
Learning English in London, 1946-1964: a personal account of a comprehensive education

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ABSTRACT This account of the author's learning to read, write, speak and listen was inspired by English teachers in a post-war democracy, and by the discovery that Eltham Green School, the original of his comprehensive experiences, had ceased to exist. The author believed the theme of learning English would help him write more coherently than before about the tensions in post-war education between innovation and tradition. The story extends beyond secondary lessons and their supposed consequences, however, and explores the complex interactions of parent, family and teacher influences. The author concludes that teachers often underestimate the scale of the task before them because they so much wish to overcome the social and cultural differences between children.

Introduction

I was educated at Eltham Green School (EGS), one of the first London comprehensives, between 1957 and 1964. The experience has shaped my personal and professional life ever since. EGS embodied the idea of a new social order and attracted teachers who believed in changing young people's lives. But even as a mere teenager I was aware of traditional structures that seemed sure to frustrate the school's democratic and egalitarian promises. Streaming reproduced the social hierarchy and many teachers emphasised rules (uniform, grammar) that limited the scope for individual expression (Barker, 1986).

The head, R.H. Davies [1], and his senior colleagues, like many others in prototype comprehensives, drew upon their grammar school (and/or secondary modern) experience and perspectives to construct an inclusive version of education, and planned for children to follow a predominantly academic, technical or practical curriculum according to their ability [2] (Simon, 1991).

There were few alternative models available in the 1950s and practitioners of the day were little influenced by critics who questioned the role of intelligence testing in education (Simon, 1953). Dissatisfaction with traditional methods was slow to influence classroom practice, still mainly driven by time-worn approaches (Medway et al, 2014).

The result was an unrecognised tension between the desire to use schools to set people free from limiting backgrounds and an unquestioning belief that traditional knowledge, methods and organisation were the primary source of educational value. EGS aimed to extend opportunities to everyone but operated in a climate where many believed children's ability was fixed and that less capable students would be better off leaving school than taking examinations (Woodin et al, 2013).

I have long wished to examine how this paradox affected teaching and learning for the first comprehensive generation, myself included, and to illuminate the myriad ways in which EGS influenced our personal, social and intellectual development. Unfortunately, lack of evidence about teachers and children at work has been a discouraging obstacle. I have no access to and no means of securing sufficient valid historical data about EGS in this period. As R.L. Stevenson says in *A Child's Garden of Verses*:

But do not think you can at all,
By knocking on the window, call
That child to hear you ...
He has grown up and gone away,
And it is but a child of air
That lingers in the garden there.

The processes of teaching and learning are complex and as elusive as a 'child of air'. Surviving written records (syllabuses, lesson plans/notes, exercise books, mark books) seldom enable historians to reconstruct and follow the sequence from a teacher's intention to the students' learning. My questions have been too grand, and tangible evidence about learning at EGS and other comprehensives in the 1950s and 1960s is remarkably limited.

A new book about English teaching in post-war London (1945-65) (Medway et al, 2014) has prompted me to think again, not least because the authors' chosen period provides an important context for understanding and discussing my own experiences. Their qualified but convincing portrait of English teachers at work over a 20-year period shows that a combination of memory (interviews) and fragmentary written records can yield valuable and unexpected insights. Concentrating on a single subject, English, enables them to frame sensible questions and to offer provisional answers. I sense that a similar focus may enable me to interpret tensions in my own education more successfully than before.

Two recent revelations have also encouraged me to re-examine my comprehensive experience through the theme of learning English. In summer 2014 I discovered that EGS no longer existed, except in the memories of former

students. After a miserable last few years, the school had been taken over by the Harris Academy chain and renamed 'Harris Academy Greenwich'. The London County Council (LCC) building, with its beautiful Festival Hall-like assembly atrium, was to be demolished and replaced. The prospect of this act of vandalism galvanized me to record my strongly positive memories of the school and to subvert the story of comprehensive failure that has become the founding myth of the academy movement.

At almost the same time, I helped prepare my parents' wartime correspondence (Barker & Moore, 2015)[3] for publication. The funny and affectionate letters in Simon Garfield's edited selection remind me of their vibrant minds and lively debates but also present them in a new light, as lovers contributing to the literature of the Second World War. As John Carey said in the *Sunday Times*, 'With Chris and Bessie it is the sheer, unclouded openness that captivates' (Barker & Moore, 2015, back cover). In my mind they have ceased life as counter clerks, who argued about ideas and scribbled articles about the post office, and have become gifted authors of a sublime million-word correspondence between 1943 and 1946. My own over-educated writing now seems an unconvincing echo of their wonderful language, rather than the brilliant advance for which I once took credit. I must come to terms with being the son of talented writers and must think again about their influence on my learning of language and literature.

English Teaching in Post-war London

Medway et al (2014) assess the degree of continuity and change in the ideas and methods deployed by three London English departments, including two grammar schools (Hackney Downs and Minchenden) and one pilot comprehensive (Walworth). The three case studies are constructed from original sources that include exercise books and teaching records, and draw on interviews with surviving teachers and children. A complex portrait emerges. A number of heads of department, like Harold Rosen, stimulated their colleagues to emphasise children's experience and writing, while others continued with a formal, examination-centred approach to language and literature.

