The year 1933: Europe is on the precipice of war, the Philippines find independence and Mahatma Gandhi is released from prison in India. But over the pond in America, in a small North Carolina mountain town called Asheville, the world is changing in an altogether subtler — but not insignificant — way: the Black Mountain College is born.

Conceived by mercurial scholar John A Rice, Black Mountain College (BMC) was forged from a desire to create a new type of educational system based on John Dewey’s pragmatic, progressive principles. Dewey, a philosopher and psychologist, was a firm believer that “education and learning are social and interactive processes” which to him meant that school itself is where social reform should happen.

He wanted students to thrive in a democratic environment where interaction with the curriculum was encouraged and pupils “should have the opportunity to take part in their own learning.” BMC embraced the utopian ideals of the progressive education movement, stating that the arts should be the centerpiece of the curriculum, whether it be weaving and knitting, painting and sculpting, or music and photography. The lofty — if rather fuzzy — ideal: to “better educate citizens for participation in a democratic society.”

“I find the depth and breadth of the Black Mountain College story endlessly fascinating,” says Alice Sebrell, Program Director at Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center, an organisation that provides access to historical materials related to BMC. “It connects to some of the most central and pivotal events and milestones of the 20th century, including WWII, The Depression and McCarthyism. It pointed the way ➤

Clockwise from above: A sign commemorates the closure of the college; the stylised Black Mountain College logo, which appeared on many of its documents; the Lake Eden campus building, which was designed by the school’s architecture professor; world renowned American dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham, who was a teacher-in-residence at BMC; avant gard pianist David Tudor, who was a faculty member of the BMC.
BMC is more than just a historical curiosity: as America continues to question its long-held beliefs about education in the run-up to next year’s election, and the Free School debate rages on in England, this small institution with a big legacy is as relevant as ever.

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