

# NURTURING INTREPID CITIZENS

The Pioneer Health Centre and the politics of welfare in early 20th century London

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Draft 22.11.2018

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## PREFACE

### The Peckham Experiment

The Pioneer Health Centre was the home of a unique initiative in social welfare, known as the Peckham Experiment, which was both a family club and a research laboratory. The Centre was located in South London and operated in three phases between 1926 and 1950. In the Pioneer Health Centre a new approach to health promotion was developed. Families that joined the club were encouraged to engage in a wide range of cultural and recreational activities. These were designed to promote the members' physical health and, equally importantly, their mental and social health by making them part of a lively community.

The project was originally initiated in the 1920s by a group of wealthy young philanthropists, who wanted to improve the parenting skills of ordinary working people in order to reduce the high level of maternal and infant mortality. This was to be done by establishing a clinic in a working class district where parents could obtain advice on childcare and family planning. The group sought the advice of two doctors, Innes Hope Pearse and George Scott Williamson, who were unusual in that they were more

interested in discovering ways to promote health than in ways to treat sickness. It was Pearse and Williamson who suggested that the centre should be a family club in which all of the members of a family could participate. Impressed by their ideas, the founding patrons appointed Pearse and Williamson as the Medical Directors of their proposed centre.

This was an ambitious project on the part of the philanthropists, yet Williamson and Pearse's ambitions for the centre went even further. Although they had been trained as doctors, they saw themselves as scientists rather than clinicians and referred to themselves as the Peckham Biologists. They developed a holistic definition of health which recognised that vitality is not just the absence of disease but is also influenced by the social and physical environment in which people are raised and nurtured. They wanted to promote the health of the families that joined the centre, and also to study them. They proposed that as well as being a family club, the Pioneer Health Centre would be a research facility dedicated to discovering the biological laws that underlie health.

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However, as research scientists, the Peckham Biologists faced a problem. Before they could investigate the nature of health they needed a large sample of people that were not suffering from disease. This they had hoped to find by establishing their project in an area with a very low incidence of deprivation. They chose Peckham because it was a district with a lower middle class and upper working class population in regular employment. They assumed that this would mean that its population would be free from serious ill-health but what they found was unexpected. *“In quite a number of parents we were surprised to find the presence of major disease by which the individual was periodically incapacitated for brief periods, and for which immediate treatment was necessary. In a still greater number of the adults we found minor maladies, all causing the individual considerable inconvenience”*.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly the study of health in their sample population would be compromised if most of the subjects were ill. The Biologists were therefore obliged to try to remove members' infirmities and diseases in so far as this was

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<sup>2</sup> Pearse I. H. and Williamson G. S., *“The Case for Action: a survey of everyday life under modern industrial conditions with special reference to the question of health”*, 1931, Faber and Faber Limited, London. (p 12, in the 1982 Scottish Academic Press edition).

possible, in order to create a healthy sample. But it was important to Pearse and Williamson that the proposed centre did not become another treatment clinic for the sick. They therefore decided not to offer curative services in the centre but instead, to diagnose any medical issues they could find by giving every member an annual health check. Where a problem was identified they referred individuals to their own GP or the outpatients department of a local hospital for treatment.

In this way medical problems could be addressed at an early stage and dealt with before they became established and chronic in nature. The strong emphasis on the identification of the early symptoms of disease was, however, seen as a means to an end, a necessary precondition for the real work of the centre, which was to cultivate and study health.

### The Medical Directors' philosophy

Central to the Medical Directors' approach was that the individuals and families that joined the club should be encouraged to be independent and self-reliant. They believed that the impersonal provision of health and welfare support, whether funded by philanthropists or the State, threatened to disempower the recipient. In the Pioneer Health Centre, they wanted to provide welfare

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and social work support in a way that would encourage people to take control of their own lives. They acknowledged, however, that it is not always possible for people to better their circumstances through self-help alone. Their approach was therefore designed to encourage independent action by removing constraints, advocating initiative, promoting responsibility and nurturing relationships.

Their project was, in large part, a response to the medical and welfare reforms and developments in scientific and social thinking that were taking place in Britain in the early twentieth century. Although they committed themselves to improving the lives of ordinary people, the Peckham Biologists were not supporters of all of the social welfare reforms being advocated at the time. They saw their experiment as offering an alternative to both the charitable giving of the past and the public welfare services that were gradually being introduced by local authorities. In order to understand their project it is therefore necessary to consider the history and the impact of these parallel events.

It will be appreciated from the description of their philosophy that there was a conflict between the Medical Directors' ideals and the fact that the Pioneer Health

Centre depended on the charitable patronage that financed so many welfare initiatives before the consolidation of the welfare state after the Second World War. Over time Pearse and Williamson attempted to wean the Peckham Experiment off its dependence on charitable donations and to present the project as a modern and enlightened voluntary welfare club. But the project never achieved the scale needed to make the family club self-supporting on the basis of membership subscriptions.

Nor did the doctors succeed in convincing the scientific community that their research was of sufficient value to attract large scale institutional funding. Both the club and the research activities depended on the group of philanthropists that kept the project alive throughout its existence. Yet despite the efforts of their supporters, the lack of reliable and regular financial support was the cause of repeated difficulties for the project and in the end the Centre was closed due to insufficient funding.

### **Information on the Pioneer Health Centre**

During its lifetime, the Pioneer Health Centre went through three distinct phases of activity. The first, its 'springtime', was a pilot scheme which began in 1926 and ended in 1929. The second, its 'summer', was a more ambitious phase which started in 1935 and ended with the

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outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. The Centre reopened after the war in 1946, and in its 'autumn' years saw a decline which ended in its final closure in 1950.

