Journal of Co-operative Studies

Vol 58 No 1, pp. 10-21

https://doi.org/10.61869/BESK6726

‘Here is the Story of Brown Eagle’: Basil Rawson, Shefstanthing, and the Woodcraft Folk

Christopher Olewicz

This article charts Basil Rawson’s involvement with the Woodcraft Folk, which spanned five decades. The primary source is a little-known interview with Rawson, known as Brown Eagle, recorded in the early 1970s. Other sources include analysis of Rawson’s articles in Woodcraft Folk publications, minutes of Folk Council, and correspondence from Janet Giles, Rawson’s granddaughter.

Introduction

For nearly fifty years, Basil Rawson dedicated his life to the Woodcraft Folk. The founder of Sheffield Woodcraft Folk in 1929, within five years Rawson was elected Headman of the Folk (1934-1941), followed by a decades long spell as President of Folk Council (1941-1976). Across that span of time, he led the organisation through periods of expansion and retrenchment, of modernisation and reform, as the organisation worked to adapt itself to the ever-evolving needs of children and adolescents across multiple generations whilst retaining a broadly socialist outlook on life.

His achievements were many. Rawson (also known as Brown Eagle) received early plaudits for almost single-handily and without the support of the co-operative movement, building Sheffield Woodcraft Folk into “the most active and promising of all Things” (Woodcraft Folk, 1934, p. 1). As Headman, he presided over the early zenith of the Folk in terms of membership numbers, before the Second World War halted further expansion.

After the war, he supported efforts to reform the Folk Charter — removing those sections committing the organisation explicitly to socialism — whilst writing a new education programme, *The Woodcraft Way* (Rawson, n.d.b, ca. 1952), which remained utopian in its outlook. He also led on the international stage, playing a key role in the reformation of the International Falcons, serving as its first President. Years later, he began the process of securing Lockerbrook Farm as a base for the Folk in the Peak District, which remains with the organisation to this day (J. Giles, personal communication, November 22, 2024). Under Rawson, Richard Palser has explained, the Folk camp became a socialist society in miniature, a “reproduction of socialist communities

in which our children learn by experience and practice a better and truer way of living" away from their largely urban social existence (Palser, 2004, p. 4).

Despite these achievements there now exists a significant knowledge gap regarding Basil Rawson's life and work. A significant factor contributing to this gap is the absence of any substantive personal reminiscence. Unlike Leslie Paul (Little Otter), his predecessor as Headman who wrote three volumes of autobiography, Rawson did not complete a memoir in his lifetime. A manuscript was being prepared at the time of Rawson's death but was not completed. It is now considered lost (J. Giles, personal communication, November 22, 2024). The author suggests that further work is needed to assess some of Rawson's achievements as Folk President, as Rawson's submissions to various Folk conferences and committees ultimately do not reveal the totality of the man.

Rawson's own published work, such as *The Woodcraft Way* (Rawson, ca. 1952), applies the broad strokes of his philosophy to the practical application of woodcraft.

What follows is a first attempt at charting the full course of Basil Rawson's life and career. The primary source used is a little-known interview with Rawson recorded in the early 1970s as part of the research filmmaker Peter Gilpin undertook in preparation for his documentary short *Our World: Woodcraft Folk* (Sansom, 1975). Conducted across two sessions, the interview covers Rawson's upbringing, his career as a political activist and his later focus on his work in the Folk.

Other sources include analysis of Folk publications in which articles by Rawson appeared, minutes of Folk Council, and corroboration from Janet Giles, Rawson's granddaughter. With regards to the rest of his life, we must rely upon the memories of those Venturers who fondly recall their childhood experiences in the 1960s and 70s, when Rawson could still outpace them on a hill climb (T. Howard, personal communication, April 22, 2024). He was the man who "brought the magic" to the movement, inspiring successive generations of young people to make their lives within the Folk (Salt & Wilson, 1985, p. 26).

Beyond the scope of what is presented here is a detailed critical analysis of Rawson's educational approach. Whilst his own views can possibly be divined from the many articles he wrote, his opinions on a variety of issues relating to the Folk, such as its early flirtations with eugenics, are difficult to prove in the absence of further detailed personal reminiscence.

School Days and the War

Basil Rawson was born in Worksop on 5 February 1899 to Albert Robert Rawson (1873-1953) and Laura Rawson (1873-1916). Shortly after his birth, the family relocated to Sheffield, where a sister May was born in 1902. Once in Sheffield, Albert began working in the dairy trade (J. Giles, personal communication, November 22, 2024). However, the family's financial stability was severely compromised when he was declared bankrupt, stemming from extending excessive credit to customers who could not repay their debts. This period of severe hardship led Rawson to experience "the dregs of poverty", even being forced to wear makeshift shoes crafted by his mother from cardboard (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 2, 8:06). By virtue of living in a housing development owned by the local co-operative society which had low rents, they were able to avoid a worse fate.

Rawson initially left school at 13, but was called back because he failed his leaving exam. He later suspected that this failure was engineered by a teacher who had taken an interest in his poetry and wanted him to take the 11-Plus exam. Though he warmed to the idea, the family could not afford to have Rawson out of work, so he left again and found a job as an office boy at Brightside Foundry (Rawson, ca. 1970s).

