Introduction
An Experiment in the Art of Living

In 1920, a Yorkshire-born agricultural economist, Leonard Elmhirst, wrote a letter to Dorothy Straight (née Whitney), a wealthy New York philanthropist and the woman he loved, about the ‘complete breakdown’ he had suffered a short time before.¹ For most of his life, he told her, he had expected to become a priest. Then came the ‘great deluge’ of the First World War. ‘I found that the bottom of life had dropped out,’ he wrote, ‘and that the old beliefs could not stand the test’. The war had destroyed his faith in orthodox Christianity. It had made him question the self-oriented, market-driven doctrine of laissez-faire liberalism that underpinned the Western world. But he had recovered his sense of optimism and purpose, he told Dorothy, and he now wanted to dedicate himself to serving humanity – working to build a more harmonious world: ‘what Graham Wallas calls “The Great Society”’ and ‘someone else called “The Kingdom of Heaven”’. He intended to create a community apart from mainstream society where a new way of living could be pioneered.

Dorothy was enthusiastically supportive. Since the age of nineteen, she had ploughed her great fortune and abundant energies into social reform. The First World War and her husband Willard’s death from influenza in 1918 had made her all the more determined to contribute to the public good in a fundamental way – now she, too, hoped to reshape society from the ground up. ‘I am filled with that terribly absorbing desire to work, and help and carry through something useful,’ she wrote, ‘I can’t help realizing every night how much more I might have done.’² In 1924, Dorothy and Leonard married – drawn together by a shared dream of shaping an alternative, more holistically fulfilling and communitarian model for living. They agreed that if they truly believed in the ‘principles which we talk so easily about’, they must not ‘sit down idly under a

¹ Leonard to Dorothy, 27 October 1920, LKE/DWE/10/A, Dartington Hall Archives (unless specified otherwise, all archival references in this book are to this collection).
system which defies them’ but must make ‘some attempt however feeble to pursue our ideal’. In 1925, they bought Dartington Hall in South Devon and began a social, cultural and educational experiment that they hoped would ‘set the pace’ for Britain and the rest of the world. They devoted the rest of their lives to this project, which became one of the best-known and most influential of the many small-scale interwar utopian experiments.

When the Elmhirsts arrived, Dartington was a run-down estate supporting only a handful of people. Within a few years it housed a school, departments of dance-drama, crafts and textiles, and numerous industrial and agricultural enterprises. Dorothy and Leonard’s ambition for this multifaceted community was twofold. All participants should have an existence that allowed them to be more than just economic units: they would contribute to a revived rural economy, but their days would also incorporate learning, creativity and a sense of spiritual communion, resulting in a life of complete fulfilment. The second hope was that participants would be fully involved in running the estate, creating a thriving social democracy that would perfect them as individuals and bring about the unified progress of the community as a whole. Dartington was not, in the Elmhirsts’ eyes, an exercise in escapism: they hoped that this ‘abundant’ experiment in integrated, democratic living would function both as a test bed for ideas – inspiring people well beyond its physical boundaries – and as an imitable model, ‘an ideal for all groups to work to’.

Beyond the overarching desire to be an ‘ideal spiral of all feeding in’, Dartington’s objectives were never prescriptively spelled out. This was, to a degree, intentional: the Elmhirsts wanted their community to be ‘built by people and not on paper’, growing up organically rather than outlined out in a manifesto. It was also because Dorothy and Leonard were not clear conceptual thinkers, finding it difficult – even impossible – fully to articulate their ideals. Instead, they tried to live by them. The Elmhirsts’ ambitions were implied by those they invited to join them and by the enterprises they instigated. The looseness of their hopes for Dartington allowed a range of idealists and reformers, sometimes with

2 Introduction: An Experiment in the Art of Living

3 Leonard Elmhirst to Eduard Lindeman, 7 January 1924, box 2, Eduard Lindeman Archives, Columbia University, DWE/G/7/C. Leonard tended to be the mouthpiece for and executor of the couple’s shared ideas, while Dorothy’s influence on the shape of Dartington was often tacit. To give voice to her role, the term ‘the Elmhirsts’ will sometimes be used in this book where it was Leonard who was doing the actual articulation, but of a joint position.

