

Stuart Semple

Exceptional Years: Edgar Friedenbergr at Dalhousie, 1970-86

“There is no odor so bad as that which arises from goodness tainted...If I know for a certainty that a man was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my life.”

- Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

In June of 1986 Edgar Friedenbergr retired as a Professor of Education at Dalhousie and, by an earlier action of the Senate, was accorded the title Professor Emeritus. His term of appointment, lasting sixteen years, had coincided with a period of considerable change in the Department of Education, invariably prompting speculation as to the impact he might have had on the department as a whole. Indeed, he himself has pondered the same question, though always, and characteristically, in respect of individual people rather than the institutional structures within which they worked. It is, of course, one thing to consider a distinguished scholar's contribution to his chosen field of study; quite another his impact upon a department in which work almost daily comes into contact with institutional policy, campus politics, and the highly subjective element of interpersonal relations. Nevertheless, this paper is designed to address Edgar Friedenbergr's working relationships within the department and it leaves to others the task of appraising the scholarly work which brought him recognition far beyond Dalhousie.

The department to which Professor Friedenbergr came in 1970 was beginning almost two decades of change after the retirement in 1969 of its former Head, Professor Alexander S. Mowat, and the appointment that year of the present writer as Acting Chair and later, Chair. Under Mowat's leadership of thirty years, it had discharged a mandate which was understood by all, despite doubt among some academics at Dalhousie that teacher-education was a legitimate activity at all for a department within Arts and Science. Fundamental to its work had been the assumption that most of the graduates in Education would

become teachers in the public schools of Nova Scotia. Therefore, as teaching opportunities increased throughout the province, so too did enrolments in Education at Dalhousie and its fellow institutions, even to the point of placing severe strain on existing faculty resources. This assumption, however, like the department's mandate as a whole, was one of several to undergo re-examination during the nineteen-seventies; another was the practice of admitting all qualified applicants with Arts or Science degrees to its preservice programme for the Bachelor of Education degree. In 1970 an initial attempt was made to limit enrolments. The following year, arrangements were made with the department's counterpart at nearby Mount Saint Vincent University, one of the two other universities in Halifax at that time, which provided for some exchange of faculty and students, the rationalizing of certain course offerings, and an understanding concerning future proportions of elementary and secondary enrolments. Representatives of the three Halifax universities — Dalhousie, Mount Saint Vincent, and Saint Mary's University — also met at Dalhousie that year to discuss problems posed by multiple applications for admission to their B.Ed. programmes. More readily apparent to the observer, however, was the change in faculty membership of the department itself. There were eleven full-time faculty members in 1969-70 and only twelve in 1970-71, but nine of the latter had been newly appointed that year. For the department, then, the decade had begun with two initiatives: administrative liaison with other institutions, particularly Mount Saint Vincent, and the appointment of staff whose work was destined to bring the department closer to the mainstream of academic life at Dalhousie.

Edgar Friedenbergr was one of those joining the department in 1970, though in circumstances markedly different from those of his colleagues. The Dean of Arts and Science, Dr. Guy MacLean, had learnt through a third party that Friedenbergr might be persuaded to come to Dalhousie from his position at the State University of New York in Buffalo. His working life to that point had been spent in American institutions; his scholarly work drew heavily on the American context and he had had no long-range goal of migrating to any other region of the world. Now, in the early years of the Nixon administration, and with the Vietnam war already driving many of his younger compatriots to Canada, he found himself considering precisely that option. He came to Dalhousie neither to join a senior group of scholars already working in his field nor to establish one with people who accompanied him. Instead he came as a solitary scholar with an international reputation. Edgar Friedenbergr was the most distinguished academic to join the Department of Education that year: he was also a person

deeply affected by events in his homeland and his departure was the strongest response he could make to what the war had done to American society in general, and its campuses in particular. Elements of his resulting distress were similar to those of many a refugee compelled by events to leave his homeland.