Some innovators, like John Kemp at Hackney Downs, were more influenced by the close, critical reading of texts that was increasingly encouraged on university English degree courses [4] than by the suspicion that traditional teaching methods might prove inappropriate for the full ability range. Medway et al (2014) consider these pedagogic debates in the context of wider societal change through the 1950s and 1960s. Younger teachers, like Douglas Barnes at Minchenden, seem to have followed the Zeitgeist in encouraging closer and more informal relationships with their pupils. They introduced social and personal themes as subject matter for their version of English teaching and were keen to promote curriculum change through meetings of the London Association for the Teaching of English (LATE).

My account (below) has been stimulated in particular by the marked contrast between the thoughtful, innovative teaching reported in Medway et al's (2014) case studies and the unswervingly 'traditional' English lessons provided at my prototype London comprehensive (1957-64). I experienced an unchanged and unchanging English curriculum. Was this significant for my later development? What else influenced my reading, writing and speaking? And what was the impact on my growing literacy? I seek to explain how I acquired my knowledge and ability in English language and literature, and to assess the relative value and usefulness of the numerous influences on my personal growth as a talker, writer and reader. To what extent are my memories of learning English in London in the 1950s and 1960s consistent with evidence from Medway et al's (2014) case studies from the same period? How did my pioneering comprehensive education contribute to my capability in the use of the English language?

The reverberations of something called 'secondary English' are not easily assessed in isolation, however, even if secondary teachers sometimes behave as if children have no previous experience of their own language (at home, during the primary years, amongst their friends). But efforts to discount a learner's previous history seem misplaced and unlikely to succeed. I have, therefore, extended my story beyond secondary lessons and their supposed consequences. I consider the interaction and impact of parent, family and teacher influences from early childhood onwards, and raise wider questions about the learning and use of English than those considered by Medway et al (2014). Do teachers expect too much from their lessons?

Methods

Medway et al (2014) discuss the validity of their own research methods. Their documentary and interview data give fascinating, close-up glimpses of teachers at work but do not provide sufficient grounds for wider generalisations about the teaching of English during the period. Although interviews confirm that some students enjoyed lessons with teachers like Kemp, Rosen and Barnes, there is remarkably little evidence about student outcomes. Black and Wiliam (1998) point out that the classroom is often treated as a black box into which inputs (e.g. teachers, resources) are fed and from which outcomes (e.g. better test results) are expected. But, they ask, what is happening inside the box and 'how can anyone be sure that a particular set of new inputs will produce better outputs' (p. 140)? Medway et al (2014) acknowledge this problem, noting that historians of education very often struggle to establish a plausible connection between teachers' ideas and children's learning. Schools and classrooms are open systems, after all, subject to non-linear and dynamic interactions amongst many unpredictable factors (Radford, 2008).

My historical account is limited in similar ways, especially by a necessary reliance on my subjective perceptions of family members, friends and teachers. I am as much the prisoner of unreliable and well-worn memories as any of the

case-study respondents, while prejudices of one kind or another have undoubtedly shaped my interpretation of what happened, at the time and since. My narrative is written from a 'top set' perspective and is therefore unrepresentative of the wider comprehensive experience, especially that of my contemporaries in the B and C bands. Each student's learning is of intrinsic interest and contributes to our understanding of the whole, but I was not a typical pupil and allowance must be made for my distinctive background and outlook, described below.

In terms of my academic trajectory, however, I was similar to many others in that 11-plus-dominated age. We struggled during our primary and early secondary years but eventually made it to university through the second-chance opportunities offered by comprehensive education. EGS was heavily creamed by local grammar schools but treated those of us who barely passed or narrowly failed the 11-plus as 'la crème de la crème' [5] (HMI, 1963; Spark, 1965). We responded to the school's kindness and attention.

The pursuit of one individual's linguistic genealogy may also prove forlorn. Our understanding is hindered by the intangible, fluid nature of human language and expression and by the difficulty of distinguishing the activity of learners from the educational processes that impinge upon them. The children in the box also make a difference. Nevertheless, I offer these reflections on my language journey as a contribution to the debate about the teaching and learning of English in London in the immediate post-war period, and use personal experiences to raise questions about the interplay of families, children and their schools.

Early Learning at Home

My parents were both post office counter clerks, who fell in love through their wartime correspondence (Barker & Moore, 2015), married while my father was on leave in October 1945, and bought a suburban semi-detached house with their joint savings. I was born in 1946 and my brother followed in 1949. Mum and Dad were highly articulate and politically minded, with strong opinions and austere habits often at variance with conventional ideas. They belonged to the Labour Party and were lifelong members of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND).

My parents' interests and enthusiasms were visible and strong. We were inducted into them like pebbles carried along by a swift stream. Mother and father were energetic about whatever engaged their attention, from walking, gardening and theatre to art and politics. The house was bursting with their activities, including books, paintings, ceramics, enamels and plants. They were secular dissenters, imbued with public service values and the culture of white-collar trade unionism. My father prized words and language for their own sake and wrote countless articles. Mother read more books and less newsprint than Dad but shared his passion for debate and discussion. She also enjoyed making

things. She hand-knitted our stair carpet, for example, and made picture frames for her vast output of paintings and enamels.