4 Leonard to Dorothy, 19 May 1923, LKE/DWE/11/C.

5 Ibid.

6 Leonard Elmhirst, untitled note, 27 January 1936, LKE/G/S9/A.

7 Leonard Elmhirst to Eduard Lindeman, 7 January 1924, box 2, Eduard Lindeman Archives.
conflicting agendas, to work at the same time towards their particular iteration of a better life in the ‘perfect playground’ of the estate.  

Capacious vagueness of ideology was not the only aspect of the Elmhirsts’ community-building that was unusual. In a period of

8 Leonard, ‘Note for talk’, 16 May 1936, LKE/G/S8/F. This concept of Dartington echoes Michael Saler’s characterisation of the fantasy worlds proliferating in this period as ‘playgrounds’; both the Elmhirsts’ estate and these fictional worlds were sites for experimenting with new ideas about how to live. As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality (Oxford, 2012), 7.
economic uncertainty, Dartington was well financed, Dorothy’s fortune – estimated at $35 million in 1925 – allowing the translation of ideals into reality at a rate beyond most reformers’ wildest dreams. In addition, both the Elmhirsts, but Leonard especially, had a particular gift for friendship, maintaining networks of reform-minded acquaintances around the globe. This quality, along with the Elmhirsts’ ideological openness and wealth, meant that Dartington became a nexus of international idealism. It impacted and was influenced by reforming projects in Europe, Asia and America, including the Bauhaus, Rabindranath Tagore’s Sriniketan and the New Deal. Like the loci of late-nineteenth-century utopian socialism delineated by Leela Gandhi, it developed into a ‘hybrid and eclectic’ scene, fuelled by friendship, which brought together disparate radical subcultures from across the world.

At its best, Dartington’s inchoate inclusiveness generated an atmosphere that was inventive, inspiring, rich in possibility and hope; at its worst, it produced muddled thinking, inconsistency and hypocrisy, and left a few participants with a permanent sense of grievance. The enterprise alternately impressed and perplexed observers. ‘I can see many aims and objects desperately tangled’, wrote one visitor in 1931. But to another, Dartington was ‘the image of the future, all our utopic ideas having become realities. It is encouraging, it is consoling to know such a place exists in the world.’

This book avoids framing Dartington in terms of either a ‘failed’ or ‘successful’ utopian experiment; all utopias are reactions to a particular historical moment and, as that moment changes, so do visions of the ‘good place’, with old ideas inevitably falling by the wayside. For me, the wonder and interest in revisiting the Elmhirsts’ project – in telling this small-scale story about very big ideas – does not come from the question of whether or not Dartington demonstrated an ideal social blueprint. Rather, it comes from the humane and imaginative ways in which those involved in the community responded to the perceived problems of their

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9 Between 1925 and 1936, Dorothy spent about $8 million in America, and the same sum in England, mainly on Dartington. Despite this, and the effects of the Depression, strategically diverse holdings meant her fortune was valued at $45 million in 1936. Michael Young, The Elmhirsts of Dartington: The Creation of a Utopian Community (London, 1982), 299.


11 William St John Pym, response to 1931 Dartington questionnaire, T/PP/P/1/E.

12 Andrée Karpelès to the Elmhirsts, 3 June 1935, LKE/G/21/F. Andrée Karpelès, a painter, illustrator and translator, worked for a time at Sriniketan with Leonard. She later ran the Indian edition of the magazine Messages d’Orient, published in French in Alexandria.
time, dedicating the very material of their lives to mastering what Dartington habitué Aldous Huxley called ‘that most difficult and most important of all the arts – the art of living together in harmony and with benefit for all concerned’. It comes, equally, from the window that the Elmhirsts’ activities open onto larger histories.

