William Heard Kilpatrick: A Memoir

William Van Til

This is a memoir about William Heard Kilpatrick, his style as a master teacher and his style as a leader of educational organizations. It is also a memoir about the relationships of an old man and a young man. Look elsewhere for Kilpatrick's biography; look elsewhere for appraisals of his contributions to philosophy of education. My memoir is simply a recollection of a great person I was privileged to know.

Our first encounter was inauspicious. It was 1934, one of the deep Great Depression years. I was just out of Columbia College, proud of my liberal arts credentials, abysmally ignorant of the field of education, and employed as a teacher in a reform school that had no books, no pencils, no paper, no course of study, no anything except delinquents. On weekends I rode with a fellow teacher from rural Warwick to New York City to take courses at Teachers College toward an M.A. So I found myself in the old barn-like Horace Mann auditorium with hundreds of others in the presence of an old man with a lion-like mane of white hair, an unlined pink face, and the voice and bearing of a benign Southern gentleman. As I rode back to New York State Training School for Boys, I might have been heard muttering skeptically concerning his ideas, "I'd like to see him try to teach that way at Warwick!" I wanted to believe, yet I was unable to believe.

Born on November 20,1871, William Heard Kilpatrick was 62 when I first saw him. He was becoming known to the press as Columbia's "million dollar professor." Not that Kilpatrick's total lifetime earnings remotely approached a million dollars. The press gave him the sobriquet because his gigantic classes limited (!) to 450 students were in the process of bringing in more than a million dollars in tuition fees.

Twenty-five years later I asked Kilpatrick to tell reporters assembled in his apartment how he, the exponent of progressive education, the prophet of meeting the needs of the learner, the advocate of recognizing individual differences, could reconcile his philosophy of education with the task of teaching these mammoth classes. The year was 1959 and the occasion was a press interview with Kilpatrick as part of the John Dewey Centennial Year observances. Here is his explanation, unedited, just as I tape-recorded it:

I'll tell you what I tried to do with my class. It demonstrates what I think Dewey would stand for. I had a large class, so that we had to do the thinking largely in advance. So I did the thinking as best I could. As to what topics I would take, were they the important topics? Then I asked a number of questions. I tried to ask those questions so they couldn't tell how I would answer them. I gave a number of statements (which might or might not be true) for them to criticize. I tried to arrange them so they couldn't tell which way I would criticize the statement. In other words, they would have to think.

The class was divided into discussion groups and they had to meet an hour outside for every hour they met inside. The discussion group must be not more than eight nor less

than five, so they could talk things over together. Each group was to have a person of the group to report what the group thought on each question in each statement. Mr. A would report on question one, Mr. B on question two, and so on. Then when I met the class I would plan to say, "Question one, groups 7, 28, 35 will answer it, question two..." I would go right on through. Then when we came into the class, I would say, "We will take question one. Now number 7, what do you say? What did your people think?" He gets up and tells it. "Twenty-eight, what did your people think? Thirty-five, what did your people think?" If they disagreed, then I had them argue it out and it was thrown open for the whole class to take part in the argument. If they all agreed and I agreed, then we went on to the next question.

After the reform school year, I taught for almost a decade at the University School of Ohio State University. University School was one of the more experimental schools of the Eight Year Study of the Progressive Education Association. I learned to be a professional educator during that period; as the Kilpatrick phrase puts it, "We learn what we live." My reading included several of Kilpatrick's books such as *Foundations of Method* (1925), *Education and the Social Crisis* (1932), *The Educational Frontier* (which Kilpatrick edited, 1933), and *Selfhood and Civilization* (1941). 1 looked forward eagerly to each issue of *The Social Frontier*, the lively and controversial journal which he and other change-oriented educators had founded. I grew.