Despite growing post office seniority, owning his own home and devoting his abundant energy to supposedly middle-class pursuits, Dad believed in the great cause of the Labour movement and in the solidarity of workers by 'hand and brain'. He did not wish to forget that he had been brought up in a slum house [6] and had left Drayton Park elementary school in 1927 (aged 14) with no qualifications. My mother's folk, like my father and his family, were members of the Union of Post Office Workers (UPW) and Labour voters, although they were comfortably off and were owner-occupiers from the early 1920s. She won an LCC scholarship, obtained her School Certificate at grammar school and entered the post office by competitive examination. She would have been less pleased than my father to be described as 'working class' but shared his loyalty to the union culture in which they grew up. Dad was a leading figure in the 'Mets' [7] during the 1930s and founded and edited *The Junior*, a hand-printed magazine for his young post office contemporaries.

As I grew older I began to realise that my father never stopped talking and was not comfortable with silence. He was good at public speaking (usually in Labour and trade union contexts), had a very large and deliberately cultivated vocabulary, and assiduously read newspapers and journals like the *Manchester Guardian* and the *New Statesman*. My mother read popular philosophy (Bertrand Russell) and serious history (Elizabeth I was her great favourite). She could be fierce and argumentative, often from a feminist perspective.[8]

Although my parents were always at home they were not lone influences on my early development. My uncle (mother's brother) lived with us and did not leave until a few months before I set off for Cambridge. My grandfather also lived with us but removed to his sister's after my brother's birth in 1949. My infancy was spent, therefore, in the company of devoted adults who thought me absolutely wonderful (this was my impression and their later assertion). I don't remember anyone reading and talking with me but I'm certain they did. Their language is wrapped up somewhere in mine, precious gifts unconsciously assimilated. My uncle was shy and unassuming but he had an intellectual disposition (his books included Boswell and Rousseau) and a keen interest in sport (bowls and Charlton Athletic). He spent more time playing with his nephews than their father did and provided the toys essential for our imaginative play (soldiers, home-made wooden battleships, forts and ranch houses). He taught us cricket and football on Blackheath.

In this milieu, I learned to talk. My head seems to have been full of words always, though of course it can't have been. I have forever felt a need to speak, an urgent desire to say what I think, and a passionate desire to question the views and ideas expressed around me. When I do not hold the proverbial conch I am able to remain quiet and attentive but the words of my contribution, adjusted to what I have heard, are already lining up to be given tongue. I have my father's anxiety about silences. My tendency to precocious talk is captured

by my mother's story that when I was in hospital with nephritis, aged five, nurses would tease me to elicit amusing moments of adult speech.

Making Up Stories

We lived in a quiet, leafy suburban avenue and had little contact with other children. My brother and I were constant companions and played imaginative games in the house and garden. Photographs show me wearing a cowboy outfit astride a hobbyhorse, driving a pedal car or 'helping' mow the lawn. As we grew, our garden and holiday adventures became extended stories, based on television series or cinema films (*Robin Hood*, *Shane*). In our bedrooms we built miniature worlds (an island, a street in the Wild West, a space station) from carpets, books and pieces of wood, and populated them with favourite model figures. Our later narratives would feature characters derived from *Eagle* comic [9] (Dan Dare, Sergeant Luck) or from fiction (R.L. Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, Rosemary Sutcliff's *Eagle of the Ninth*).

Starting School

As an August child, I started school after my fifth birthday, in September 1951.[10] I was distressed by this unexpected separation from home and by being plunged into a crowd of other children. I have never forgotten the trauma of that day [11], with my inconsolable tears eventually subsiding as the teacher introduced the idea of writing on slate with chalk. This is my first memory of writing, or at least of making marks on a surface, and began a long struggle with every conceivable means of inscribing words on slate, walls, paper and eventually cyberspace.

We began with slates, progressed to steel nibs and ink, were introduced to fountain pens, were given and sometimes forbidden Bicos, then Bics [12], and finally discovered typing. But in later life our hard-earned, endlessly practised skills became more or less redundant with the increasingly frantic arrivals of the computer, laptop, tablet and smart phone. All my awkward efforts with cursive or italic script have had very little bearing on the principal methods of writing that I have used in adult life (typewriting, screen typing).

I was slow in learning to read and write. My mother tried to help and I wince with the memory of her irritation when she slapped me round the head for a particularly hopeless guess at a word in *The Jolly Miller*, a reader published by Blackie's. I have vague memories of the *Janet and John* books and being asked to sound out simple, frequently repeated words. My surviving exercise books from infant school disclose a struggle to form regular letters with a pencil. I remember loving school and teaching my teddies but have no recollection of what I liked about it.

When the time came to move up to the juniors my new teacher, Mr Williams, summoned me to his desk. He handed out paper and pen and required me to write, in full view of the other children. He glanced at the result, declared

me left handed, and dismissed me to the class below. I wanted to talk about this decision but was too nervous to speak out. I felt that he had found me out.

My school report (1953/54) contains a few words about a range of subjects but in reality, from that moment onwards, we were preparing for the 11-plus, with a remorseless focus on the basic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic. My lack of ability was by now obvious. I did not understand, and no one explained, that an incomplete sentence from one line of an exercise book page should be continued on the next below. I remember wrestling with what to do and adopted the expedient of writing the remainder of unfinished sentences on the facing page and drawing a box around them. I do not remember learning the correct procedure. By the end of the academic year 1953, however, I had risen to the dizzy heights of twenty-eighth in a B class of 45 children.