Already having spent time in the Scouts and the Boys Life Brigade (BLB), which focused less on drills than on lifesaving, leaving school gave Rawson a chance to more actively develop his hunger for "nature, harmony, [and] beauty" (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 2, 14:24). In his spare

time, he read books such as *True Stories about Indians* (Ellis, 1905). Aged 15, he hitch-hiked to Snowden with another boy.

> From that moment on … I realised the psychological effect of mountains, of high places, that for all man's power he was very small in nature, and largely subject to natural laws that if defied could punish. The inspiration of beauty … contrasting with the rottenness of civilisation … [the realisation] that beauty is something that can be seen in life. (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 2, 15:00)

War was looming. Rawson enlisted at 17 — "as patriotic as the rest of them" — under the Derby Scheme and went to France as a radio operator (J. Giles, personal communication, November 22, 2024). On the front, he was wounded and then gassed along with four other men. Unlike his three comrades, he believed that he survived because of the fitness he had acquired from his nascent outdoor life (Rawson, ca. 1970s).

Once recovered, Rawson went to Germany with the Army of Occupation, using his leave to travel widely across the country and in Switzerland, where he tried and failed to climb the Matterhorn (J. Giles, personal communication, November 22, 2024). His encounters with other veterans sharpened his hostility to war as "a means of settling international differences" (Rawson, ca. 1970s). Eventually demobilised after the Medical Board gave him eight years to live, he decided to commit all the time he could to the outdoor life, "to beat the medicos" (Woodcraft Folk, 1951, p. 18).

Venturing into Politics

Whilst in Germany, Rawson was offered and accepted a place at Cologne University to study medicine. He completed one year, but at the age of 21 had to return home to Sheffield because his father became unemployed (J. Giles, personal communication, November 22, 2024). Rawson went to Brightside Foundry as an apprentice draughtsman, attending night school to learn machine drawing and mathematics. Eventually he rose to the position of design engineer, planning installations for buildings such as air conditioning and ventilation systems. "How far this prepared me for my political thinking for educational purposes I don't know", Basil recalled, "except to say I was against ugliness … I looked for beauty and harmony, no doubt from my interest in nature" (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 2, 14:24).

In January 1922, Rawson married Martha Elizabeth Walker (1899-1986). Their son Donald was born in 1923 (Rawson, ca. 1970s). In his spare time, Rawson became involved with the Methodist Church, where he organised hobbies groups and summer camps for children, inspired by his own experiences in the BLB, where he became an officer alongside his developing interest in rambling, mountaineering, and hostelling. Martha would play the piano for the devotional classes and for the dances at the Church. "It ... blossomed as a natural partnership in working with young people. She joined the Labour Party and had the same feelings. I [knew she'd] adopted these ideas from her own thinking ... she caught my enthusiasm" (Rawson, ca. 1970s).

Rawson also began his socialist education through attendance of a Sunday School bible class, the leader of which interpreted Christianity as a socialist doctrine (Rawson, ca. 1970s). He was taken by a fellow class member to Leeds to hear Keir Hardie speak, who afterwards began to question him regarding his involvement with the quasi-military BLB. Following the trip, Rawson began to move his BLB group further away from drills and signalling and towards woodcraft techniques and weekend camping (Rawson, ca. 1970s).

Yet much of this activity fell by the wayside as politics began to dominate Rawson's spare time. Despite his status as a lay preacher and Sunday School teacher, and against the protestations of his union branch secretary, also a preacher in the Methodists, he began to drift from the church, who were not completely supportive of his youth organising efforts, which took the children away from Sunday School (Rawson, ca. 1970s). A final straw was the Church's refusal to provide financial support. (J. Giles, personal communication, November 22, 2024).

In 1922, Rawson joined the Labour Party, and the following year the Independent Labour Party (ILP), where he rose to the position of Secretary of the Sheffield Branch. In the early 1920s, the ILP counted over 1,000 members in Sheffield and included amongst its leadership many of the pioneering councillors who formed the first Labour majority Council in 1926. It was a good fit. “The ILP professed not the material advantages of socialism” he recalled, “so much as the social need for socialism, the attitudes to each other … the idealism” (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 1, 10:55). A confident speaker who enjoyed debating and challenging hecklers, Basil settled quickly into the role of socialist propagandist.

In 1926, Rawson served as Assistant Secretary and Propaganda Secretary on the Sheffield General Strike committee. Three years later, he was selected as the Labour candidate for Sheffield Hallam constituency. Though committed to the fight, he admitted that winning “would have caused complications” due to his doubts “about being in any kind of cage, whether it was the council or in parliament” (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 1, 23:11). During the week of the first Sheffield Woodcraft Folk camp in 1929, he had to travel back to Sheffield midweek to be present at the Town Hall to accept the Labour nomination.

Although he did not win the election, Rawson was thought to have preformed strongly, and when the Brightside and Eastern constituency became available, he was asked if he would like to stand. Ultimately however, Rawson, in his mind, was unable to compromise on his beliefs to the degree needed to be an effective party politician. “I was truly independent as I had an interpretation of socialism which was often different in advance of party line, and the discipline part didn’t attract me at all” (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 2, 2:00). Although at times he felt the desire to get back on the campaign platform, that was the end of Rawson’s political career. Increasingly, he believed that a better way to convert people to socialism was through the political education of young people.