Once at a Progressive Education Association convention I attended a special meeting called to protest Kilpatrick's coming mandatory age retirement. The protest had his support, for Kilpatrick, always ahead of his time, also opposed age discrimination. But ageist policies prevailed and he retired. I assumed that I would never see Kilpatrick again, not knowing the number of years he had yet to live and that I was to work with him following his supposed retirement.

Kilpatrick was a slow starter and a strong finisher. After being a teacher and principal in Georgia public schools, then a professor of mathematics and briefly the acting president of Mercer University, he went to Teachers College to study. He received his Columbia Ph.D. degree in 1912. So a new life began for him at forty. He taught at Teachers College till retirement in 1938. In retirement, he wrote regularly and he contributed leadership to social and educational organizations, among them the Urban League, the League for Industrial Democracy, the Progressive Education Association, the John Dewey Society, and both Bennington and Goddard colleges.

One of his leadership roles was as chairman of the board of the Bureau for Intercultural Education, a pioneering organization that worked for better human relations among Americans of all races, religions, and ethnic backgrounds. In the mid-1940's the board of the John Dewey Society asked him to edit a yearbook on intercultural education to be published by Harpers. Since I was then director of publications and learning materials for the Bureau for Intercultural Education, I became his legman in the development of *Intercultural Attitudes in the Making*.

His way of creating a yearbook was unique. I have always wondered why other editors of yearbooks haven't copied it. First he called together in the Bureau offices in New York a group of intellectual leaders in human relations education to plan the structure and central thrusts of the book and to suggest possible authors. Then he invited writers who were skillful in communication to prepare the chapters. Kilpatrick knew that intellectual leaders in a field are not necessarily the best writers and, conversely, that the most skillful writers are not necessarily the best planners of structures or proposers of seminal ideas. So some carried through one role and some the other and a few did both.

In 1946 Kilpatrick was in his mid-seventies and I was in my mid-thirties. Never physically powerful, he was becoming frailer. So, as his right-hand man for the yearbook, I traveled weekly from midtown Manhattan uptown to the Kilpatrick apartment on Morningside Heights. His home was a large, comfortable, wide-windowed, old-fashioned apartment within walking distance of the Columbia campus. The apartment building was perched on a cliff that overlooked the roofs of a teeming city area where Puerto Ricans, blacks, and Italians were concentrated.

I recall vividly my first visit. Marion Y. Ostrander, who was Kilpatrick's third wife, greeted me warmly and ushered me into the big living room where Kilpatrick awaited me. I am not much good at small talk. But I felt the occasion demanded some so I talked about the view. Kilpatrick listened patiently and contributed little. I mentioned that I had been in one of his large classes. "What year?"

“1934, the spring." He excused himself and disappeared into another room. He returned and said, “And you got a B+." Somewhere in his apartment he still kept all the names and grades of uncountable thousands of students who had been in his mammoth classes.

I returned week after week as author correspondence developed and as manuscripts eventually arrived. I soon discovered that Kilpatrick tolerated rather than welcomed small talk. The man was innately courteous, dignified, formal, reserved, intent. His mind worked like a Swiss watch, precise, accurate, orderly. He raised the important questions, suggested good procedures as to problems, gave careful instructions. After an hour or two, I would return to my office with a week of editorial work ahead. Kilpatrick would turn back to looking over another yearbook chapter or writing another book or to the affairs of the Urban League or the League for Industrial Democracy.

Eventually the entire manuscript was ready to send to Ordway Tead at Harpers. I brought to Kilpatrick the stack of pages topped by the title page which read "Intercultural Attitudes in the Making edited by William Heard Kilpatrick." He thumbed through file waited until I had risen and was on my way to the door.

"Mr. Van Til." (I was always Mr. Van Til to him.)

"Yes, Dr. Kilpatrick." (I would no more have called the Dalai Lama by his first name than call Dr. Kilpatrick Bill or Heard.)

He said, "I want you to make a change on the title page. It is to read "Edited by William Heard Kilpatrick and William Van Til.'"