In each phase of its active life the family club became a hive of activity and Williamson and Pearse and the other biologists and educationalists who worked at the Centre recorded both their ideas and their experiences in a number of books, articles and lectures. These include 'The Case for Action' (Pearse and Williamson 1931), 'Biologists in Search of Material' (Williamson and Pearse 1938), 'The Peckham Experiment' (Pearse and Crocker 1943) and 'Physician Heal Thyself' (Williamson 1945) and these books played an important role in establishing the reputation of Pioneer Health Centre.

Even after it closed down The Peckham Experiment had an afterlife, its 'winter', which began with the closure of the Centre in 1950 followed by the death of George Scott Williamson in 1953, and ended with the death of Innes Pearse in 1978. During the Second World War Williamson had begun to write up his conclusions regarding the nature of Health and Living, but this work was unfinished when he died. The treatise was completed by Innes Pearse and was finally published as 'Science Synthesis and Sanity' (Williamson and Pearse 1965), followed by Pearse's own

final work, 'The Quality of Life' (Pearse 1979), published shortly after her death.

While these two books were intended to complete the account of their work and beliefs, compared to the earlier publications by the Peckham Biologists they had limited impact. By the time they appeared, the Peckham Experiment, which had aroused widespread and international interest in the 1930s and 40s, had been all but forgotten, and eclipsed by the success and popularity of the National Health Service. While *Science, Synthesis and Sanity* contains aspects of Pearse and Williamson's theories and beliefs that had not been revealed in their earlier works, the book was written in a style that made it difficult to understand and did little to clarify the relationship between the practical social work carried out at the Pioneer Health Centre and the Biologists' theories of Life and Health.<sup>3</sup>

As well as the books written by the Peckham Biologists further information is available in the archive of the Pioneer Health Centre held by the library of the Wellcome Collection in London. This contains minutes of meetings,

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<sup>3</sup> The book was aptly described by David Goodway as "*a dauntingly conceptual work, replete with neologisms that did nothing to satisfy their critics or even to aid their admirers*" in his Oxford Dictionary of National Biography entry on George Scott Williamson, 2012, Oxford University Press.

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lecture notes, articles, correspondence, press cuttings, annual reports, photographs and other documents. The archive is extensive, but not complete, and reveals a different side of the story when compared to the books written by the Peckham Biologists. The books present a positive and coherent public relations narrative whereas the archive reveals all the behind-the-scenes trials and tribulations of the project.

There has, in addition, been a modest but persistent interest in the Peckham Experiment over the years since Pearse's death, in part generated by the work of the Pioneer Health Foundation, a small organisation that continues to promote the ideas behind the Peckham Experiment.<sup>4</sup> This interest has resulted in exhibitions and events and the publication of a number of articles focusing on different aspects of the experiment.

### The relevance of the Peckham story

One of the attractions of the story of the Pioneer Health Centre is that it touches on so many themes that were central to the culture of its time. These include the emerging science of biology, the debate over national efficiency and eugenics, the changing character of medical

practice, the implications of effective contraception, the development of a state welfare system and new ideas about child development and education.

But did the Pioneer Health Centre succeed in its endeavours? One writer, who had long-term first-hand knowledge of the experiment said that *"(i)n retrospect, it must be regarded as an immense and magnificent failure, but as long as it remained open, it had many of the aspects of an inspired success."*<sup>5</sup>

While it failed financially, a number of distinguished commentators have testified to its success as a social welfare project. The sociologist Peter Townsend, for example, said: *"Peckham was probably the most impressive experiment combining family and health needs that I have ever known. I first visited the centre ... in 1946. I was excited by its warmth and by the satisfaction that its members took from all its activities – something I have not seen expressed in just such a way ever since. It conveyed a strength of social relationship and of mutual support by people of all ages and abilities, which for me is at the core of good health."*<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The Pioneer Health Foundation continues to promote the legacy and the ideas of the Pioneer Health Centre and the Peckham Experiment, See <http://thephf.org/>.

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<sup>5</sup> Donaldson F. A., *"Child of the Twenties"*, 1959, Rupert Hart-Davis, London, p 158.

<sup>6</sup> Scott-Samuel A. (Ed), *"TOTAL PARTICIPATION TOTAL HEALTH: reinventing the Peckham Health Centre for the 1990s"* 1990, Scottish Academic Press, back cover.

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These sentiments have been echoed by many others including, most importantly, some of the people who, as children, used the Centre and who have referred to the powerful sense of community it generated and the positive and empowering effect it had on their lives. Regrettably the record of the feelings and experiences of the family club members is limited. The history of the project is, therefore, necessarily told largely from the perspective of the staff and the Biologists' who ran the Centre.

In the Pioneer Health Centre the Peckham Biologists developed an original and positive approach to the issues of health and welfare and while their project failed to make a significant impact on the wider problems of inequality, social deprivation and ill health, many of the

ideas behind the experiment were valuable and remain surprisingly relevant and topical when considered in the context of the continuing failure to adequately address these problems today.

Williamson and Pearse's insights into the dangers and weaknesses of a bureaucratic welfare administration have proved to have some substance. More importantly, their belief in the power of communal and personal relationships as a critical aspect of health, and their insistence on the importance of people controlling their own lives, provides a salutary critique of the sometimes impersonal and normative approach adopted by the British welfare system that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century.