The Birth of Shefstanthing

The trail which ultimately led Rawson to the Woodcraft Folk began with his organising of a rambling club for the Brightside Section of the ILP. As a family club, the children of the members were often brought along, and Rawson found that they began to confide their problems to him, which often had to do with their parents. “It did depress me that even in socialist homes children often needed something more that they weren’t getting” (Rawson, ca. 1970s).

Rawson’s first contact with the Folk was Paul’s article “Why not a Labour scout movement?”, published in the ILP journal *The New Leader* (Rawson, n.d.a). Intrigued, he wrote to Paul to enquire about the organisation.

> What wasn’t fully clear in the Folk’s original documents, was the need for socialist education … to bring these boys and girls to the realisation that what their parents were engaged in had a bearing against their desire for a better life as expressed in socialist politics. (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 7, 11:30)

The “attitude of peace, democracy, and co-operation” Rawson felt, had to be the practical awareness of the “ugliness of society around us, our resentment of that, and our intention to do what we could, not just to ameliorate the effects on our bodies, on other people’s bodies, but also to change society” (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 7, 15:04).

Satisfied with Paul’s response, Rawson decided to raise the idea with the children of the rambling club of forming a Folk group. This small group, he thought, could act as a nucleus which could draw in other children around the city.

> I told the parents at a previous committee meeting about what I’d heard about the Folk. They thought it’d be a good idea … [So] on a ramble in February … a fine day, during the lunch time, I explained [to eleven youngsters] what I knew about the Folk and arranged for us to have a ramble. (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 1, 21:22)

On 14 April, 1929, Rawson, Martha, and others hiked with a group of children to Stanage where they had a “pow wow” about living the woodcraft way. By a stone later christened the Rock of Resolution their Folk group was born:

> From the ancient grit-stone hill which the Saxons knew, comes our name … The 12 Kinsfolk and 62 Pioneers who met that weekend are determined that many more shall follow the trail from the great sprawling city that has long covered all except the outcrops of the ‘grit’. (Rawson, 1930b, p. 3)

In their earliest correspondence Rawson addressed the group as the Sheffield ILP Woodcraft Folk. Feeling that a name was required however, one boy suggested that, as they were breaking a new trail, they should call themselves the Trailbreakers (Rawson, ca. 1970s). The first full camp took place at Whitsuntide 1929. With more tents required, Rawson decided to organise a Supporters Council that would enrol parents of Woodcraft children to undertake money raising activities on behalf of the group. The idea of Supporters Councils would later be embraced by the national organisation (Salt & Wilson, 1985). Activity developed quickly. Within 12 months there were three groups, and in December 1929, the Sheffield Federation of Woodcraft Groups, or Shefstanthing, was organised.

Rawson propagandised widely for the group.

> Our charter is a Socialist and Co-operative charter … We regard modern civilisation as decadent and disorderly. We believe we must strive to develop our personalities and our abilities to express ourselves and our ideals … and equip ourselves with knowledge and tribal basis, upon which the foundations of co-operative life can be laid. (Rawson, 1934c, p. 51)

The task was not simply the:

> … fitting [of] ourselves for World Building, but … the more far-reaching duty of bending boys and girls together to go with us in the blazing of the trail … uprooting prejudices, traditions, and other barriers to freedom of thought and reason prior to the pointing the way to greater things. (Rawson, 1932, pp. 9-10)

From those early days, Sheffield Woodcraft Folk worked hard to forge links with the local co-operative societies, and there is little doubt that Rawson believed in the Co-operative Commonwealth. He achieved middling results. “We applied again to the Brightside and Carbrook Education Committee for recognition … We shall continue our efforts in this direction until we have convinced them of the value of our organisation to the co-operative movement” (Woodcraft Folk, 1935, p. 2). The following year, it was reported that propaganda had been carried out among the local guilds and that “all available members had attended the B and C Co-operators Field Day” where the Folk had given a “brief display of supple limb exercises, dancing, and games” (Woodcraft Folk, 1936, p. 1). Following a visit by Henry Fair (Koodoo) to meet with the two Education committees of both the Brightside and Carbrook and Sheffield and Ecclesall Societies, it was found that there was “still misunderstanding, and even some opposition” to the local groups and that many co-operators did not know the Folk was affiliated to the Co-operative Union (Woodcraft Folk, 1944, p. 2).

Despite the lack of support for Shefstanthing, in subsequent articles for *The Herald of the Folk* and in his efforts in Sheffield, Rawson reiterated his belief in co-operation and the Co-operative Commonwealth.

> We feel sure that, as knowledge about us grows, and contacts increase, Co-operators will be willing to give the Folk better treatment and on a par with the help given by other progressive Co-operative societies in the country … The children are available; they like the Folk method of ‘learning by doing’. We must continue in our efforts to convince our committees of the power within their reach. (Woodcraft Folk, 1938, p. 3)

Through co-operation, the Folk could come to understand why man was “bewildered today, poor in the midst of plenty, competing and warring on a planet which can well support him in complete material contentment if he would only unite, organise, COOPERATE” (Rawson, 1934b, p. 2). The Woodcraft Folk was an organisation which:

> Itself arose against the landslide of civilisation, fighting against the worst evils of industrialism, protesting against the rivalries and unscientific ideas which permeate human society, putting against national rivalries and class privilege belief in a new world-wide economic order and world brotherhood: against the mental and spiritual starvation of the age strong bodies and unfettered minds; against mental confusion cool, clear, scientific thought; against competition co-operation; against war, peace (Rawson, 1934c, p. 53)

Isolated from the rest of the movement, which was largely based in London, there were many practical issues that had to be overcome separately.

