cliffs

near Cromarty. In Chapter VII of *My Schools and Schoolmasters* he recounts the Huck Finn-like doings of his band – stealing apples, contending with the Cromarty House gardener, camping and cooking in the woods, lighting shale-fires on the shore (which attracted the Customs' boat on the lookout for smugglers), and carrying ancient disused weapons. His widowed mother gave up on him. His uncles funded a place at a private school in the town but to no avail. There he stabbed a school-fellow – a Black pupil – in a knife fight. And finally he quarrelled with his schoolmaster and was expelled.

In 2003, Harvard Professor of Psychology Steven Pinker – named the following year by *Time* magazine as one of 'The 100 Most Influential People in the World Today' – wrote: 'I am convinced that children are socialised—that they acquire the values and skills of their culture—in their peer groups, not their families.' He continued,

> *Children do not spend their waking hours trying to become better and better approximations of adults. They strive to be better and better children, ones that function well in their own society […] Children sink or swim in the crucible of other children.*[2]

Pinker was writing in the context of debates about 'nature or nurture' – about whether we are the kind of person we are mainly because of our genetic inheritance or mainly because of the way we have been raised. His point in the passage I have quoted was that 'nurture' is almost always equated with parenting. However, in evolutionary terms we are still hunter/gatherers. A baby in a hunter/gatherer band is cared for by its mother until it is weaned at about two years old and is then mostly in the company of other children. The natural environment of the child is other children – and it can be a harsh environment.

Whatever Miller's intentions in writing *My Schools and Schoolmasters*, his skills as an observer – including as a self-observer – make it, I suggest, a work about the 'crucible of childhood'. In this crucible Miller's values were formed and the 'companions of the cave' were, if Pinker is correct (as I think he is), one of the great influences on Miller's life. He was, without doubt, deeply affected by his father's death at sea when he was five years old; he loved his mother and later found her remarriage difficult; and he admired and respected his uncles. But he was moulded into 'Hugh Miller, geologist and writer' – as the signs at the

entrances to Cromarty now proclaim him – by his interactions with the 'companions of the cave' and by his successes and failures in their society.

When Miller's last school teacher – the man who would expel him – took up his post he could see that Hugh was 'of potent influence' among the other boys.[3] Miller was, indeed, the leader of the gang which roamed over the Hill of Cromarty – the place which he later regarded as his 'true school'.[4] In a letter written in 1836, in which he mused on the fates of his 'cave companions', he named a core band of nine boys. Of those I can identify and for whom I can find birth records, Miller was the oldest by one or two years. One boy, his neighbour Adam McGlashan, had, like Miller, lost his father at a young age; another was an orphan; and two boys were probably illegitimate children being educated at a convenient distance from their father's home. It was a setting in which an older, confident boy like Miller – of 'a bold, self-relying temperament' as he described himself[5] – could take the lead.

He created the stories which they acted out as robbers, buccaneers and 'outlaws of every description', he led the others – 'my boys' as he called them – in fights with other gangs, and he 'swam, climbed, leaped, and wrestled better than any other lad'.[6] Miller later recognised that when the number in the band 'swelled to ten or a dozen' he often 'experienced the ordinary evils of leadership, as known in all gangs and parties, civil and ecclesiastical'.[7] It was an astute observation. In order to maintain his position as leader he had to satisfy his followers' expectations – in this case that there would be mischief afoot. And so, together, their conduct became wilder and more reckless and he was 'led to engage in enterprises which my better judgement condemned'.[8] In retrospect he saw that there was a dynamic in which the leader became, in reality, a follower of the expectations he had helped to create.

In an intriguing remark in an early draft of what became *My Schools* he recognised his desire to be a 'hero' in some cause – to be a knight errant battling giants. But, because he could not 'find giants to encounter', he found himself becoming 'a giant' – that is, a monster – himself. He was, he seems to be saying, a hero – and a rebel – without a cause. On the Hill of Cromarty he discovered how to be a leader; his challenge in adult life would be to find a fitting cause.

As the leader of the gang Miller was never off duty; he could not afford to be if he was to maintain his position and reputation. But he treasured the times when he found himself alone with his closest friend at the time, Alexander Finlay, a gentle, even timid, boy. In later life he reminded Finlay (as he always called him) how:

> *I fell in love with you, and carried you off at first pounce […] I brought you to the woods, and the wild sea-shore, and the deep, dark caves […] and taught you how to steal turnips and peas; and succeeded […] in making you nearly as accomplished a vagabond as my self.*[9]

Finlay wrote poems which he shared only with Hugh, including one on their friendship:

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They lost touch when the 'companions of the cave' went their separate ways – Miller to become an apprentice stonemason, Finlay to a school in the south of Scotland, and others to a variety of trades and occupations. When Miller went to Edinburgh in 1824 he assumed that Finlay would be a student at the university or working in the legal profession and hoped they might meet by chance – 'I have looked a thousand times after the college students and smart lawyers clerks'.[11] They did not and something prevented Miller from seeking Finlay out, perhaps a sense of the social distance between a journeyman mason and a university student. In any event, either by that time or soon afterwards, Finlay was 'sent out to Jamaica where he took up a post as book keeper on a plantation, where he rose to an overseer'. They did not meet again until the mid-1830s.

As a boy Miller learned how to be a leader and he had an intense relationship with whoever was, at the time, his 'best friend'. Finlay had replaced another boy, John Swanson, in that role. Later, as adults, Miller and Swanson, who became a minister in the Free Church, resumed their friendship. But Miller was not a team player, not a follower. His experience in the 'crucible of childhood' on the Hill of Cromarty seemed to make that difficult or impossible. He was at home either a

solitary figure standing apart or as the leader.

That characteristic stayed with him. While almost every working adult male in Cromarty joined one or other of the flourishing friendly societies in the town – the Freemasons, the Wrights and Coopers, or the Free Gardeners – Miller held himself apart. He did not take to the communal life of the masons' bothy when he worked away from home or in Edinburgh, preferring his own company and long solitary walks. He was elected to Cromarty's newly created town council in 1833 – but then attended no meetings.

It was Miller's good fortune to find a cause to which he could devote his talents and his skills as leader, becoming a champion of the ordinary parishioners of the Church of Scotland in opposing interference in church affairs by the state and powerful landowners. As editor of *The Witness* he helped create and sustain the Free Church of Scotland when it asserted its independence from these powers in the 'Disruption' of 1843 and, before and after this date, he championed many other causes. It was said of him that 'his business was to fight'. This he did as effectively as he had on the Hill of Cromarty, although his weapons were now words which had their impact in households throughout Scotland.

But *My Schools and Schoolmaster* is more than the memoir of a prominent figure in Scottish society of the mid-nineteenth century. It a rare and remarkably insightful book. It is a book in which *boyhood* is examined and displayed with all the attention Miller devoted to his geological specimens. In June 1853 Hugh Miller – geologist, folklore collector, writer, evangelical churchman and editor of the Free Church newspaper *The Witness* – began to publish, in serial form, his autobiographical *My Schools and Schoolmasters: or The Story of My Education*. It appeared as a book in March 1854 and was to be his most popular work – often regarded as a classic story of self-education and self-improvement, with the message that true education is much more than formal schooling. Miller's conclusion still resonates for twenty-first-century ears – the more so if we adjust the pronouns to make them inclusive:

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