These circumstances were to bear directly upon his early relations within the department. At its meetings he would describe his recent experiences with passion, attention to detail, and a sense of immediacy. For him the occasions seemed cathartic. For his colleagues, however, already preoccupied with establishing themselves in new surroundings and careers, the same occasions proved traumatic, for Friedenbergs assumed a more intimate knowledge of American affairs than his listeners possessed, and he had yet to recognize, as he would in later writings, that the Canadian view of law, order, and individual rights was not identical to that of the Americans. Consequently, personal impressions from those early days were often intense and were to prove remarkably durable throughout his tenure at Dalhousie. From the beginning it was clear that Edgar Friedenbergs was a person to whom no one could remain indifferent.

The department made considerable progress during the nineteen-seventies, first with Doris Dyke as its Chair and later William Hare, its growing self-confidence and stability being reflected in academic output and the development of new programmes. It was aided in this by improved relations with the Atlantic Institute of Education following the retirement of its founding director, Joseph Lauwerys, and the appointment of William Hamilton as his successor. A Nova Scotian, former teacher, and experienced principal, Hamilton had the trained historian's understanding of the background of teacher education in the province, as well as an extensive set of personal contacts within the profession. Under his directorship, the Institute focused increasingly on those areas of need, including professional development, which the universities had been unable to meet. In this improved atmosphere faculty members at Dalhousie were able to devote their energies, with some confidence, to the strengthening of Education within the university community.¹ Whereas the earlier friction between the department and A.I.E. had been institutional in nature, and of little direct concern to Edgar Friedenbergs, the new circumstances were ones in which his scholarship and academic prestige could be employed to the full.

During Doris Dyke's term as Chair, a second series of appointments increased the size of the department to the largest it has ever been. Facilities were improved, faculty members began to be elected with growing frequency to administrative committees of the university, and the department acquired a "progressive" image on campus: it pros-

pered. Therefore, when it was given the opportunity to move to its present location in the centre of campus, during William Hare's term as Chair, the move was one welcomed by all sections of the faculty. Meanwhile, the appointments made during Doris Dyke's term of office had greatly increased the department's strength in Educational Foundations, for all of the new staff had a wide understanding of the nature and purpose of education, regardless of whether they worked formally in one of the foundational disciplines of history, philosophy, psychology, or sociology. This strength was now to be reflected in several developments which suggested a consensus on important issues in education. In a response to the Graham Royal Commission drafted for it by Edgar Friedenberg, William Hare, and Eric Ricker, the department expressed opposition to the proposal that the Nova Scotia Teachers' College be relocated on the Dalhousie campus, and it disavowed any imperial designs on other programmes of teacher education in the province. On the contrary, it urged the value of diversity and asserted the right of university departments to reflect unhindered in their programmes the fruits of their scholarly research. For Dalhousie this meant, by implication, the right to adopt a critical stance towards school practices if such was warranted by that research. The second development in this period was the successful submission of a proposal for a Ph.D. programme in Education at Dalhousie; the only one of its type in the Maritimes. Again, the initial document had been drafted for the department by Doris Dyke, Edgar Friedenberg, and William Hare and, consistent with the strengths and interests of the department, it was grounded in the theoretical study of Educational Foundations. Notwithstanding the proposal's own merits, many people recognized that the presence of a scholar of Friedenberg's rank had been vital to its success. A third development was the establishment of a Master of Education programme, without thesis, which not only met the needs of growing numbers of applicants but also strengthened scholarly links between existing M.A. programmes and the new Ph.D. programme.

These developments reflected the view that Education was a legitimate field of academic inquiry and not only a training programme for teachers. It was a view keenly held by Friedenberg and one which also commanded strong support within the department. Though undergraduates at Dalhousie had been able to take courses in Education toward subsequent diplomas and B.Ed. degrees, the change in viewpoint meant that courses in education could also be seen as legitimate parts of a liberal arts programme, regardless of any intent to enter the teaching profession. The developments made possible by this change have become distinguishing features of the department and a benefit to

other faculties in the university for which it provides service courses. They have also fostered the growth of enrolments in adult continuing education. To the cynic these developments might have seemed a response to a shrinking job market as the decade advanced. Instead, they were a logical outgrowth of the view that Education was a field of academic inquiry and that critical viewpoints generated by that inquiry should be freely disseminated.