I was thunderstruck. The 35-year-old leg man had become the co-editor of *Intercultural Attitudes in the Making* with the eminent philosopher of education born six years after the end of the Civil War.

"Thank you," I gasped.

"If I make any other changes, I'll call you," he said. And the door closed.

Never, I vowed to myself, no matter how long I live, will I ever fail to give full credit to anyone who ever works with me on a publication or a project. I have kept the pledge.

I had other occasions to watch him work. At the Bureau I edited a book by a young Fieldston School teacher, Spencer Brown. *They See for Themselves* described the documentary approach to learning which proceeded through student interviews and discussions and which culminated in student written documentary plays. One play was critical of Father Charles Coughlin and his magazine, *Social Justice*. (Note for the younger generation: Of Coughlin, the New Columbia Encyclopedia reported, "In the nineteen thirties he made radio addresses in which he criticized such diverse groups as U.S. bankers, trade unionists, and Communists" as well as New Deal policies... "Coughlin also published a magazine, Social Justice, which he expressed pro-Nazi opinions and made increasingly anti-Semitic remarks... Father Coughlin was...silenced by his superiors.")

In 1945 a group of supporters of Father Coughlin's views met with Kilpatrick and Bureau staff members to protest the material dealing with Father Coughlin. Kilpatrick was subjected to tirades, veiled economic threats, and thinly disguised abuse. He heard the censors out. At the close of the meeting he reaffirmed the right of young people to use the method of intelligence. He said courteously, "You have given me an insight into the sensibilities of some persons that I have not had before." Distribution of *They See for Themselves* by the Bureau and Harpers continued.

For years he presided over board meetings of the John Dewey Society for the Study of Education and the Culture, for he served as president of the organization from 1938 to 1957. As a long-term board member, I marveled at his 1eadership skills even as I did while a Bureau staff member. He would listen to conflicting opinions by people of good will who were debating policy with the passion that only the dedicated can bring to bear.

He often helped them clarify proposed alternatives. Then, with scrupulous regard for all that had been said, he would reconcile proposals and create a synthesis. Amazingly enough, his new common ground usually seemed reasonable and acceptable even to those who had earlier been disputants.

He grew older and frailer. I remember an occasion at his dinner table, presided over

graciously by Mrs. Kilpatrick, when he told me that he had received recently a newspaper clipping from a friend on the West Coast. It spoke well of Kilpatrick and progressive education. He had responded to his friend that he was especially appreciative since, as far as he knew, this was the only good thing being said about him by the press of that section of the country. Along with John Dewey, George L. Counts, Harold Rugg, and other progressive educators, he was under constant attack by reactionaries.

During the McCarthy era I was attempting to fight the reactionary educational McCarthyites through developing a 1953 ASCD yearbook, *Forces Affecting American Education.* I talked to Kilpatrick once and expressed my despair at the success the reactionary forces apparently were having in destroying modern programs of education. He said, “The attacks on education simply show that the kind of education in which we believe is becoming more effective. They only fight us bitterly when we are making a real difference. Otherwise they ignore us."

In the 1960s when I was teaching and administering at New York University, I would very occasionally drop in at his apartment when events brought me to the Columbia campus. Kilpatrick was then in his nineties. One day a sad-faced Mrs. Kilpatrick told me at the door that he no longer wanted to see visitors. "He's a proud man, you know, He doesn't want people to remember him as he is now." As I walked back toward the campus I saw him. He was in a wheelchair which was being pushed along Morningside Heights by a young man. I watched for a long while. But I did not approach him. I never saw him again.

He died on February 13, 1965. 1 arranged for a memorial meeting to be held March 4, 1965 in New York City. It was announced in *The New York Times*. Remembering those tremendously large classes which he had taught, remembering the hosts benefited by his voluntary service to organizations during his teaching years and throughout his long retirement, I worried over whether the room in which the meeting would be held would be large enough. I need not have worried. Fifty-three people came, most of them old friends. Maybe something good was on television that night.

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