



Kurt Hahn 1886-1974

Introduction: The Philosophy of Kurt Hahn

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One Small Flame is a celebration of the influence of Kurt Hahn’s philosophy and a mark of thanks and respect for all he did to influence and enrich so many peoples’ lives. Next to Hahn being the spiritual father of the schools Schule Schloss Salem (Germany, 1920), Schule Birklehof (Germany, 1932), Gordonstoun (Scotland, 1934), Anavryta (Greece, 1949), Louisenlund (Germany, 1949), Battisborough (England,1955), Rannoch (Scotland,1959), Box Hill (England,1959), Atlantic (Wales, 1962) and Athenian (USA,1965), the four main legacies that he inspired are The Duke of Edinburgh’s Award Scheme, the United World Colleges, Round Square and Outward Bound. These organisations involve enormous numbers of young people. Outward Bound now has 43 schools in 35 countries and serves 245,000 students each year. There are more than 70 Round Square Schools and 13 United World Colleges around the globe. Each year, The Duke of Edinburgh’s Award involves over 275,000 young people in the United Kingdom (UK) and, worldwide, over four million young people have taken up the International Award challenge and The President’s Award.

Kurt Hahn has had a significant influence on the fields of outdoor and experiential learning, adventure education, progressive schools and, not least, badge schemes throughout the world. His vision of education has continued beyond his life in these four organisations, all of which epitomise his values in their philosophies, objectives and every day practices.

The concept of the four pillars is a key to Hahn’s work. The pillars are physical fitness; an expedition that provides challenge and adventure; a project that develops self-reliance and self-discipline; and a sense of compassion through service.

The photographs in the pages that follow show how these four pillars, in particular the ethic of service and importance of community spirit, have created important - often life-transforming - experiences around the globe.

Hahn strongly believed that the type of education he advocated should be available to as many people as possible and this was demonstrated throughout

his life: A scholarship scheme was discussed before the opening of Schule Schloss Salem in 1920 and introduced at its inception; the idea was taken up at Gordonstoun and eventually on a large scale at the Atlantic College (and subsequently also at other United World Colleges). Alongside this were his attempts (and successes) to bring this type of education to a UK-wide audience.

Hahn was born in Germany in 1886 and early in his life became critical of contemporary education. At age 24, he published a book, Frau Else’s Promise, a school novel, and spent the rest of his life involved in education in various ways. He was committed to personal growth and to education that engaged people.

Leafing through books from the fields of alternative and non-formal education, outdoor and experiential education, and many more, it is hard to get beyond the first few pages without finding at least some mention of Hahn, his life, his work and his philosophy. Many works contain historical accounts but they do not illustrate the manifestations of Hahnian values in the organisations he inspired. Understanding this historical context sets the scene to understand Hahn’s philosophy of education, rationale and events leading to the development of the four organisations and their expansion. In this introduction, we offer a brief outline of the early part of Hahn’s life. Next, we focus specifically on two themes that ran throughout his life: inclusion/ expansion and providing challenges/overcoming disabilities. This provides an overview of Hahn’s philosophy, which is then followed by more specific information on each of the four organisations featured in this book.

Historical Framework and Influences

Kurt Hahn was the co-founder and Headmaster of Schule Schloss Salem in Germany in 1920 and Gordonstoun School in Scotland in 1934. At both of these fee-paying schools, activities such as sailing and hill-walking, often through expeditions lasting more than one day, played a prominent role in the education of the students. At Gordonstoun, Hahn expanded his educational ventures through the use of badge schemes to include young people from the surrounding district who were not students at his school. Hahn’s badge schemes involved local children partaking in set activities including an expedition, which could be sailing or hill-walking, organised by Gordonstoun which, on completion, resulted in a badge being awarded.

Hahn expanded his badge schemes, firstly across Morayshire in which Gordonstoun was situated, and then across Britain. Outward Bound (first called Short Term Schools or Summer Courses) a training centre where

students could go for four-week courses, followed the badge scheme syllabus. It was founded by Hahn and Lawrence Holt, a ship-owner, at Aberdovey in Wales in October 1941.

