

Address given at the launch of *Light on Dumyat*

Stirling Smith Art Gallery and Museum, 19.9.08

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It is a pleasure and an honour to say a few words at the relaunch of *Light on Dumyat*, Rennie's wonderfully politically incorrect book. After all, this is a book where children hunt with bows and arrows, light fires, stay out all night, go hill-walking without the required ratio of adults and climb the outside of buildings.

These children are also self-reliant and resourceful, brave and honest, and, as it happens, civilised, helpful and polite. Above all, they are accomplished, self-directed learners. They have a great time and don't seem to need any counselling after their adventures. But there was really no need for him to write in his new Foreword that all this happened before the age of Health and Safety: nothing could be more obvious.

In March 2007, UNICEF published a survey of childhood in the developed world. The children that they spoke to were protected from the dreadful risks that the four children in the book faced. But many of them revealed that they had been exposed to real violence and various forms of self-inflicted harm. Less dramatically, but almost universally, they faced boredom. The children in *Light on Dumyat* are never bored.

Thousands of children described their experience of childhood to UNICEF. There was little of the joy of life that runs through Rennie's book. What should most concern us is that British children were the unhappiest.

Some other countries have better protected the unique and precious qualities of childhood. We all know about the summer camps in the United States. In Germany and Scandinavia, many children attend forest kindergartens where they climb trees. Italy has truly wonderful nurseries where children are regarded as competent, collaborating in developing their own futures. They are encouraged to explore secret passages under their ancient towns. They

create beautiful works of art using real tools, including real hammers and saws. They share a sociable lunch with adults, using china plates and glasses, and occasionally they learn the useful lesson that some things break.

The same is true even in some less favoured places. My friend John Abbott of the *21st Century Learning Initiative* tells a story from when he was headteacher of a grammar school in Manchester many years ago. Every summer he took boys to Iran, to live with the nomads of the Zagros Mountains. Every year, his pupils returned full of admiration for the nomad boys. Their adventures were like those in *Light on Dumyat* but for real. Their society didn't suppress the energy of adolescence but made use of their acute vision, rapid reactions and relish of adventure. These boys were the scouts and the night watchmen. As one Manchester boy said enviously of his nomad counterparts 'They aren't just tolerated, they are needed. They have a real place in society'.

The best report ever written on Scottish education was the one published in 1947 by the Advisory Council. It set out a shining vision not just of schooling but also of childhood. In one memorable passage it asserts that 'childhood is not a preparation for life but an essential part of life'. It goes on to say that a good school – and it could as easily have said a good society – is measured not by traditional examination successes but 'by the extent to which the years of childhood are surrounded by security, graciousness and ordered freedom'. By *security* they were not talking about door-entry systems, but the creation of a climate in which children feel emotionally as well as physically safe.

Graciousness comes from the experience of living in a community where people demonstrate care for each other. *Ordered freedom* describes the process by which constraints are progressively loosened as childhood develops, in a place where it is safe to make mistakes. These are the qualities of the childhood that the four children in *Light on Dumyat* enjoyed.

They are also the qualities to which all children should be entitled. Making this book available afresh will let people read about what a good childhood is like. By reminding them, it may help them to create a better childhood for their children.