Reading Breakthrough

But at some uncharted point between the ages of six and seven I acquired 'the knack' and embarked on the fiction provided by my parents (from R.L. Stevenson to H.G. Wells, and from Captain Marryat to Charles Dickens). I also remember reading Richard Dimbleby's *Elizabeth Our Queen* [13] and envying the small cottage Elizabeth and Margaret used as a Wendy house when they were little girls.

A friend of my mother's gave me Arthur Ransome's *Winter Holiday* for Christmas and within a couple of years I had acquired and read all the Arthur Ransome books, from *Swallows and Amazons* to *Old Peter's Russian Tales*. On cold winter evenings I would snuggle beneath the blankets with a copper hot water bottle pushed down inside a sock and read about ice, wood stoves and samovars. I would allow the enigmatic Baba Yaga to fly through my imagination with her mortar and pestle. I was haunted by a volume of H.G. Wells's short stories, especially 'The Magic Shop', and linked the idea of time travel with Jet Morgan's radio *Journey into Space*. I was thrilled by the doppelganger theme in Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.

Aged 10, we were read Mabel Marlowe's *Barney Blue-Eyes* in class but at home I deceived my mother, who was keen on early bedtimes, by using a cycle torch to read Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* under the bedclothes. I had learned to read.

Writing: School

My writing also improved but I remember nothing of the lessons that were supposed to get us through the 11-plus. In the second-year juniors we studied and wrote about flies, portrayed as a deadly menace to health and hygiene. The looming examination was mentioned with increasing urgency as a 'do or die' challenge that would determine our futures. My mother bought a book called *First Aid in English* and she worked through stock exercises with us; she also

acquired IQ test papers. At school, every morning was devoted to arithmetic, commencing with a mental test and progressing through examples of addition, subtraction, multiplication, long division, or fractions.

Writing, which I enjoyed much more, was given much less priority and time. On one occasion we had something called nature study. The teacher covered four blackboards with writing about hedgehogs and we had to copy it out. I am fairly certain we were taught no history at all. The curriculum was driven almost exclusively by the 11-plus. Even so, I managed to climb further through the ranks to third place in the B class (now called Alpha) and received prizes (James Fisher's *Wonderful World*, Lancelot Hogben's *Man Must Measure*) in each of my last two years. These mixed science and history in an appealing full-colour format and introduced me to early civilisations, nature, dinosaurs, astronomy and mathematics.

Writing: Home

I still have one of two compositions written when I was at home with illness. 'The Mystery of Who Owned the Diamond Mines at Rio de Janeiro', written in a fairly neat hand by fountain pen, probably in my ninth year, suggests that I had learned how to construct a plausible story and had a passably wide vocabulary. When my father came home he took me into the front room and went through my epic line by line. The four pages are covered in his red biro, marking spelling and grammatical errors. This was a powerful, almost shaming experience, but I was in awe of my father and longed to be a writer like him. Through the 1950s and 1960s he contributed hundreds of articles about postmen and counter clerks (3 guineas a time) to *The Post*, a national magazine owned and distributed by the UPW. I grew up to the rhythm of his typing in an upstairs bedroom.

Non-Fiction, Theatre and Conversation

My father was also responsible for the steady flow of illustrated non-fiction that we read at home. There was an encyclopaedia with colour pictures of butterflies that I skipped over because I was afraid the insects would leave the page and beat their wings around me. I treasured Richard Haddon's *The Pictorial History Book* (Sampson Low, 1950) and Montagu Clifford's *The Pictorial Encyclopaedia of Scientific Knowledge*. I also scanned Odham's Press books with their photographs of cities, towns and industrial processes. My father presented me with *The Short History of the World* (H.G. Wells) and offered 10 shillings if I read it.

Our other home-based experiences had little bearing on the school's idea of learning. As soon as my brother and I were old enough we were taken to London theatres, including *The Mermaid* (*Treasure Island*, *Great Expectations*) and *The Savoy* (*The Mikado*). My parents' visitors also impressed us. Joseph Effete and his wife came from the Cameroons; Caroline Harrison travelled from Australia. We were always included in conversation around the dining table and

walks across Blackheath and Greenwich Park. I remember Caroline's remark that one should never lie about sex, religion or politics.

Eleven-plus

On the day of the 11-plus examinations I told my father: 'Today I walk the plank'. I remember worrying about my essay after the event. Was it wise to write a fantasy piece about owning a radar-controlled boat and whizzing it around the Prince of Wales pond? Would my IQ test result, taken earlier in the year [14], be held against me? My parents talked about sending me to private school if I didn't pass, such was the reputation of the local secondary moderns. In the end it was a close-run thing, with age marks pulling me through. Perhaps the essay had not been so bad after all.

My father decided that I should go to EGS, a new comprehensive school opened by Lord Hunt of Everest in 1956. My mother was apprehensive. She feared me developing a vulgar working-class accent. She also worried that I would want to leave school at 15 or 16 and would fail to realise her dream of my going to university. But the risk was taken. I transferred to EGS in 1957.

