

*Pestalozzi: The First Modern Educator*  
BY MARJORIE MADGWICK

'At Neuhof, Saviour of the Poor  
At Stans, Father of Orphans  
At Burgdorf, Founder of Schools for the people  
At Yverdun, Educator of Humanity  
Man, Christian, Citizen  
All for Others, nothing for himself  
Bless his name.'

That is the epitaph on the memorial of a man, who in his early life, believed himself to be a complete failure.

Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi was born at Zurich in Switzerland on January 12th 1746. His father died when Johann was a young boy and he was brought up solely by his mother, whom he adored.

At college, Pestalozzi read many of Jean Jacques Rousseau's works, particularly *Emile* which interested him profoundly and influenced much of his later thinking. He was drawn to the new French ideals of liberty and equality especially as it affected the rights of the common people to have as good an education as the aristocracy.

In these days of universal education it is difficult to imagine the state of the European peasantry in the eighteenth century. Pestalozzi saw all about him the squalor of a people living in a swamp of ignorance, the hollow mockery of the hovels that were called 'schools' and the lack of any interested instructors

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for the children of his country. The few schools that existed were usually housed in some barn or semi-derelict cottage, presided over by an elderly retainer or disabled soldier, illiterate like his charges, but useless for any more arduous occupation. Ill-lit and unventilated, lacking any attempt at discipline or control, the schools were a disgrace and a breeding ground for sickness and vice.

Pestalozzi longed to change all this but, for a long while, he was unable to see how he could help. After thinking of the ministry, he decided on a course of agriculture, believing that the best way to help the peasantry was first to improve their standards of living. He studied with Tschiffeli, an agronomist who was experimenting with the growing of madder in Switzerland. Pestalozzi became very enthusiastic about the project and when he married he used his wife's dowry to buy an estate at Neuhof in order to carry on Tschiffeli's work.

Unfortunately Pestalozzi had no idea of the economy of running a business and was soon deep in trouble. He had begun a school for the village children, feeding and clothing them and teaching them the elements of learning, while employing them on his farm. It was probably the first Industrial School the world had seen and was noticed by a few people in authority, whose consciences had pricked them about the illiteracy of the peasants. They were not sufficiently interested, however, to help Pestalozzi when he got deeper and deeper in debt and eventually he had to sell the farm to pay his creditors and, reluctantly, send his pupils away. Pestalozzi was thirty-three now and in a low state. He was reduced to extreme poverty and the

conviction that he was a failure. He was disliked and reviled by the people he longed to help and his mind was confused and worried about the future. Not for one moment, however, did he give up his ideals. He knew, vaguely, that somewhere along the lines of his agricultural school, he must find a way to give peasant children an education. This had to be his life work. He began to write, feeling that this might help clarify his ideas.

In 1780 he published his first book called *Evening Hours of a Hermit*, a review of his thoughts on education, morals and religion, particularly expressing his consciousness of his debt to Rousseau. The following year he brought out another book, the first part of *Leonard and Gertrude* which was to become a set of four volumes expounding his great new theories and giving the world a whole new way of education.

*Leonard and Gertrude* was immediately successful and was highly praised by all who read it in Switzerland and Germany. Written as a novel, the work was an account of a simple village, ordinary rustic life, with good triumphing over evil. In this first volume, Pestalozzi stressed his philosophy of sympathy to the poor and needy and his belief in the importance of Mother love, which belief became the basis of all his educational teaching.

Between 1781 and 1797, Pestalozzi wrote the other volumes of his *Leonard and Gertrude* saga, gradually building a complete picture of his ideals and plans for the education and moral uplifting of the masses. He also published *Christopher and Alice* and *Letters on the Education of the Poor Youth in Country Districts* and a weekly newspaper *Schweizer Blatt* which ran for about a year in 1782.

The years were slipping away and Pestalozzi grew more and more impatient to put his theories into practice. At last his chance came in 1799.

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Switzerland was in a wretched state. The French had invaded her, misery and confusion had spread wholesale and hundreds of children had been rendered homeless and destitute.

At the urgent suggestion of an old friend, Stapfer, the Minister of Arts and Sciences in the new Swiss Republic, Pestalozzi gathered a number of these orphans and took them to live in an old disused convent at Stanz. From January to June 1799, Pestalozzi cared for the children. When he first took them in, they were little animals, miserable, starved and brutish, unlikely material for any reformation in educational practice. For those few months, he taught, comforted and fathered his charges.

