

## Same, Same, Very Different

High Master, Ladies and Gentlemen

If you feel a sense of déjà vu seeing me standing at this lectern, it may be explained by the fact that I once gave an assembly speech in the Mem. Hall a couple of dozen years ago, in my final year of school. That sort of honour was normally conferred on the Head Boy, School Captain or Vice Captain; it fell into my lap as a result of one of the aforementioned officers getting horribly drunk at the prefects' cheese and wine party the night before and begging me to stand in for them at a couple of hours' notice. It certainly wasn't Nick Winter who was in his cups that night (not his scene), so it was either Mark Salthouse (who's not with us tonight) or Bob James, who is. All that I remember of my speech is that it began with the statement, 'I hate politics, I hate religion and I hate sex.' If anyone can remember how it continued please let me know as I have no further recollection of it; I, too, had drunk my fair share the night before. I was nervous about facing a similar audience tonight after so long, but hey, if Morrissey can do it then so can I.

Cast your minds back somewhere between 25 and 35 years. You're 11 years old and heading off on a Monday morning down the green tiled corridors, past the cages and on your way to assembly in the lecture theatre, hymn book at the ready. 'Steady on' says Wilf, addressing you by surname as you almost knock him for six, pipe clenched between his teeth, 'more haste less speed, son'. He blinks at you through bottle bottom glasses and strikes a *Swan Vestas*. Someone in the melee is singing 'Tell me why I don't like Mondays' (or whichever latest hit) which had its first airing a few days previously on Top of the Pops.

Once we're all assembled, packed into the appropriate stretch of curved seating, the black curtains are swished shut by the prefects standing at each side of the stage looking very grown up and in sweeps the High Priest of Lower School Assembly in a flurry of tattered, black gown. Peter Laycock was never a sinister man, not to my recollection, but there was an intensity about him, a zeal, a gleam in the eye which brought an instant hush to the rows of would-be delinquents and made us suddenly attentive. As a sort of trailer to the main screening that was morning assembly I'd get to see Peter each day pedalling heartily through the sluggish traffic along Kingsway on his butcher's boy bike, periodically overtaking my Dad's rusting Beetle and belting out whichever hymn he had lined up for us that morning.

“One day you will be leaders of men, captains of industry, pioneers in your chosen field...” These rallying calls were usually given in the context of us being told off en masse for the crimes of a minority, usually involving misbehaviour on or around public transport. Well, Peter, I became a teacher, which I hope isn't too much of a disappointment for you or for my *alma mater*. Both of the schools I've taught in, Bradford Grammar School and Dulwich College, bear some strong similarities to MGS so I suppose that by the time I left school I had reached the vocational conclusion that if you can't beat 'em join 'em.

Surely one of the main reasons that so many middle aged men (that's us boys) have gathered together here tonight from such far flung corners as Norway, Germany, France, Jersey and Mineapolis to say nothing of Dorking, Saddleworth and Cleethorpes, is the gravitational pull of that galaxy of stars, the MGS teaching staff. Thirtyish years on and many of them are still working their magic on the current generation of Mancunians, including the offspring off at least one of my contemporaries here tonight. He, the proud father, confided to me that he became quite choked up as he brought his eleven year-old son for his first day at MGS earlier this year; school fees can do strange things to a man.

So who were your heroes of the Common Room? I think my role model as an A Level English student must have been Chris Johnson; 'take your feet off the desk, don't wear cowboy boots to school and get your hair cut...' we kept telling him but he took no notice. But above all he drove a black Porsche to school, an achievement which I have yet to emulate.

Then there was Andrew Mayne, indeed there still is, 'Good morning gentlemen, do sit down...' a paragon of courtesy and understatement, but by no means lacking a sense of irony or a taste for the absurd (or abzurd as he pronounced it). He once made passing mention of a scrap book in which he collected quirky local newspaper articles covering abstruse accounts of human folly and misadventure; the old lady in Levenshulme who'd microwaved her poodle, some diver accused of indecently assaulting a dolphin. We saw Andy arriving each morning on his way to registering us, MSiiiq, in a wide, beige Mercedes and no particular hurry.

Paul Ponder; epicurean, raconteur and ornithologist. 'Gargantua and Pantagruel' was not a set text for 3S, but that didn't stop Paul going into great detail about Rabelais' description of the various alternatives to toilet paper with which the giant experimented; I particularly remember the goose's neck - I suppose the goose did too. In fact in those days the concept of the set book was very much in the background which in many

ways is where it belongs; nowadays it's centre stage, with a chorus line of coursework, assessment criteria and attainment targets.