Among the province's teaching profession, however, some of these developments aroused considerable anxiety. The radical criticism of schooling being offered by Friedenbergs, and the department's willingness to see Education as more than the professional preparation of teachers, combined to persuade many that Dalhousie had abandoned its commitment to teacher-education. Complaints were heard that its graduates were poorly prepared for teaching, even though the structure of the B.Ed. programme had not been changed. Rumours continued to the effect that school boards preferred to hire graduates of other institutions. The situation was not helped by isolated instances of poor performance in practice teaching by Dalhousie students. It mattered not that these were quite rare or that such instances were likely to occur in all practical courses of professional training. Nor did it matter that they could in no way be linked definitively to an overdose of critical analysis at Dalhousie. Far from being assuaged, local concerns were further heightened by visits to the department from a succession of well-known critics of schooling: James Herndon, Everett Reimer, John Holt, and John Bremer. With the exception of Reimer all were, or had been, teachers; and all had come from the United States. By any measure they were critics "from away," as indeed was Friedenbergs himself.

Before Doris Dyke left Dalhousie, this reaction from the profession had begun to expose a fundamental difference within the department, between those who felt that informed and critical comment was compatible with their support for a system of public schools, and those who believed that the schools were the root of the problem. Edgar Friedenbergs belonged to the latter group, for he viewed process as inextricably bound to the institution of schooling, and the latter itself reinforced by a self-protective bureaucracy. Special education he saw in particular as one of the outcomes of this linkage, and for it he reserved some of his strongest language, even when talking to colleagues. Unlike the criticism offered by others, moreover, his went to the root of the entire establishment: it was radical and therefore more threatening. To some it was an irony of the time, and certainly a cause for concern among many in the department, that relations with the teaching profession in the field were slipping to a nadir even as the

department's "progressive" image was gaining wider recognition on campus. Yet, if the attacks on Friedenbergs overlooked demographic change and other influences which already were affecting the school system, the fears of his ability to promote radicalism among students proved groundless. The visit of activist and former Stanford professor, H. Bruce Franklin, attracted a large audience of students at Dalhousie, but when a demonstration eventually occurred on campus it was relatively late in coming, much more restrained than those on other Canadian campuses, and not linked to faculty involvement or destructiveness of the type which had resulted in legal proceedings in Montreal. As for the local schools, there was simply no evidence Friedenbergs continuing criticism had produced any radical outcome among their students.

Why was this so? The answer lay partly in his radical conservatism — or conservative reductionism, as one reviewer described it — as well as his own sense of elitism. He took seriously the meaning of the Latin "radix." For him that root was a person and not a group. It described his own intense individualism, explained his respect for that of others, and precluded his forming them into cabals or power blocs of his own. Not only was he accustomed to acting alone: he was conscious of being alone, and spoke frequently of this to friends. In department meetings, therefore, he expressed himself plainly, believing that academic colleagues would be persuaded by force of argument — as frequently they were. As a result, Friedenbergs impact was probably greater *within* the department than *on* it, for the focus of his concern was the individual person; institutional structures were to be treated warily as often inimical to a person's rights. Within those structures however, as the need arose, he could still be a persistent and forceful advocate for individual causes. He was able to communicate a profound understanding of the functions of institutions in society, to challenge idealism, and to help others develop a critical stance without abandoning their ideals entirely. For his listeners, it was always a fascinating and challenging experience to follow his train of thought, as he wove his way to a still-hidden conclusion in language rivalling that of W.E. Gladstone. His eclecticism was remarkable. The most ordinary conversation might involve a journey through four or five discrete fields of knowledge. For a department, priding itself on going beyond conventional approaches to schooling, his level of scholarship was a fine example of the best to be expected in an academic community. But it was not the type likely to inspire a general manning of the barricades by radicals.