Secondary School

Apart from its sheer size (15 forms and 450 children in my year group) and modern architecture (sweeping glass towers and an assembly atrium modelled on the Royal Festival Hall), books were the most striking feature of education at Eltham Green, at least in the humanities. We received a large blue Bible as well as textbooks that included *English Today*, *Read to Write*, *From Ur to Rome*, *Modern Europe* and *Approach to Latin*. We were issued with set texts as our courses required and were allowed to retain them afterwards (e.g. *Book of Narrative Verse*, *The Aeneid*, *The Prelude* (books 1 and 2), *Paradise Lost* (book 1), *The Franklin's Tale*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and also selections from Byron, Shelley and Lamb's essays). We invariably carried a serious weight of reading from home to school and from lesson to lesson, whether or not the books were needed.

English (1957-62)

Mr Maynard was our English teacher until the sixth form. We were greeted at the door with melodramatic warnings about the fate of those who even thought about disobedience, although he did play the role of stern unbending martinet with just the hint of a twinkle in his eye. The lessons were lively and interesting but the content was invariably formal and analytic, with English presented as if it were a foreign language. Over the years we honed our skills in comprehension, précis, clause analysis, parts of speech and, of course, spelling. I was a fairly good speller and followed my father in deliberately and self-consciously acquiring new and often obscure words (e.g. verdigris). Learning

French and Latin extended our grammatical knowledge and in my case encouraged a curiously pedantic English style, including, for example, the frequent use of the ablative absolute.

By chance, the Latin lessons introduced us to mime as well as an alternative perspective on grammar. Miss Farr, our young teacher, included classical literature in her syllabus and was the first to spot the genius of 12-year-old Geoff Hoyle. Invited to the front, he gave silent performances of famous myths and legends. He played all the parts, featuring on one occasion a bloodthirsty fight with the Minotaur, followed by Ariadne and Theseus clasping each other in a tender embrace. Geoff later studied mime with Étienne Decroux in Paris, and worked with Ed Berman and Inter-Action in London before moving to the United States. He became a 'bay area treasure' in San Francisco, played the role of Zazu in *The Lion King* on Broadway, performed with Cirque Du Soleil in their *Nouvelle Expérience*, and has since created one-man shows like *Geezer*. First performed in 2011, this sell-out comedy is about growing old and features his father, a Yorkshire typesetter who died at 60, and 'Trixie', the adventurous Latin mistress who inspired his life in comedy. Fifty-two years later, I chuckle inwardly when I remember Geoff's silent killing of the Minotaur and his subsequent self-embrace. Our unintended, unplanned mime lessons showed us new ways to tell stories and revealed the role of silence and gesture in communication. Geoff left with his family for Yorkshire while the rest of us continued the serious study of English.

Essays were often set for homework. My first described a family outing on the Snowdon mountain railway in the summer of 1957. The marking was like my father's, heavy red ballpoint generously applied to indicate shameful lapses of spelling, punctuation and grammar. Another piece in that first year earned contemptuous abuse: 'This essay is like a glucose vat left open and dripping'. The aim was to minimise technical errors. Mr Maynard strongly emphasised neatness and handwriting. My English exercise books show my care to please him. I was less careful in other homework, provoking deserved report comments to the effect that 'tidiness needs care'.

Mr Maynard's humour could be unpredictable. On one occasion he was teaching us that the verb 'to be' took a complement, rather than an object. He explained that if we were to describe a boy in the class, my friend Martyn Stucke, for example, the expression 'Stucke is ...' would require a complement. Captivated by the wordplay, I found myself quipping: 'Oh, Stucke is, is he?' My humiliation was instantaneous. 'Barker, stand up! Bend over.' Mr Maynard advanced towards my raised buttocks, lifted the lower part of my green blazer to my waist and struck me across the rump with his ruler. It didn't hurt much but I sat down, shocked and not sure whether he was really angry with me.

I don't blame him for it, but his methods were not about making writers of us. We were not asked to experiment with language to communicate feelings and different points of view. We were not advised to show rather than tell. But every day when I write, Mr Maynard and his lessons work within me. I agonise over possible errors of syntax and worry about rules. I have written above, for

example, that 'he was teaching us' (past continuous) but wonder whether 'he taught us' (past tense) would be better, since he did in fact teach it and I have learned it.

We were entered for GCE [15] Ordinary (O) level Language at the end of the fourth year (I was 14 at the time of the examination) and for English Literature a year later. I remember intense practice of précis and comprehension skills in the run-up to the Language examination, and my growing confidence that I could meet the exacting standards required.

During the literature course that followed in 1961/62, I enjoyed *Jane Eyre* (the regulation novel), the spookiness of Coleridge's *Christabel*, and amusing scenes from *Twelfth Night* that featured the cross-gartered Malvolio. In later life I have often felt like the wedding guest in *The Ancient Mariner* when listening to unwanted stories, and have found some repetitive lines from the poem sounding themselves out in my head in the most unlikely circumstances:

Water, water, everywhere,
And all the boards did shrink;
Water, water, everywhere,
Nor any drop to drink.

We read the Shakespeare round the class and reflected on what was happening scene by scene. We were supplied with background information and listened to lengthy explanations of plot and character. Literature seemed to be an extended exercise in comprehension. At the time I was puzzled. What were we supposed to write about? How were we supposed to respond to this encounter with 'great' literature? We attended to plot mechanics and surface meaning but the essay titles set implied there was something more that we should consider, especially in poetry.

I suspect that Mr Maynard had limited knowledge of literature [16] and was simply unaware of the possibilities explored by teachers like John Kemp at Hackney Downs. Even the final examination almost ended in disaster. Our answers had to be written in a booklet, my first experience of this format, and I composed an essay in the wrong box. I decided to copy it out again to correct the error. Much precious time was wasted, so I was not surprised to scrape through, though English was my second-best subject.