> What sort of jerkin did the Folk wear — what was the correct shade of Lincoln green? … Ossoo and the Leicester folk between them solved most of these difficulties, with the aid of samples and photographs … Finance created another difficulty … nevertheless we pulled through the breakers. (Rawson, 1930a, p. 7)

Rawson produced his own trail charts and visual aids and divided the "very primitive and rather vague" test system from *The Folk Trail*, into practical "digestible portions" (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 8, 1:52). While Rawson's group retained some of the traditions, such as burning their ordinary names on birch bark, he prioritised education over the escapist attitude.

> Although I appreciated its relevance, particularly at a time when Indian romanticism was attractive to children, to me [adopting Woodcraft names] wasn't essential, but I could see its point … [it] symbolised getting away from the established way, the old way. (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 3, 27:22)

Over the next decade, Shefstanthing achieved consistent growth. Writing of the first twenty years of activity in Sheffield, he wrote:

> Hundreds of children have found happiness, health, and communal fellowship in our groups. The Folk, nationally and regionally, have felt the Shefstan impact. Shefstan members and ex-members have been appointed to National and Kin offices … What were once Shefstan experiments have since become part of national Folk educational technique. (Rawson, n.d.a, p. 7)

As well as the Folk, Rawson also served as Vice President of the local Basque Children's Committee, helping to bring over Basque refugees during the Spanish Civil War (Jones, 1988). Rawson also continued the Folk's international work, which had begun in 1929 when Leslie Paul met the Falcons in Vienna. In 1931, Rawson led Shefstanthing to Germany where, for the first time, the Woodcraft Folk and the Falcons camped together (Rawson, ca. 1952).

Brown Eagle the Headman

Following some further correspondence and some indirect connection through Leslie Paul's articles in *Wide Awake*, the two first met when Paul came to Sheffield to address a Folk conference. Rawson recalled that Paul "spoke well, but he upset some of our audience … He was a heavy smoker, and I had people coming up to me saying that shouldn't be a part of a youth organisation as idealistic as ours" (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 3, 23:40). Later, when the London groups heard about Rawson's educational innovations and improvisations, he was asked to visit London to explain the idea. Although Paul remained quiet, the leadership generally liked the idea of a planned education programme, and Rawson was asked to write a pamphlet. He also lectured on the "Sheffield Scheme" at a Camp in Shornells (Woodcraft Folk, 1934).

The circumstances by which Rawson replaced Leslie Paul as Headman deserve some analysis. In 1933, Paul was absent from the National Camp at Wye Valley. Unaware that there was any problem, Rawson was surprised when, at a subsequent Folk Council meeting, Richard Goss (Kestral), Education Secretary, approached him and asked whether he would be willing to put his name forward as Headman. Goss said that Paul was becoming difficult to work with and "not open to new ideas" (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 4, 3:55).

> I was shocked. This was the first revelation I had that there was any real move against Leslie … I had a word with Leslie about it. I asked him if he knew about the move. And he said yes. [I told him that I wasn't] going to accept a situation where [I'd be] used as an opposition party against you … If there's any value in my Headmanship, then the whole movement has got to demand it … He told me, 'Quite frankly I've decided I'll not make a battle of it, I shall resign'. (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 4, 6:55)

Writing in *Angry Young Man*, Paul (1951) explains that his departure as Headman was rooted in his increasing exhaustion after years of activism inside and outside of the Folk. In the summer of 1933, he broke down to the extent he could barely walk. "One could not go on with this jolly camping and singing forever" (Paul, 1951, p. 200).

It was unanimously agreed that Paul should retain an influential position on Folk Council, and in 1934 he was appointed Chief of Council, a position he held until his enlistment in the armed forces, at which point Rawson succeeded him.

> We decided that we'd make full use of his ability and his knowledge of the Folk and co-operative movement … I as headman never tried to adopt a position of closing him down or stifling anything … There were a few clashes, but he did make a very big contribution as chief of council. (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 4, 10:32)

Paul's decision to enlist and his later distancing from the Folk was a considerable blow. Of *Angry Young Man*, Rawson felt that Paul had been overly critical of the 'Marxist attitude' of the Folk and its link with politics. Of Paul's commitment, Rawson speculated that:

> … something was missing in [him] ... and I couldn't place it. I felt that he too must be a victim of society … I forgave him his lapses … but … he was more distant from us than he ought to be. It was if his intellectual ability had drawn himself away from the masses … although he had declared himself a Marxist, and expressed himself in Marxist terms, he didn't seem to me as a proletariat, although he was obviously aware of the wrongs of society. He had a great ability, but he didn't have that mainstream of determination that should keep him straight on the road that he took. Somewhere, he lost faith in people I think and to him the church was a refuge ... I think in time he escaped from the jungle of politics and society. (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 4, 15:21)

The 1934 Allthing proved a watershed for the Folk for another reason, as the decision was taken to move away from open air mass meetings and towards Annual Delegate Conferences to better suit a growing organisation (Rawson, ca. 1952). Rawson expressed his vision for the Movement as socialist in character.

