

The house that Wills built

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When Reynolds House had to close at the end of 1970 it brought to an end an NAMH experimental project in the care of maladjusted boys of school-leaving age and underlined the great contribution made by David Wills to the evolution of specialised residential work. The book that distils his vast experience makes compulsive reading – and not just for members of his profession.

Residential social work is rapidly establishing its professional status with the publication of an increasing number of books on the practice of residential work by professional social workers. David Wills* adds to this list by the description of his work from 1963-1968 as warden of Reynolds House in Bromley, Kent—a hostel for 12 boys leaving schools for maladjusted children with no home to which they could return.

This project was financed by a very handsome grant from the Buttle Trustees under the terms of their Trust, which makes it possible for them to promote research. They entrusted the management of the scheme to the NAMH who contributed financially, as well as providing skilled, sympathetic guidance and oversight.

The set-up had everything to commend it. In the first place it had Mr. and Mrs. Wills as wardens and they are both highly therapeutic people. David Wills already had an international reputation for his work in residential schools. He made no secret of the fact that he was 60 when he undertook the appointment and that it was to be for a definite term of 5 years only. But David Wills,

at 60, is still the David Wills of Q Camps and the Hawkspur Experiment, and he brought to a hostel for working boys all the caring, the uncommon sense and the practical application of relevant psychological theory that he had shown in other situations.

The house was appropriately adapted for its purpose and there were good work and leisure resources in the neighbourhood for the boys. The staffing was not ungenerous and the neighbours were friendly. The boys were selected on the basis that they had shown some progress in their schools and that they were suited for such a placement.

Yet there were difficulties. For 2 years the hostel remained only partially full with 8 boys instead of the group of 12 which was thought to be the appropriate number, both economically and psychologically—and which was eventually achieved. Schools just would not believe that there could be vacancies; the administrative machinery for placing boys at the school did not function and a number of the boys accepted were not able to respond to the régime.

For the 5 years of the Wills' wardenship there was a remarkable continuity in staffing but on their retirement, short term arrangements had to be made. This coincided with the last payment from the Buttle Trust and a reduction in the number of boys, which forced higher and higher the subsidy that the NAMH had to contribute to the project. So when the NAMH decided that it could not continue its support on what had become a very considerable scale indeed, the project came to an end in 1970.

David Wills entitles one of his chapters, 'An unsuccessful attempt at evaluation'. Because of the small numbers involved—of the 38 boys, only 20 stayed their designated time in Reynolds House—and the lack of a built-in research programme (which would have been difficult under the circumstances) it is not possible to say how significant it is that out of 20 boys, 5 made 'exceptionally good progress' and 6 made 'satisfactory progress.' This does not mean, however, that Reynolds House should not have been, or that its contribution is unimportant.

Here, in the different chapters, we have not only David Wills's credo, but its working out within actual situations of the house-meeting, work, leisure and day-to-day relationships. He treads the narrow pathway between establishing patterns of self-determination and the permissiveness that has no principles. He describes—and perhaps is not always aware he is doing so—what 'acceptance' means in a working boys' hostel situation.

This is just what many residential social workers want to know and, as the whole field of residential work becomes more familiar, what David Wills has written becomes compulsive reading—not only for those working in similar hostels but also for those concerned with community homes and schools, from which an increasing number will have boys going out to work. There will always be boys and girls who cannot return to their homes after being in residential care and who will need environments which give them ever-increasing freedom from which they can be 'helped out' into the world.

David Wills's Quaker faith and the principles that flow from it are somewhat unusual, but his attitudes and his working methods are models both for teachers and practitioners in the field.

*A place like home
by David Wills
George Allen & Unwin, £1.75