This portrayal of Friedenbergs, as a lone activist of distinctly conservative stripe, may help to explain the absence of any radical movement

coalescing around his leadership. It does not account, however, for the intense antagonism which he seemed able to arouse in some people and quite contrary reactions in others. The reasons for this need to be identified if we are to understand something of the intricacy of the man as well as the nature and scope of his impact within the department.

Three traits, in particular, stand to the fore with him: a commitment to truth, a high standard of scholarship, and a respect for intellectual discourse. While hardly uncommon in university settings, all three are notable in his case for the degree to which they have permeated his personal life as well as his professional work. Throughout his appointment in the department, Friedenbergr demonstrated a refreshing, almost boyish, enthusiasm which, knowing no bounds, could be as hurtful of friends as it was challenging to adversaries. He understood that a commitment to truth required its relentless pursuit and a willingness to concede it openly when truth had been established — even if the outcome were unfavourable to him. For Edgar Friedenbergr, all meetings were opportunities for intensive intellectual encounter, though not necessarily ones devoid of humour. Indeed, one cannot think of him without recalling his puckish humour which could enliven, and enlighten, the most prosaic of meetings. Nevertheless, one can also understand the feelings of faculty members who, years later, could still recall the harrowing experience of their first meeting with a department reappointment committee of which he was a member.

Friedenbergr respected those who disagreed with him or sought clarification of points not understood. With such people intellectual discourse was possible. Those who shrank from such encounter, however, whether faculty members or students, frustrated that discourse and were judged accordingly, for he believed that a university, of all places, should be hospitable to intellectual discourse. Some people undoubtedly found this a most difficult barrier to surmount. Yet those who managed to do so benefitted intellectually and were able to experience his personal generosity, graciousness, and kindness. Friedenbergr could speak with warmth of the graciousness of Dalhousie's President, Andrew MacKay, and still not hesitate to lead members of the faculty union in picketing the first convocation at which he was to preside. He could initiate a grievance against procedures employed for the reappointment of the department's Chair and be fully vindicated by the arbitrator's judgment; yet read in the judgment that passage of time prevented granting of the remedy which he had sought in lodging the grievance. Had he not by then been close to retirement, however, his commitment to the pursuit of truth may well have dictated further recourse. Nevertheless, he saw no reason for long-term recrimination or vindictiveness toward those involved in the action, not even those

faculty members who he knew had sought to thwart progress of his grievance in the Dalhousie Faculty Association. In their case, it was sufficient that truth had been reaffirmed; judgement of their actions was inherent in his own vindication.

Within the department he was known not to "play games," yet he certainly perceived when others were doing so. As colleagues and administrators can testify, his dislike of school-based concepts such as "classroom management" reflected his own intense respect for individual rights and the fact that he himself was not one to be "managed." Indeed, to the observer he seemed to enjoy, in the daily life of the university, a type of autonomy rare even among distinguished full professors.

For some it was a matter of concern that Friedenberg did not teach in the conventional style, even though it was apparent that colleagues and students alike learned much from him. At no time did he seek to remove the challenge from learning. For him, integration was the outcome of cognitive process, and not something to be acquired through pre-digested curriculum packages; divergent thinking, rather convergent thinking, was the essence of his approach to education.