> Today's struggle is, in effect, a race ... between the forces of Freedom and the forces of Slavery; between Progress and Reaction; between Democracy and Tyranny, and the choice is between the old ways of the Capitalist state with all its ugliness, its drabness, its injustice, its paradoxes, its tragedies, its efforts to persist, and that, more vague perhaps, but more desirable community — that New World — a world united — a world set free — to which our trail leads — and to the building of which we have set our hands. (Rawson, 1934a, p. 2)

The following year, the Woodcraft Folk was recognised by the Labour Party as the youth organisation of the Labour movement, which allowed Rawson and National Secretary Henry Fair the prestige and credo with which to further grow the organisation with increased support from the Co-operative Movement. From 1936 to 1939, the membership tripled and the Movement published a monthly *Broadsheet*, a newsletter for helpers, *The Herald of the Folk*, and children's magazine, *Pioneers*. By 1939, the membership had grown to roughly 8,000 (Prynn, 1983).

The coming of war, however, proved to be singularly disruptive.

> The blitz has altered Sheffield beyond all recognition … The centre is a wilderness, and acres of house property are down. We were 'out-Coventryed' as a Coventry man told me. Fourteen folk members are at present homeless, although living with relatives they are not in dire need ... Three have been evacuated to places more than 15 miles away. I have received offers of homes from Scunthorpe and Chesterfield. Folk work is suspended pending renewal of transport facilities. (Rawson, 1940)

The war placed many of its senior members in a difficult position regarding conscription. Several applied for conscientious objector status and were successful. Others were not, including Rawson's son Donald. A member of the Folk since the age of six, he was fined £5 for failing to present for his medical. A teacher by training, Donald took work with G. Fletcher and Sons Bakery, one of the few places conscientious objectors could find employment (Rawson, 1943c). The Leeds Tribunal board made no allowance for "the influence of background in youth's life" particularly the Folk, with "a few months membership of a religious sect" appearing to "carry more weight" (Rawson, 1943a). Despite retaining a lawyer, the decision was upheld, and Donald was imprisoned for a year (Rawson, 1943b).

Through the Falcon Movement, the Folk is remembered for the role it played in the Kindertransport Movement. Seventeen children were taken in by Folk members, with two girls being adopted in Sheffield. One of those, eleven-year-old Sue Pearson, from Czechoslovakia, stayed as a guest with the Rawsons until she was 16 and later became a headteacher in Sheffield. For the reserved Martha, it was quite a challenge, but Sue was soon accepted into the family (J. Giles, personal communication, November 22, 2024).

Post-war Rebuilding

After the war, the Folk began the long process of rebuilding their movement, both domestically and internationally. At home, they faced a challenge of restoring the membership. In 1946, an All-Councils meeting was held which set the target of doubling the membership within a year to bring the Folk back up to 1939 membership levels (Woodcraft Folk, 1946). This was not achieved, with considerable financial consequences to the organisation, which had expanded its administrative team in the anticipation of growth, with Fred Kempton (Springbok) employed as General Secretary alongside Henry Fair (Koodoo) as National Organiser (Woodcraft Folk, 1949). A Committee of Enquiry was set up to investigate the whole basis of the organisation and its role (Woodcraft Folk, 1950).

In his submission to the enquiry, Rawson rejected the idea of forming official links with the Labour Party, as was the case in other countries with International Falcon members organisations. He agreed that Clause C of the Woodcraft Folk Charter, which all Folk had to sign to gain full membership, should remove the 1939 reference to the training of children and young people "in the light of co-operative and socialist philosophy, for service to the working class movement" and replaced it with "the task of the Woodcraft Folk is the training of young people in the light of modern progressive philosophy for service to the people's movements" (Woodcraft Folk, n.d.). This, he felt was a barrier to recruiting new leaders who might be wary of the implied political overtones.

Abroad, Rawson was at the forefront of efforts to rebuild in International Falcon Movement (IFM). In 1947, he chaired the first Conference of the International Falcon Secretariat, and the following year was elected as President (Rawson, ca. 1952). Like the Folk, the original IFM had focused on socialist education, but were more regimental, and had closer links to political parties which had influence over their outlook and activities. "This meant," Rawson later recalled, "that those involved tended to interpret socialism in the terms of 'the adult party'" (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 5, 13:35). The Folk on the other hand, contained leaders from parties from across the left, and focused on those elements of living and working where there was no difference between individuals. The Folk did not restrict their international activity to the IFM, and conflict with that organisation often focused on the Folk's insistence that activity had to be truly international and involve contact with the communist countries. This was a "natural result of the Woodcraft ideology" not merely tourism, but "building communities of children of different nationalities" (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 5, 9:14).