Pestalozzi was determined to put into practice that which he had expounded in his *Leonard and Gertrude* books. Alternating lessons with manual work, trying to win the hearts of his pupils by loving kindness and creating, as nearly as he could, that family atmosphere which he felt to be so vital and fundamental.

In June 1799, the Russian and Austrian armies pushed the French invaders back and the convent was taken over as a hospital. Pestalozzi was forced to abandon his orphans and once more close his school. It was a bitter blow after the immense effort he had been making and he retired to the mountains, weary in body and sick at heart. Was he never to be able to get to grips with his life work?

Two months later, in September, the tide turned for the disconsolate dreamer. Stapfer sent for him and offered him a post in the elementary school of Burgdorf. He would have 25 children between the ages of five and eight years and would be allowed complete freedom to carry out any experiments in teaching that he chose. In huge delight, he once more set his

theories in motion. The years of thought, of writing, of pondering at last bore fruit. When the public examinations were held in the following spring, his children astounded the examiners, as did older pupils taught by his methods in the following year. They had been taught to read, write and add in an unbelievably short space of time, being at least three years ahead of any taught by the old methods. The Commissioners who visited the school in 1800 were visibly impressed and Pestalozzi was complimented and made much of, by everybody.

Flattered and encouraged, Pestalozzi now decided on a big new venture. He resigned from Burgdorf and opened his own school, an Institute of Education in which he could perfect his methods of teaching and a Normal School in which to train teachers who would be able to assist him and carry on his work.

This was the high season of Pestalozzi's life. He could now put into practice all his beliefs and demonstrate them to the world. What did he believe? How did his ideas differ from past teaching methods?

Pestalozzi believed that the way of Nature was the best way to teach. He felt strongly that love, the loving ways in which a mother taught her baby, must be the first principle. The only way to teach children successfully was to make their lessons happy and joyful. Where the old schools had been miserable, undisciplined hovels, the children constantly flogged or utterly neglected, Pestalozzi taught that there must be love and understanding of a child's point of view. School teaching must interest both teacher and child. It must develop a child as a whole, guiding and stimulating self-activity, foster learning through the senses and through [p 65]

intuition and proceed in an orderly way through elementary to more advanced work.

He wrote two more books during those years. *Report of the Method* while he was still at Burgdorf and, perhaps his greatest, *How Gertrude Teaches her Children*, which was a complete account of his theories and principles as he sought to implant them in teachers and pupils. *How Gertrude Teaches her Children* consisted of fourteen letters explaining these principles and the volume made a terrific impact on educational thought of the day.

Pestalozzi opened two more Institutes, one at Yverdun and one at Munchenbuchsee and all three became places of pilgrimage by leading educationists from all over Europe. Froebel, Talleyrand, Humboldt, Madame de Stael and even Catherine the Great of Russia, visited Pestalozzi during these years and, returning home, wrote and talked about the Institutes and the new Methods and sent children to study under the new Master.

Was this the end of the Pestalozzi story? Not quite. For a number of years he devoted all his time and energies to teaching and guiding his students, but Pestalozzi was growing old. He grew petulant and quarrelsome. The men he had taught began to develop their own ideas, ideas which often ran counter to the old teacher, enlargements on his teaching, of which he did not approve. Though he still welcomed visitors with wholehearted delight and discussed his methods of education with all the old zest, among his own people, the teachers he had raised, he was becoming unwanted, a reactionary and a nuisance.

At last he retired to Neuhof where he wrote a last book, *Swan Song* and died, not long after, at Brugg on February 17th 1827.

With the passing of time, Pestalozzi's methods have been superseded, new ideas have flowered and withered in their turn but the man, who believed himself to be a failure, will never be forgotten. He won his place in history as the first Modern Educator and that title can

never be taken from him. The Saviour of the Poor, the Father of Orphans, Educator of Humanity is still remembered. When the Swiss threw open their frontiers to the war-driven children of Europe in 1945, they remembered the man who had fathered the orphans of an earlier war and they called the villages they built, 'The Pestalozzi Children's Villages'. Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi would have liked that.