A Canadian scholar, whose metaphysics could not have differed more from that of Friedenberg, has offered a view of great teachers which seems remarkably apt in this case:

...all great teachers are dangerous. They always ask the kind of questions that compel accepted belief to re-examine itself. They not only scrutinize established tradition, they establish new tradition. They assume the same responsibility for communication of the truth as they do for its discovery.²

In coming to Dalhousie Friedenberg was destined to play a major part in establishing a tradition of critical analysis and an interdisciplinary outlook which has continued to distinguish the department from others in the field of Education. His presence as a faculty member was clearly a key element in its being allowed to offer a Ph.D. programme, and over that programme's development he exercised the type of helpful supervision which is possible only from an established scholar of his rank. Whether conducting a wide-ranging seminar, teaching and supervising the research of students, serving on the M.A./Ph.D. Committee of the department, or sharing invaluable experience with its co-ordinator, Friedenberg's best insights were at the service of the department and its students. In ethical matters he proved himself a man of high principle; a formidable force protecting the department's interests within the university and the rights of its faculty members, whether colleagues or adversaries, and whether they were aware of it

or wished to admit it. His deeply-ingrained sense of individual rights and responsibilities made him ever vigilant in their defence, and never more so than when he suspected that they were under threat from bureaucratic action. There was consistency in the care he took to assert and safeguard the rights of the faculty union, the department in which he was appointed, and the faculty members with whom he worked. As for the schools, he remained their critic. No doubt he has applauded the recent victory, in Nova Scotia, of parents who had fought to prevent their nine-year-old and mentally-handicapped son from being taken twelve miles to a special education class at another school, even as he must have wondered why any parents would have tried so hard to have their child admitted to school in the first place.³

In recent years the department has resharpened its focus on the preparation of teachers. Relations with the teaching profession are manifestly more harmonious than before, and a high proportion of B.Ed. graduates now obtain jobs as teachers. Within the department, faculty members had been sending their children to school when Edgar Friedenbergr came to Dalhousie: they still do, though perhaps with a more vigilant and critical stance. Indeed, the Dalhousie Elementary School, which operates in the department's building, has achieved international recognition for its work. From this it would be tempting, though glib, to conclude that Friedenbergr's contribution has been eclipsed by subsequent developments, but that would be to overlook the changes which have occurred in schools and the continuing effect of informed, if more subdued, criticism from colleagues who remain active scholars in their own disciplines.

Edgar Friedenbergr's final legacy to the department may be the very last thing he intended. Almost twenty years have passed since those early steps in liaison with Mount Saint Vincent University and now, once again, the department finds itself in discussions with other teacher education institutions in Halifax. This time, however, the institutions are four in number,⁴ the discussions much more far-reaching, and the framework more formal, being titled the Confederated College of Education. Early in these developments Edgar Friedenbergr and a colleague, Eric Ricker, were given the task of drafting, for the new venture, a constitution which would foster the careful development of programmes, while protecting the rights and responsibilities of faculty members and the autonomy of individual departments. So thoroughly did they do their work that the document received overwhelming support from faculty members of the four institutions, thereby largely removing personal rivalry of the type on which such a venture might well have foundered in earlier times. Edgar

Friedenberg might not approve the outcome but he will surely relish the irony.

NOTES

1. The Atlantic Institute of Education was established by the Nova Scotia government in 1969, on the basis of a report prepared for it by Dr. Joseph Lauwerys of the Institute of Education, University of London. It was to be concerned with coordinating teacher education and promoting curriculum development. Whatever the understanding between Lauwerys and Harold Nason, the Deputy Minister for Education in Nova Scotia and his longtime friend and acquaintance, the institute's early years were marked by a good deal of conflict among the institutions involved in teacher education. The institute was effectively closed by the government in August of 1982 and its existing obligations to students were assumed by Dalhousie University in February of 1983. A number of institute faculty members transferred to Dalhousie at that time.
2. J. Stanley Glen, *The Recovery of the Teaching Ministry*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960, p. 39.
3. The Elwood family initiated action against the Halifax County-Bedford District School Board under the equality provisions of the Canadian Charter of Rights, the first time the charter had been used to secure placement of a handicapped child in a neighbourhood school. On the eve of the case coming before the Supreme Court of Nova Scotia, an out-of-court settlement was reached which gave the parents the relief they had sought. *Chronicle Herald and Mail Star*, June 2, 1987, *Globe and Mail*, June 3, 1987.
4. Dalhousie University, Mount Saint Vincent University, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, and Saint Mary's University.