In the early 1960s, Rawson (n.d.b) published his definitive version of *The Woodcraft Way*, which constituted a comprehensive overview of the organisation, a compendium of tests mixed with his own philosophy, targeted towards Woodcraft participants. Rawson's matured outlook was

a philosophy of action, mixing physical, mental, and social development in six main groups: knowledge of the Folk, healthy living, self-reliance, social knowledge, social practice, and world. Those who had done “worthwhile things in the world” had never learnt their craft or developed their skill in an armchair at home (Rawson, n.d.b, p. 6). The aim was not just physical fitness, but social fitness. In the ceremonies and camp songs, the Woodcraft Folk spoke of their hopes, aspirations, and deepest thoughts, “of the one-ness of the human race … understanding, kindness, tolerance, friendship, love … consideration for each other” (Rawson, n.d.b, p. 301). These were the activities which Rawson felt would instil young people with the skills and character to create a better world. “It was my bible” Sheffield Woodcraft Folk veteran Terry Howard recalled (T. Howard, personal communication, April 22, 2024).

The model outlined in *The Woodcraft Way* was built on test work. Children would earn badges for completing various practical tasks, promoting personal growth at their own pace. These tasks were designed to be non-competitive and reflected broader educational goals, such as citizenship and global awareness. Another element which Rawson focused on was the importance of ceremonies as a means of “expressing our ideas and the innermost truths of our Woodcraft Life” (Palser, 2004, p. 4). As Palser (2004) has noted, these ceremonies highlighted the contradictions of the Rawson’s educational ideas — that his ideas about creating short term socialist communities where children learnt by doing could only be realised in ceremonies and rituals separate from the reality of urban life.

In February 1963, Rawson attended a leader training school at Wood Cottage, near Sheffield. The cottage was owned by the Barnsley Mountaineering Club. The Folk visited the cottage six times in that year, including a couple of Venturer Groups led by Rawson (Wood Cottage, 1963). It was during one of these trips that Rawson mentioned that it would be great for the Woodcraft Folk to have a similar centre and it was suggested that he investigate Lockerbrook, an untenanted empty hill farm owned by the Forestry Commission. Against stiff opposition he was able to obtain a lease in February 1964, winning out against local education authorities, other youth organisations, schools, and 22 individuals, Sheffield Venturers succeeded in obtaining a 21-year lease. Significant support was provided by Sheffield LEA, who were converted to the idea of Monday to Friday use by Secondary schools (Rawson, 1967).

> Basil put a bid in of £75 a year … what won the day was that Basil said … this centre is going to be used … for the education of young people … the early constitution of Lockerbrook was … as a Venturer centre. And that’s what those Venturers did, every weekend we went to Lockerbrook (Cowley, 2016).

The next year Rawson retired from formal employment, and despite warning the Folk Council that he could not continue indefinitely as Chair, he became “busier than ever”, particularly on the Folk’s international work, now “worldwide — east and west”, travelling abroad three or four times a year (Rawson, 1967). Rawson viewed retirement as a glorious opportunity to do full time what he had been doing part time. This is what he did, as well as looking after Martha.

> I wanted to give all that I could to the Folk while I lived. Anything I could offer nationally and internationally, I was ready to do it, whatever time it took, and whatever expense I could afford insofar as it came onto my shoulders. But I always had a nagging thought at the back of my mind that the time had to come when somebody else would have to do it … My feeling has been that while ever I was useful to the movement in my duty and my wish to give, that I didn’t want this to be a stumbling block. (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 7, 6:40)

How his continued commitment to the Folk affected Rawson’s home life can only be speculated upon. “We often wondered how she [Martha] coped with Basil’s total commitment to the Folk and the time he gave to so many under privileged children” the family recalls (J. Giles, personal communication, November 22, 2024). Donald, who returned to teaching in the post-war era, continued to be involved in the Folk for a time, but stepped away, partly because of seeing the effect that his father’s commitment had on the family.

The Enchanter

Despite his success in rebuilding the Folk to a semblance of its post-war strength, Rawson was, when interviewed by Peter Gilpin in the early 1970s, able to admit that not all his ideas had been successful. “In any youth movement you … have to face up to times of disappointment, sometimes … disillusionment … I started practice which eventually were dropped because they failed” (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 8, 7:15). One example of this may be the relative failure of the Senior Venturer age groups, designed to support older Woodcrafters to remain in the Folk as organisers (Palser, 2004). “Our feelings about the group was that it was our job to create a kind of leadership … Our boys and girls … either [becoming] folk leaders … or [going] into the working class movement” (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 8, 5:30).

> I realise that I had hoped for too much and that the majority would stay in and become leaders. I hadn’t properly thought it out at the time that the system of which I regarded them as victims could prevent that, not just by destroying their enthusiasm … just by the mere fact that they had to leave school and go to work, and the system in industry would in many ways kill all their enthusiasms even if it didn’t change their direction of thought. (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 6, 6:38)

As well as retaining older volunteers, Rawson also spoke of the difficulties of attracting younger children to the organisation. The Folk had taken many years to recover to its pre-war size and by the time it did, Rawson noted, society had irrevocably changed and so had the motivations for joining the Folk. In the early days, it was stimulated by the presence of poverty and unemployment, but also because the children of left-leaning families were more political. Competition from the mass media and a more acquisitive society, has made it “more difficult to teach or preach socialism” (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 3, 18:40). In the later 1960s, with young people growing their hair and rejecting the attitudes of their parents, the Folk, he explained, had to be careful not “to sink into the false position of having the same attitudes as … adults outside” (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 6, 11:00).