Dartington can be read in a dizzying number of ways. In the British context, it can be framed as a case study in rural regeneration or in the dethroning of elite patronage and philanthropy by state-sponsored intervention. With an eye to the United States, it can be interpreted as part of the history of transatlantic progressivism or of the globalisation of American philanthropy. From the viewpoint of India, it can be understood as a demonstration of the ‘religious revival’ of which Rabindranath Tagore was a part. Situated in a wider field, the experiment can be seen as an episode in the worldwide history of utopianism or in the centuries-long endeavour to make capitalism moral. The Elmhirsts’ project gives a vivid illustration, too, of two important twentieth-century developments: the attempt to marry local attachments with international horizons – what the philosopher Kwame Appiah calls ‘rooted cosmopolitanism’; and the emphasis on the significance of everyday lived experience in forging a ‘common culture’. This book will consider all these frameworks, and more, to make sense of the various elements that made up the Elmhirsts’ estate. But, overall, it interprets Dartington

as a series of responses, sometimes overlapping, sometimes clashing, that sought to grapple with the inadequacies of laissez-faire liberalism.

What did laissez-faire liberalism mean for the Elmhirsts? The word ‘liberal’ was deployed very loosely in the years between the wars: Julia Stapleton suggests that there were so many forms of liberalism that it is best to think of the variants not as part of one ideology, but as ‘sensibilities – articulating a style of political action appropriate to the English political world they characterized’.²⁰ Dorothy and Leonard used ‘liberalism’ more vaguely than most. By and large, they saw laissez-faire liberalism as a set of destructive tendencies: individualistic competition; a way of life scorned of any meaning beyond getting and keeping; an atomised society, rather than one that emphasised humankind’s interconnectedness; the loss of a higher, transcendent meaning that gave a unifying altruistic or spiritual purpose to individual existence and to society as a whole. Sometimes they viewed themselves as rejecting all forms of liberalism; more frequently, their aim was to reconfigure liberalism in a more socialised, holistically fulfilling form: they believed it should be a means of building a satisfying individual way of life that also involved contributing to the collective good.

With the emergence of totalitarianism in the 1930s, the picture was further muddied as those at Dartington began defining their ideas against authoritarianism – which often involved a new enthusiasm for ‘English’ liberal individualism. At the heart of this idea was an association of the English national character with the countryside, whose varied landscape and culture was seen to underpin a diverse individuality that acted as a bulwark against the scourge of totalitarian ideas.²¹ The Elmhirsts enthusiastically subscribed to this view of the distinctiveness of English liberalism, and it was one of the original reasons that they situated their experiment in the deep countryside. ‘Liberal-reforming’ is therefore used in this book to imply both condemnation of laissez-faire liberal tendencies and an embrace of the idea of a distinctive, individualistic ‘English’ liberalism.

Alongside ‘liberal-reforming’, I frequently characterise Dartington and its participants as ‘progressive’, a term also sufficiently contested and ambiguous to need early definition. As Emily Robinson finds, in the interwar period the word’s centre of gravity tended towards the political left, but it was also deployed by conservatives opposed to socialist and

²¹ Ibid, 276.
revolutionary action.\textsuperscript{22} It was associated with active citizenship but was used in a range of non-political settings as well – to characterise efficient business practice, for example, or cultural experimentation.\textsuperscript{23} The word’s meaning is further complicated by the Atlantic context that informed politics in Britain: in the United States, ‘progressive’ tended to be a less inclusive term, more clearly identified with a political movement and the Progressive Party that grew out of it – a movement with which Dorothy was involved.\textsuperscript{24} The label ‘progressive’ is a useful one for Dartington exactly because it is so vague and diffuse, encompassing – as the estate did – political aspirations, loosely framed desires for the shape of future society, and narrower meanings, as in the case of child-oriented ‘progressive’ educational reform. This book unpacks alternate senses where they arise, but generally when it uses ‘progressive’ it is gesturing, as the Elmhirsts were when they used it, to a capacious socio-political ideology – implying left-leaning (but not revolutionary) ideas about promoting social change and revolving around the ideals of individual fulfilment and active social participation; and also a mentality focused on moving beyond the present. As Robinson writes, ‘to be progressive is to anticipate the future and, in doing so, it is to bring that future into being’.\textsuperscript{25}