History (1957-62)

I discovered history in September 1957. In a classroom on the second floor, Mrs Toms asked questions about early man. My hand went up. My hand always went up. She told us about Stonehenge. I had innumerable ideas about how the stones were dragged to the site and the possible religious practices of Stone Age people. By the time we reached ancient Rome, poor Mrs Toms edged towards the exit as the lesson bleeps approached, poised to escape even more questions about the fate of the Empire.[17] Surely it could have been saved? I hurried home and wrote a long fountain pen essay on quarto paper borrowed from my

father's supply. 'Could the Roman Empire have lasted longer than it did?', I asked myself (it wasn't homework). Mrs Toms referred me to Mr Horton, Head of Department. I thought this was high praise, never thinking that the poor teacher was fed up with my enthusiasm.

I found history lessons a better place for writing and discussion than English. History was an intrinsically interesting subject and my main pleasure in reading and writing about it came from speculating about why people behave as they do and how their actions influence events. I had an instinctive desire to explain the causes of things, for example, the fall of the Roman Empire, the outbreak of the French Revolution, and the Holocaust. I had a passion for reasons and a growing ability to talk and write about them persuasively.

Mrs Toms mysteriously disappeared after a period of illness, to my great regret, and was replaced by Miss Wood, an obviously intelligent and well-read young teacher from Oxford. But to my dismay, our class found her an object of mirth. She would begin to talk about Tudor times, I would listen attentively, and a chorus of shouting would be unleashed. David Hills, often my partner in raising awkward questions, was intoxicated by the atmosphere, so much so that Mr Horton appeared at the window, no doubt to discover the source of the banshee wail. I watched, horrified, as the door burst open and a long arm swung through the air, striking David on the side of the head with what seemed immense force.

After that we were given to Mr Sockett.[18] He was vigorous and showed a quick-fire potential that brought the class to heel with remarkable speed. We did not then know that he was just another young teacher, straight from Marlborough and Christ Church, Oxford, no doubt as worried about discipline as Miss Wood had been. I was drawn to him at the time and have remained in intermittent contact ever since.

He took a small group through O level in 1962, drilling us in the standard routines of taking notes and writing essays. I was at first content to scribble in a class exercise book but gradually discovered that it was better to read the textbook at home and write careful notes on all the key points. I found that Denis Richards' *Modern Europe 1789-1945* was ideal for this method. I must have half-known that my notes and essays about Lord Shaftesbury, Gladstone, Disraeli, Bismarck and Hitler were the foundations for a career in history teaching, because I used to write the same essay several times. I would submit the best to Mr Sockett and mark the others myself, always in red ballpoint.

Religious Education

One incident that took place in Religious Education when I was 12 illustrates the unbounded nature of the opportunities for speaking and listening. Miss Brooks devoted a whole lesson to presenting Genesis as a factual account of Creation. I listened with growing astonishment. Could anyone, never mind a teacher, believe that God made the world in seven days? How could this be reconciled with modern science? Miss Brooks was a formidable figure, not

wisely contradicted, and she allowed no scope for discussion. So I waited until the end and spoke with my friend David Hills, a keen amateur astronomer who later worked for the American space programme in California. We were both indignant. Genesis was a fairy story. The universe did not begin with a bearded gentleman waving a wand. Together we approached the dragon as she smouldered at the front. I don't remember what we actually said and I'm sure we were polite in questioning the tenets of her mistaken teaching. But she began to shout very loudly and drove us from the room – outrageous, disobedient boys who had much to learn.

A younger and less formal teacher eventually succeeded Miss Brooks. John Evers actively encouraged the debates she did not permit. He understood the limitations of his brief (two lessons a week, no examination) and did not attempt sermons. Gruesome accounts of the crucifixion were replaced by liberal-minded discussion of moral and social themes. When we were in the sixth form, John Robinson [19] visited the school and talked about God in ways that seemed remote from Miss Brooks and the unchanging truth of Genesis. But Mr Evers also introduced us to more traditional Christian beliefs. We drove on Sunday evenings to Westminster Chapel in London. Dr Martyn Lloyd Jones, a famous Evangelical, would preach for an hour and then retire to a room where he would receive members of the congregation. Each week I would join the queue and utter the phrase 'but surely' while Dr Jones wiped his brow with his handkerchief and sipped tea from a porcelain cup. On the way home we would debate what we had heard and thought.

Writing Breakthrough

My father did not give presents. He left our uncle to provide the Dinky toys, sailing boats and board games. But when I was 12 he gave me a charcoal grey Olympia SF portable typewriter in a black zip-up case. The dark metal of the chassis gleamed, the steel keys glistened inside, and the light grey rounded letters that formed the keyboard invited you to begin a sensuous journey through language. The stainless steel carriage return lever responded to the gentlest touch and would advance the paper through the platen. A little bell would ping to advise that you were nearing the end of a line. Dad also gave me a *Teach Yourself Typing* book. He removed a full-sized drawing of the keyboard from the book, glued it to a piece of plywood, and nailed the result to an upright panel at either end. I tucked my hands beneath the board, glanced at the location of the keys on the diagram, and began to type.

