THE MACDOWELL COLONY FOR CREATIVE ARTISTS

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The artists' colony is a unique product of a rather dubious American tradition: the US Government's continuing financial neglect of its artists. The National Endowment for the Arts (the US equivalent of the Arts Council of Great Britain) was founded in 1965; under the Reagan administration it has been driven to the dossers' house by a 50% bite out of its £88 million budget – already a pauper's purse by European standards. (The Arts Council budget for 1980-81 was £80 million – for a country with a quarter the population). The traditional American attitude towards government support of the arts was summed up in the Reagan administration's pre-budget statement:

> For too long, the Endowments have spread federal financing into an ever-wider range of artistic and literary endeavor, promoting the notion that the federal government should be the financial patron of first resort for both individuals and institutions engaged in artistic and literary pursuits. This policy has resulted in a reduction in the historic role of private individual and corporate philanthropic support in these key areas. The reductions would be the first step toward reversing this trend.[1]

On a trip to the USA at about the time this statement was made, I happened to be sitting next to the Chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee (the powerful government committee that deals with taxation). I confronted him with the well-publicised fact that under the new budget, more money would be spent on military bands than on the National Endowment for the Arts. His view (and he is a liberal Democrat) was that the NEA was a luxury long overdue for trimming, and that military bands are also an important part of the country's artistic environment – a point I guess I had not considered.

These are views of the vast majority of Americans, and they create the atmosphere into which the American artist is born. The arts are simply not yet as important as they traditionally have been in Europe. If an American artist works in a field that is not commercially rewarding, he is left to his own devices and resourcefulness to make ends meet. In the past he has had few choices: survive on air and water, find a wealthy patron, or get a 'proper job' and do his own thing after working hours. Charles Ives somehow managed to compose in between writing out life-insurance policies, but Edward MacDowell, like most American composers, spent most of his time teaching. For MacDowell the only real creative time was the summer, when he could leave his teaching commitments at Columbia University and retreat from the city to work.

In 1896 Edward MacDowell and his wife Marian bought a farm in Peterborough, New Hampshire, about a six-hour train ride north-west of New York City. As a surprise birthday present, Marian had a small log cabin built in the woods on a nearby hill. There MacDowell was able to rest, work in tranquillity, and triple his creative output. He and his wife talked of expanding their facilities so as to be able to invite other artists to share the same benefits. In 1906 a fund was started in honour of MacDowell 'the first internationally known American composer', and contributions came from many prominent men of his day: Grover Cleveland, Andrew Carnegie, Victor Herbert, J.P. Morgan, and others. But in 1908 at the age of 46 Edward MacDowell died of syphilis (or, as the 1954 *Hallmark Hall of Fame* television documentary portrayed it, a very bad headache). The continuation of the project was left to Marian; with her tremendous energy, she brought it to fruition shortly afterwards. Many of her early guests became well known in later years and the reputation of the Colony spread; but it was plagued by the financial problems of capricious private funding. Each winter Marian would tour America, playing Edward's music and lecturing on his life and work, and on the Colony – the place where composers, poets, painters, sculptors, playwrights, and novelists work in seclusion and the congenial environment her husband enjoyed. She died in 1956 at the age of 98 with the future of the Colony finally secure.

Today the MacDowell Colony has about 500 acres of beautiful wooded land in the foothills of southern New Hampshire. Scattered through the woods are 30 artists' studios; in the centre are the residence buildings and Bond Hall, the communal meeting-place. Each studio is equipped for a particular discipline: composers have grand pianos (mostly Steinways); painters have large floor spaces and northern light; printmakers and photographers have darkrooms and equipment for intaglio, lithography, and serigraphy; and, in addition, each studio is furnished with a large, overstuffed chair in front of a fireplace with plenty of wood, a large writing-table, bed, toilet facilities, running water and central heating. On the walls are 'tombstones', the wooden plaques signed by artists who have used the studio over the past half-century. No studio is within sight of another, and all have wonderful views. Each one has a unique design: Alexander studio, for example, is built like a medieval castle; Watson looks like a Greek temple; and Adams could be something out of *Hansel und Gretel*.

When an artist arrives he is given a studio and a room in one of the residence houses. This room is smaller than the studio, but is also furnished with a writing-table and bed, and has a bathroom. The residence houses are near Bond Hall, the studios are between 10 and 25 minutes' walk away. The Colony Fellow can live either in his room in the residence house, or in his studio; both are available for his exclusive use. All Fellows take breakfast and dinner together in Bond Hall. Lunch is delivered to the studio in a picnic basket so that the artist will not be disturbed during the day. When I was there the evening meal was the highlight of the day. It was served by candlelight in front of the fireplace. After dinner there was always a ping-pong match and 'Cowboy Pool' – a pool game so complicated that no one could write down the rules. Often after dinner one of the Fellows gave a presentation of his work. This usually took place in the library, a wonderful stone building with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, an excellent Steinway grand piano, heavy, stuffed chairs on a large Persian rug, and a fireplace at one end of the room.

There are 20 artists working at the Colony during the winter (since only 20 studios are 'winterized'), 25 artists in the autumn and spring, and 31 in the summer months. The residencies last between one and three months, but the average stay is about six weeks. In the 1980-81 season there were 199 Fellows: 100 men and 99 women. Most were from North America, but there were a few from other parts of the world. Some of the more famous artists who have worked at MacDowell in the past are Aaron Copland who wrote *Appalachian Spring* there in 1944, the playwright Thornton Wilder who based *Our Town* on Peterborough, Stephen Vincent Benet whose *John Brown's Body* won a Pulitzer Prize in 1929, Leonard Bernstein, Virgil Thomson, Alec Waugh, James Baldwin, and Milton Avery.

The budget for running the MacDowell Colony is about £250,000 per year. Almost all of this is from private sources. (The NEA was contributing 16% before the recent government cuts.) The staff consists of the director (Chris Barnes), two secretaries, a cook and manager, a book-keeper, a housekeeper, four maintenance men, and a part-time staff of ten. In New York City there are a full-time fund raiser and two secretaries, who spend all year raising money for the Colony. Working at the Colony is essentially free to any artist who is accepted,[2] but Fellows are asked to make a donation if they can. The actual cost of maintaining each Fellow is £26 per day. A donation of £5 per day is suggested, but the average Fellow contributes about £3 per day.

My residency at the MacDowell Colony in March and April 1981 was one of the most productive times of my life. The conditions are frighteningly ideal. There is almost a sense of panic that under such ideal conditions perhaps one will not be able to produce, and that does happen: one composer could not stand the silence and left after only a week; one of the writers was there for six weeks and did not keep a word he had written. It is not everyone's Utopia, but for the vast majority of artists it is a uniquely profitable experience.

On returning to Britain after such an experience one naturally asks why something like MacDowell can't be done here. It certainly can. In many respects Britain is in a much better financial position than the US to sponsor something like this, and there are numerous stately homes belonging to the National Trust that would serve such a purpose magnificently. The United States now has some 20 artists' colonies, not all as grand as MacDowell but all serving the artist in a similar way. Britain should establish at least one.

NOTES:

[1] *American Music Center Newsletter,* vol. 23, no. 2 (Spring 1981), p. 3.

[2] For further information and application forms write to: Admissions Secretary, 680 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10021, USA.