Dartington’s history in the first half of the twentieth century fell into three phases, which were shaped by the community’s internal dynamics, by Britain’s domestic politics, and by the rise of fascist regimes in Europe. Beginning in 1925, the Elmhirsts concentrated on reform at a local level, and here they came closest to achieving their goal of demonstrating a holistically fulfilling community life. Dorothy funded the project generously. Participants’ expectations were high. The community succeeded in merging its educational, spiritual and practical aims and activities and in attracting interest from progressives in Britain and across the world. The years after the First World War saw widespread disenchantment with conventional methods of achieving change – with ‘politicians, governments, treaties, and conferences’ as Leonard put it – and Dartington’s radical approach proved attractive to many.\textsuperscript{26}

The second phase, beginning in the early 1930s, was triggered by the totalitarian dystopias that were threatening abroad and the seeming lack of political response to these in Britain. Dartington took in an influx of

\textsuperscript{22} Emily Robinson, \textit{The Language of Progressive Politics in Modern Britain} (London, 2017), chapter 2. See also, David Blaazer, \textit{The Popular Front and the Progressive Tradition} (Cambridge, 2009), 18–19.
\textsuperscript{23} Robinson, \textit{Progressive Politics}, chapters 4 and 5.
\textsuperscript{24} Rodgers, \textit{Atlantic Crossings}.
\textsuperscript{25} Robinson, \textit{Progressive Politics}, 4, 49.
\textsuperscript{26} Leonard to Dorothy, 3 February 1922, LKE/DWE/10/F.
European refugees. At the same time, the Elmhirsts began to feel that their enterprise should be offering a more immediate, realistically costed and widely replicable model of community. Their drive became less towards local organic integration and more towards efficient administration and outside impact. Over the course of the 1930s, echoing the trajectory of other elites in Britain, they gradually moved away from a vision of society as perfected through autonomous local groups to one in which reform was led from the centre. For Christopher Lawrence and Anna-K Mayer, this shift in the locus of responsibility for regeneration in the 1930s was ‘the road to the welfare state’.  

The Second World War precipitated Dartington’s third stage. It brought to the fore a ‘social-democratic’ notion of democracy, led by an organised working class, which undermined the concept of independent, elite-led social experiments. The war also brought about the extension and centralisation of government. From this point onward, the Elmhirsts began working mainly to turn Dartington into an outpost of research and development for the government – and they succeeded in making significant contributions to the construction of the welfare state. This shift did not mean that the notion of change being achieved through small communities fell entirely by the wayside. Dorothy and Leonard went on, in the 1950s and 1960s, to be involved in supporting the community development movement in Britain and abroad. Meanwhile, others at Dartington took a different route during and after the Second World War, withdrawing from democratic engagement in favour of more individualistic self-exploration.

The Elmhirsts and their supporters sometimes used the term ‘utopia’ to describe what they were building at Dartington – denoting the effort to turn a radical social vision into a real place that might inspire wider change. But they also used the word in a negative sense – implying impractical, unrealistic social dreaming – when describing the ‘innumerable social experiments’, past and present, from which they wanted to distinguish Dartington. Robert Owen’s New Harmony, for example, was ‘not based on sound economics, or sound psychology’, the

29 Leonard Elmhirst to Eduard Lindeman, 7 January 1924, box 2, Eduard Lindeman Archives.
late-nineteenth-century model villages of Bournville and Port Sunlight were too paternalistic;\(^{31}\) the Cotswold Bruderhof Community and Welwyn Garden City had ambitions that were too narrow.\(^{32}\) Early on, Soviet Russia was deemed by some at Dartington to be utopian in the positive sense, with one employee demanding a “‘Five Years Plan’”.\(^{33}\) But as the totalitarian regimes grew stronger through the 1930s, more emphasis was placed on Dartington’s being different from any others. While the Russians had revolutionary group socialism, Leonard argued that what America and Britain needed was the gradual evolution of ‘socialised individualism’.\(^{34}\) The term ‘utopian’ is deployed in this book in the same ambivalent sense that it had for Dartington’s participants: it describes an impulse to turn high ideals into a lived reality that verges on the impractical and quixotic – which is a very good way of encapsulating the Elmhirsts’ project as a whole.