> These changes are there, they are part of the effects of society, we have to recognise them, and we have to try and guide them … Insofar as their attitudes, their dress, their mannerisms, indicate a revolt against the adult society, we should welcome it. Because we ourselves are still rebels against the society which exists, despite its affluence … We mustn’t grow old and settled and in a rut, otherwise we shall find ourselves in the position of being against this rebellion on part of our young people … Our job is to guide, by practice of social life, by social living in our groups, and our camps, it into positive channels. (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 6, 10:17)

In 1973, during an excursion at Lockerbrook, Rawson took ill and had to be hospitalised. The well wishes were voluminous (Beglie, 1973). His illness meant he had to halt active work on a new edition of *The Woodcraft Way*, first published in 1952, with the movement having to pick up the task of developing the new manual themselves, which a small group of leaders did over a period of three years, leading to the 1976 edition. The book was split down into a series of booklets containing a single test that could be compiled into the complete edition.

At the 1975 Annual Delegate Conference, Rawson was made Honorary Life President of the Folk. “No one who was present on that moving occasion will ever forget the way Conference expressed its pride in our pioneer educationalist, and its joy at seeing Basil restored to health and vigour again” (Woodcraft Folk, 1976b, p. 5). In his preface, Rawson wrote:

> In our camp communities we learn through practice that happiness springs from the use of our democratic and co-operative principles. Use *The Woodcraft Way* to help you to understand how and why we must carry these principles into the world around us. I give you an old Woodcraft greeting of 50 years ago — Break Trails — to Peace and Freedom. (Rawson, 1976, p. 8)

Basil Rawson died in March 1976. For a man who had been given six months to live during the First World War, Basil Rawson, a man “so strong we thought him everlasting”, his passing had a huge impact on the Folk as “he always had such a following” (J. Giles, personal communication, November 22, 2024).

> At his funeral, the room was overflowing with so many people. The presiding officer, thinking he was just coming to the funeral of an elderly person, had to go round asking why there were so many young people in attendance. (J. Giles, personal communication, November 22, 2024)

It is fair to say, in conclusion, that Rawson's time as Headman and President of Folk Council was successful. By elaborating on "his own, and the movement's educational ideals", the editors of *Wide Awake* explained, Rawson's work had become "an eloquent testimony to his philosophy on life, its meaning and its purpose" and the belief in "what life could be like if we only wanted it badly enough and were prepared to work for it" (Woodcraft Folk, 1976a, p. 1). It was up to the Folk to continue in this tradition. Rawson had:

> … opened people's eyes; now we feel his loss, and to help us in our mutual struggle for a richer, fuller life, both as individuals and as part of a wider community, we can take comfort in the fact that the man lives on … in his works, in his ideas, in his friends and family, in the essential humanity of the man, that, in the space of one life, touched and influenced thousands. (Woodcraft Folk, 1976a, p. 1)

The Author

Christopher Olewicz holds a PhD in American History. He is currently a Director of Principle 5: The Yorkshire Co-operative Resource Centre and library, based in Sheffield, which works to revive interest in and knowledge of co-operation in all its forms and holds a large library of books on co-operation.

Note

The Peter Gilpin interview consists of an eight audio cassette reproduction of a reel-to-reel tape interview with Basil Rawson, which the author borrowed from a Folk organiser. It is not stored in a public archive. The reel and minute numbers refer to the cassette reproduction used by the author.

References

Beglie, G. (1973, June 11). [Letter to Basil Rawson]. (UCL Institute of Education, YMA/WF/288). University College London Archives, London.

Ellis, E. (1905). *True stories about Indians: Thrilling adventures among the American Indians*. John C. Winston Co.

Cowley, J. (2016, February 5). *An oral history with Jess Cowley*. Woodcraft Folk Oral History Collection (C1699), British Library Sound Archive, London.

Jones, S. G. (1988). *Sport, politics and the working class: Organised labour and sport in interwar Britain*. Manchester University Press.

Palser, R. (2004). Learn by doing, teach by being: The children of 1968 and the Woodcraft Folk. *Socialist History Journal*, (26), 1-24.

Paul, L. (1951). *Angry young man.* Faber and Faber Ltd.

Paul, L. (1980). *Early days of the Woodcraft Folk*. Woodcraft Folk.

Prynn, D. (1983). The Woodcraft Folk and the Labour Movement 1925-70. *Journal of Contemporary History, 18*(1), 79-95. https://doi.org/10.1177/002200948301800105

Rawson, B. (n.d.a). *Here is the story of Shefstanthing*. (Reference FH_069_03). Woodcraft Folk Heritage Archive. https://heritage.woodcraft.org.uk/archive/item/here-is-the-story-of-shefstanthing/

Rawson, B. (n.d.b). *The Woodcraft way* (2nd ed.). Woodcraft Folk. (Reference FH_062_05). Woodcraft Folk Heritage Archive. https://heritage.woodcraft.org.uk/archive/item/the-woodcraft-way/

Rawson. B. (1930a). Sheffield — And the birth of a Fellowship. *The Folk Yearbook 1929-30,* 7. (UCL Institute of Education, YMA/WF/1). University College London Archives, London.