Thus began a love affair with typing. Dad suggested various pangrams [20] but he had no need to encourage me to practise. I typed anything and everything and became competent and fast within a year. The bedroom was very cold, heated in winter by a single electric bar positioned at the height of the picture rail. But this did not discourage my new life as a writer. I was delighted with the idea of myself as an author struggling in an upstairs garret. I persuaded teachers to let me type essays and embarked on writing plays, articles

and stories, often for the simple pleasure of using my wonderful charcoal grey Olympia. I wrote science fiction about the librogramme, a machine that could produce text without human aid. I did not win the hoped-for *Daily Mirror* prize but was pleased enough with a certificate of commendation.

My earliest (typed) published article appeared in the school magazine during my second year at EGS (1958/59). Mr Sockett had founded the paper with the help of a group of senior pupils who wrote, edited, copied and distributed *VOX* during their break and lunch times. When I saw the first number, ink duplicated on foolscap sheets below a blue lino cut print of the title, I was very excited and hastened to write and submit 'Man's Worst Enemy'. I was worried about the future of humanity in the nuclear age and doubted that science could solve all our problems. Man's worst enemy was himself, with human nature likely to trump technology. I suppose I was echoing my mother's stance on war and peace and copying her table talk.

Mr Sockett was impressed with the article, nevertheless, and within a short time I became a member of the *VOX* staff and learned how to write, print, assemble, staple and sell the paper. Within two years I was editor and typed all the stencils myself, carefully removing wax from the keys with a toothbrush when each number was complete. My mother found she no longer knew whether I was doing homework or writing articles for the newspaper because the clack of keys was continuous.

Clubs and Societies

Intrinsic interest led me into writing articles and helping with magazine production, but there was another motive for joining clubs and societies. Membership meant you were privileged, a trusty who could go to the relevant teacher's room rather than face the wind and cold at break and lunchtime. *VOX* was better than being bullied behind the gym. Mr Boom's chess club was more appealing to me than football in the yard. Our geography teacher, Mr Pepper (another Oxford graduate), was an active member of the Blackheath Labour Party and a keen internationalist. He ran the International Society, organised sixth-form conferences that brought hundreds of students together from across London, and encouraged our challenging outlook on religion, politics and social change. Teachers took an interest in you and allowed access to useful equipment and facilities.

Aged 14, I was invited to attend the first of my four sixth-form conferences. Hugh Gaitskell, Leader of the Opposition, was guest speaker, so I demanded his support for unilateral nuclear disarmament. I'm not sure I understood Labour politics, but I was thrilled (as well as nervous) to take the microphone and address the packed assembly hall. Each conference had a theme (Science and Society, Learning to Live) but aimed to stimulate the broadest discussion of politics, economics, contemporary society, international affairs, the arts and anything else that seemed to matter. Over three days, delegates

attended lectures and seminars and learned the ways of the adult world through coffee and tea parties, lunches, a grand conference dinner and even a dance.

In that same year, when teachers' salaries were caught up in Selwyn Lloyd's 1961 'pay pause', I decided to organise an EGS petition, prompting fellow pupils to demand a fair deal for the staff. For reasons now lost to me, I embarked on this precocious trade union campaign unaided, drafting the petition, collecting the signatures and typing a stern letter to the *Kentish Mercury*. There were no repercussions back at school when banner headlines followed in the local press. We somehow had permission to raise awkward questions, challenge authority and speak our minds. We identified with our teachers and they somehow identified with us, or that's how they made us feel. But none of this freedom connected with the curriculum and none of the excitement carried over into our lessons.

Drama

My parents, passionate London theatregoers, did not choose EGS because it had its own drama hall. At that moment, they did not know about this sacred place and had no conception of it as a source of delight and memory that would colour my thoughts for the next sixty years. The plays I saw there and the parts I acted enhanced my learning of English and brought literature to life.

I attended my first audition nervously but was entranced by the darkness, taking the stage and peering towards the shadowy outline of teachers watching us from the body of the hall. I was rewarded with the part of Wally Webb in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. I had two brief speeches. In the kitchen, I had to announce that 'I have to learn all about Canada by nine o'clock'. Later, amongst the dead in the graveyard, I was supposed to comment on the starry night, 'Yes, yes, it is'. I'm afraid, despite the producer's best efforts, I imparted a comical intonation to this brief remark and the line was cut. This was a relief because I was worried about forgetting words or uttering them in the wrong places. This did not detract from my enjoyment, however. The play was the thing. Wilder's portrait of small-town innocence in middle America has persisted in my mind and I have enjoyed seeing it performed since, at schools and in the theatre, but never without muttering to myself the cut graveyard line: 'Yes, yes, it is'.

To be in a school play was to enter an Arabian Nights world of the imagination, illuminated by batteries of lights with coloured filters that created bright mornings, warm afternoons and evenings or gloomy nightscapes to match the producer's vision. Painted screens and ply-board sets converted the small stage into a drawing room, a church, a battlefield, a prison or a desert. Then there were the costumes, the make-up, the smell of grease paint and blossoming romances between members of the cast, thrown together in embraces that continued beyond the show.