Dartington’s multiple experiments – while too easily written off as marginal and eccentric by contemporaries and historians – had effects and consequences in a variety of fields.\(^{35}\) Its pioneering work in soil surveys and its championing of access to the arts influenced post-war government policy. It contributed significantly to moulding twentieth-century traditions of handcraft, modernism, learning-by-doing, countercultural spirituality and communitarianism. While it is a moot question whether these disparate activities could have happened without the Elmhirsts’ initial utopian and holistic inspiration, one certainly cannot understand them individually without tracing them back to those roots – which is part of what this book does. Dartington merits close study as an intellectually-linked constellation of experiments in education, the arts, spiritualism, agriculture and social organisation that has rarely been looked at in the round.\(^{36}\)

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\(^{31}\) John Wales to W. B. Curry, 4 March 1936, C/DHL/1/B. Port Sunlight was a model village built by the Lever Brothers in 1888 to house their workers. Bournville was a similar endeavour begun by George Cadbury in 1893.

\(^{32}\) J. J. Findlay, *The Dartington Community: A Story of Social Achievement*, unfinished manuscript written 1937–9, LKE/G/13/B. The Bruderhof, started in Germany in 1920, promoted communitarian Christian living. In the 1930s, under pressure from the Nazis, it moved to England, setting up in the Cotswolds. Welwyn Garden City, also founded in 1920, by Ebenezer Howard, was one of several garden cities intended as radical vehicles for social and environmental reform.

\(^{33}\) Anonymous response to 1931 questionnaire, LKE/G/13/B.

\(^{34}\) Leonard to Arthur Geddes, 24 February 1923, LKE/IN/6/D.

\(^{35}\) For such criticism, see, for instance, William St John Pym, response to 1931 questionnaire, T/PP/P/1/E and Hardy, *Utopian England*, 157.

\(^{36}\) Victor Bonham-Carter’s *Dartington Hall: The History of an Experiment* (London, 1958) and Michael Young’s *The Elmhirsts* are the only books that offer a full survey of the estate. Both authors were prejudiced in the community’s favour: Bonham-Carter because he was appointed Dartington’s official historian by the Elmhirsts, his role being to document the estate’s activities in great detail rather than to analyse them in the wider
This book also illuminates a wider landscape of holistic reformism. The ideal of promoting wholeness, integration, unity or syncretism cropped up in a huge range of forms and places in the interwar years, in Britain and further afield. Progressive educators tried to address the needs of the whole child, rather than dividing learning up into narrow subjects. \[^{37}\] Artists seized on the project of unifying the various media, or the process of creation, or life with art. \[^{38}\] Those who had lost their Christian faith sought syncretic alternatives that amalgamated spirituality with the findings of modern science. \[^{39}\] Idealist philosophers argued that society was not an ‘atomistic’ aggregate, but a single organism with a shared purpose that was embodied in a general will. \[^{40}\] An abundance of projects were set up to encourage more integrated living, including the Brynmawr Experiment in Wales, Ditchling in Sussex and Rolf Gardiner’s Springhead estate in Dorset. \[^{41}\] British post-war social democracy itself owes some of its zeal and efficacy to such holistic origins (which of course it combined with others). In all of these fields of thought and action, there were different panaceas offered for different sorts of ills, but the basic problem distinguished was the same: the need to uncover an underlying essence that would restore unity and meaning. Dartington mirrored and cross-pollinated with many of these unity-seeking projects, and a study of the community draws attention to the broader holistic moment that they constituted.

There are pluses and minuses to looking at one utopian experiment as representative of a reforming milieu. Dartington bears the peculiar imprint of its founders. Dorothy retained unusually close connections with America and Leonard with India. Leonard was idiosyncratically preoccupied with the application of scientific techniques, Dorothy with her own spiritual journey and with the professional arts. Both of them were interested in the fate of the countryside, almost to the exclusion of the town. Dorothy's wealth removed Dartington from the average run of context; Young because he was a pupil at Dartington School, then a protégé of the Elmhirsts and a trustee of the estate, signalling his commitment to the project by taking the title 'Baron Young of Dartington' when he was given a life peerage in 1978.

\[^{41}\] Dennis Hardy surveys the communities of this period in *Utopian England*. 