Rawson, B. (1930b, April). Shefstan Thing. *Herald of the Folk*, 3. (UCL Institute of Education, YMA/WF/331). University College London Archives, London.

Rawson, B. (1932). The place of the Pioneer. *The Folk Yearbook 1931-32*, 9-11. (UCL Institute of Education, YMA/WF/1). University College London Archives, London.

Rawson, B. (1934a, June-July). Brown Eagle, Headman. *The Pioneer of the Folk, 2*(2), 1-3. (UCL Institute of Education, YMA/WF/332). University College London Archives, London.
Rawson, B. (1934b, September-October). The Headman writes: Be strong Pioneers. *The Pioneer of the Folk, 2*(3). (UCL Institute of Education, YMA/WF/332). University College London Archives, London.
Rawson, B. (1934c). Woodcraft Folk: Who are they? *The Manor and Woodthorpe Review, 1*(6), 31. (Sheffield Local Studies Library, 052.74 SQ). Sheffield City Archive, Sheffield.
Rawson, B. (1940, December 29). [Letter to J. Mayston]. (UCL Institute of Education, YMA/WF/206). University College London Archives, London.
Rawson, B. (1943a, May 7). [Letter to Cecil H. Wilson MP]. (UCL Institute of Education, YMA/WF/212). University College London Archives, London.
Rawson, B. (1943b, August 31). [Letter to Jack]. (UCL Institute of Education, YMA/WF/212). University College London Archives, London.
Rawson, B. (1943c, July 15). [Letter to Mr. Bingham]. (UCL Institute of Education, YMA/WF/212). University College London Archives, London.
Rawson, B. (ca. 1952). *The Woodcraft way: First year tests and how to pass them* (1st ed.). Woodcraft Folk.
Rawson, B. (1967, March 18). [Letter to J. E. Simmons]. (UCL Institute of Education, YMA/WF/201). University College London Archives, London.
Rawson, B. (ca. 1970s). *Interview by P. Gilpin* [Cassette transfer of reel to reel]. Copy in private possession.
Rawson, B. (1976). Message from Basil Rawson. *The Woodcraft way: Introduction* (1976 ed., pp. 7-8). (Reference FH_063_02). Woodcraft Folk Heritage Archive. https://heritage.woodcraft.org.uk/archive/item/the-woodcraft-way-introduction/
Salt, C., & Wilson, M. (1985). *We are of one blood: Memories of the first 60 years of the Woodcraft Folk 1925-1985*. Co-operative Retail Services Ltd. https://heritage.woodcraft.org.uk/archive/item/we-are-of-one-blood/
Sansom, J. P. (Director). (1975). Our world: Woodcraft Folk [Film]. A Woodcraft Folk Film.
Wood Cottage. (1963). *Wood Cottage hut book*. (A-3904-G/5/10). Barnsley Archives and Local Studies, Experience Barnsley Museum & Discovery Centre, Barnsley.
Woodcraft Folk. (n.d.). *Submissions to the Enquiry Committee* [assorted undated entries]. (UCL Institute of Education, YMA/WF/216). University College London Archives, London.
Woodcraft Folk. (1934, July). Editorial comment. *Herald of the Folk*, 1-2. (UCL Institute of Education, YMA/WF/331). University College London Archives, London.
Woodcraft Folk. (1935, January 20). *Shefstanthing scribes report to the Annual Thingmoot*. Woodcraft Folk. (UCL Institute of Education, YMA/WF/251). University College London Archives, London.
Woodcraft Folk. (1936, January 24). *Scribes report to the Annual Thingmoot*. Woodcraft Folk. (UCL Institute of Education, YMA/WF/251). University College London Archives, London.
Woodcraft Folk. (1938, February 6). *Shefstanthing annual report 1937*. Woodcraft Folk. (UCL Institute of Education, YMA/WF/251). University College London Archives, London.
Woodcraft Folk. (1944, February). *Shefstanthing annual report 1944*. Woodcraft Folk. (UCL Institute of Education, YMA/WF/251). University College London Archives, London.
Woodcraft Folk. (1946). *Report of National Folk Council for year ending 31st December 1946*. (UCL Institute of Education, YMA/WF/3). University College London Archives, London.
Woodcraft Folk. (1949). *Report of National Folk Council for year ending 31st December 1949*. (UCL Institute of Education, YMA/WF/4a). University College London Archives, London.
Woodcraft Folk. (1950). *Report of Committee of Inquiry*. (UCL Institute of Education, YMA/WF/216). University College London Archives, London.
Woodcraft Folk. (1951). *Woodcraft Folk international children's camp brochure, July 18th – August 18th, 1951*. Woodcraft Folk. (UCL Institute of Education, YMA/WF/271). University College London Archives, London.
Woodcraft Folk. (1976a, April). Editorial statement. *New Day*, 1. (Main Journal Sequence N). Special Collections and Archives, Bishopsgate Institute Library, London.
Woodcraft Folk. (1976b). *The Woodcraft way: Introduction* (1976 ed.). (Reference FH_063_02). Woodcraft Folk Heritage Archive. https://heritage.woodcraft.org.uk/archive/item/the-woodcraft-way-introduction/