Roger, aka 'Doc' Dennis led us through A Level Geography in his first year of teaching, hurling reams of banded hand-outs at us in every ink shade available, apologising for every aspect of his teaching methods whilst inspiring and educating us more than any veteran could have hoped to. Like the butterflies and moths which are amongst his greatest loves (and about which he is a world authority) Roger flitted equally brilliantly around the classroom and the limestone pavement; a species perhaps increasingly rare with the creeping blight of government modified education. Perhaps lacking the resilience of some of my MGS mentors, 14 years in the classroom satisfied my own pedagogical ambitions and I've spent the past 5 years marketing Dulwich College to prospective overseas parents, happy to abandon the long haul of GCSE English coursework assessment in favour of the long haul to Hong Kong.

This inadequate mantra must include other names, however fleetingly they're mentioned: 'Tweedy' Harris who never taught me but who was clearly quintessentially tweedy; Percy Hill who was sartorially impeccable and a consummate gentleman; 'Rev' Berry our form tutor in 2S who enthralled us with highly embroidered tales of the Kings and Queens of England, elegantly puffing on gold-tipped Dunhills between the beheadings and incestuous affairs; Derek Stubbs who always gave you bonus marks if you included the phrase 'agite d'horribles convulsions' in your essay; Nick Poole who did his 'wide mouthed frog' routine at Bassenthwite camp; a gowned Peter Farquhar who was leapt on from behind by an unwitting sprog, mistaken for a friendly prefect - the boy's presumably still in therapy; George Myers who brought a fragrance to the corridors and often quoted Philip Larkin, Graham Curtis who badgered us through our Chemistry O Level and Dougie Herne in whose lessons one breathed at one's own risk. And, of course, any such list, however cursory it may be, cries out for inclusion of the Godfather of the Common Room, Ian 'Basher' Bailey, who I remember once led us through a reading of Hobson's Choice hamming up the Lancashire accents more shamelessly than the cast of Coronation Street. Belated 90<sup>th</sup> birthday greetings from us all, Ian.

And to all current and former members of staff here tonight, on behalf of your assembled protégés, may I express our enormous gratitude, respect and affection. They say that nobody forgets a good teacher and we were privileged to be taught by the best.

I would like to thank our hosts for arranging this splendid event and leading us from memory lane to Old Hall Lane for an evening. Thank you to Dr Martin Stephen, High Master, for your hospitality and congratulations on your appointment to the post of High Master of St. Paul's School. Thank you to the committee for rallying the troops, to Roger Alderson our impeccable MC and to Ian Thorpe and Carole Pemberton for overseeing the whole operation. I'm sure that there's no connection, Ian, between the Sixth Form option course called 'You and Yours' which you ran 25 years ago, consisting largely of instruction in how to use a cheque book, and your recent appointment as Development Director with responsibility for the Bursary Appeal.

An image I'd like to leave you with is that of the art teacher Andy Radcliffe who once told our class that if we ever really wanted to achieve a goal in life (within reason) that we would inevitably achieve it. 'Most people,' he explained 'never get round to dreaming and so drift through life, contented but unfulfilled.' Several years later I was walking through a municipal art gallery in Bradford in my lunch break and there was Andy Radcliffe standing before an easel painting the portrait of the actor Edward Fox who was seated before him. We had a brief chat, catching up on news, and Andy explained that his next commission would take him to Kensington Palace to paint Prince Charles' portrait. He was clearly making progress in living his own dream.

This calls to mind an interpretation of the school motto which I read recently in J. B. Pickerill's book, 'The Portcullis and the Owl', an account of the life and times of our Founder, Hugh Oldham:

'Sapere Aude – wisdom in action not pure knowledge in thought; wisdom in the council chamber and the market place where the activities of the living populace are found.'

In celebrating tonight the talents and diversity of the staff here and the whole, life-changing MGS experience which marks it out as a truly great school, let's also celebrate our common bond as Old Mancunians. As the games master told us as we filed nakedly and timidly into the swimming pool: 'Come on boys - you're all made the same!'

As they say in the bootleg street-markets of South East Asia:

'Same, same, different...'

Tony Binns (15/05/04)