On a number of occasions before 1944, Hahn tried to influence national educational policy to include badge schemes in the education of all children. The badge schemes and Outward Bound, although not explicitly stated, were brought to the attention of the Norwood Committee, set up by the UK government to investigate educational change, and mentioned in its report in 1943. This report influenced the 1944 Education Act which continues to guide education in the UK today, and was arguably the single most influential education act in the UK’s history.



“Away lifeboat crew” at Outward Bound Aberdovey. In Hahn’s words, “The passion of rescue reveals the highest dynamic of the human soul.”

The influence of Kurt Hahn and Outward Bound extended (back) to Germany where the first “Kurzschule” (German Short Term School) was founded at Weissenhaus in 1952 and through an American, Joshua Miner, who worked with Hahn at Gordonstoun School to the United States in the 1950s. Outward Bound USA has an award, named after Kurt Hahn, which recognises individuals who have made significant contributions to the mission of Outward Bound.

Hahn, through Outward Bound, is considered influential in the wider context of experiential education. This influence is illustrated by the Association for Experiential Education, in 1983, inaugurating the Kurt Hahn Address which has continued since. This Address is awarded annually to the person who exemplifies the Kurt Hahn spirit in contributing to the development and advancement of experiential education.

Hahn’s influence has reached other countries through Outward Bound, but also with other organisations and people, such as Project Hahn in Australia and Finland with the interest shown there by Professor Matti Telemaki. The name Outward Bound is now an international brand and is so well known that, in many locations, the term is now being used synonymously with outdoor pursuits.

In a UK context, Hahn, alongside the scouting movement and Brathay Hall, is cited as having had an important influence on the provision and philosophy of outdoor education. Various authors believe that this influence extends to much of the current practice seen in the UK. None of this is particularly surprising given that Hahn lived a large part of his life in the UK and is probably best

known here for starting Gordonstoun School and Outward Bound at Aberdovey.

The extent of Hahn’s influence can also be seen through The Duke of Edinburgh’s Award. The award was first introduced in 1956 by former Salem and Gordonstoun student HRH Prince Philip at the instigation of Hahn, but it is a direct descendent of his badge schemes at Gordonstoun. It was to be “A Scheme...to meet the increasing need, under modern conditions, to provide incentives and opportunities for young people to achieve a balanced development for their character and physique, in preparation for citizenship.” Each participant has to complete an expedition (and also a service, a Skills Section and physical recreation) to obtain the Award, which can be traced back to the earlier badge schemes. There are three levels of the Award - Bronze, Silver and Gold - each requiring a greater level of personal commitment. Since 1956, four million people have taken part in the award in the UK.

International expansion followed in 1958. Representatives of the Award Programme worldwide founded The Duke of Edinburgh’s Award International Association (also known as The International Award Association or IAA). The IAA is the “governing body for all countries that offer The Duke of Edinburgh’s Award programmes, including the UK”. It is made up of 59 National Award Authorities and over 200 Independent Operators in more than 60 countries. Duke of Edinburgh’s Award programmes now operate in 132 countries under a variety of titles including e.g., The International Award for Young People, The President’s Award, The National Youth Achievement Award, Das Internationale Jugendprogramm and The Congressional Award. The title of the programme may vary, but the underlying philosophy and basic principles of operation are the same.

What is perhaps less well known is Hahn’s association with Round Square and the United World Colleges. They both follow Hahn’s educational philosophy and both organisations contain, inter alia, outdoor activities and social services and, furthermore, a decisive commitment to international understanding and the recognition of cultural differences.

In 1962, the United World College of the Atlantic was founded “to engage young people from all nations in finding peaceful means to bring together a world divided by political, racial and socio-economic barriers”. The Atlantic College at St. Donat’s Castle in Wales has three fathers: Kurt Hahn, the founding Headmaster Rear Admiral Desmond Hoare, and Air Marshal

12 Hahn said, “Expeditions can greatly contribute towards building strength of character.” Shown here, a 1930s expedition of Gordonstoun students in England’s Lake District.