I never learned to act but I stood tall and spoke well, so small parts were found for me. I was in a haunted house play in the fourth year, and in the sixth form was amongst a group of cigar-smoking businessmen encountered by Peer

Gynt on his travels in the desert. This introduced me to smoking. I loved the Castellias provided by the props department but also savoured the box of large cigars I purchased on holiday with my parents in Holland. My parting role was as Agrippa in *Antony and Cleopatra*, our A level set text in 1964. This involved prompting Enobarbus to describe Cleopatra in the most extravagant terms.

Enobarbus (Brian Plumb) came from a lower class than me but just happened to be a better actor, had a fine grasp of Shakespeare's language and could remember his lines. I missed the last night through a painful ear infection. Mr Davies, the headmaster, said that my 'noble presence' had been missed. On stage my 'presence' was about my only asset.

For seven years, I attended every show with my family and have retained a lasting affection for the plays we saw. Jean Anouilh must have been especially popular then. The teachers performed *Ring Around the Moon*, while my brother Peter was the narrator in *Antigone*. I can picture the sylph-like Derina Green as Mole in *Toad of Toad Hall* and recall my parents' delight in Shaw's *Arms and the Man*. Although I have seen *The Importance of Being Earnest* many times, including a production at Imperial College with our son Chris as Algernon Moncrieff, I have vivid memories of my EGS friend David Begley tasting the cucumber sandwiches and Richard Rabone dressed as Miss Prism, the absent-minded babysitter.

Hot Topics

After my mother's death, aged 90 in 2003, Julian Crowe [21] wrote a memoir of Bessie and Chris Barker in which he aimed to capture the unusual atmosphere of their home life in Kidbrooke, SE3. He had been their close friend as well as mine for over forty years and his thoughts about them are uncluttered because he was not their son:

What struck me and has remained with me was that the end of the performance [22] signalled the beginning of the excitement, the discussion, the asking what did you think, why did they do that, what did that mean? ... Bessie's mind was open, welcoming new ideas, wanting to know the reasons for everything. Chris was quite simply the most rational and balanced person I had ever met – a position he has continued to hold in my life ever since. ... There was always some current hot topic in the Barker household, and this would soon be brought out and your views solicited.

I remember my parents in the same way, though I fought fierce battles with my mother, usually about bedtime and homework, and sometimes found my father stern and demanding. Their sustained intelligence, argumentativeness and open-mindedness must explain why I have always seen them as the most interesting and stimulating people I ever knew. For a long while I believed my extended university education had given me a big intellectual advantage over them and

they always treated me as if I were the brightest spark imaginable. My opinion has changed.

I was in love with the exciting life at school and the new possibilities opened for me by young, often left-wing, teachers from Oxford and Cambridge, but my parents, sometimes assisted by Uncle Wilfred, continued to encourage me to think and scattered books, plays, films, foreign trips and passionate arguments across my path as if they were gifts from a stocking at Christmas. Unlike Philip Larkin, I came to maturity with the 'Chatterley' ban, and listened to the Beatles' first album as I summoned the courage to make love to the girl of the moment. It was certainly not too late for me. But for the trial [23], however, I think my introduction to D.H. Lawrence may have been long delayed. As it was, my uncle bought a copy of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* to find out what all the fuss was about.

My parents allowed me to read it, provided the readings took place downstairs. This was a wise precaution, from their point of view, but they failed to enforce their modified ban. Aged 14, I smuggled *Chatterley* upstairs to investigate its masturbatory potential, which was considerable. At school, I became the centre of attention as I regaled my classmates with extracts from the novel. Each day a cluster of boys would gather round me to demand the next instalment.

My parents were dissenters, disarmers and socialists and I now suspect the early sixties were more their time than mine. We were at Trafalgar Square in 1961 to hear Bertrand Russell on the risk of nuclear war, and in the same year we saw *Beyond the Fringe* at the Fortune Theatre. By 1962, we were avid *That Was the Week That Was* viewers, delighted to see conservative, middle-class society mocked and ridiculed. The satirical sketch style was infectious and I soon began to write my own rather embarrassing sketches. I also began to read the *Manchester Guardian* and the *New Statesman* and followed current affairs with rapt attention.

Dad noticed my growing journalistic tendencies and introduced me to George Orwell's rules on the writing of English.[24]

Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.

Never use a long word where a short one will do.

If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.

Never use the passive where you can use the active.

Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.

Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

This was Mr Maynard country, but in the long run George Orwell's advice proved more useful than the ability to identify metaphors, similes and adverbial clauses. I was given and eagerly read other Orwell books, including the Left Book Club version (with photographs) of *The Road to Wigan Pier* as well as

Penguin paperback editions of *1984*, *Animal Farm* and *Homage to Catalonia*. My father had two lines of attack on my growing arrogance. He would tell me that all my knowledge came out of Pelican paperbacks, and was therefore more superficial and less valid than I believed; and he would sneer at my 'primary school' use of coloured pencils in geography.

Our family theatre trips continued in 1960-62, with visits to Robert Bolt's *Tiger and the Horse* (with Vanessa Redgrave), his *Man for All Seasons*, and Terence Rattigan's *Aircraftman Ross* (about T.E. Lawrence). My brother and I did not understand everything but this did not prevent us from having lively debates with our parents as we made our way to Charing Cross Station and the Southern Region train home.

Lower Sixth

I was the first member of my family to have a sixth-form education. My father left his London elementary school in 1928, aged 14. My mother passed her School Certificate in 1929, but despite a pleading interview with the headmistress, left her grammar school to join the Post Office aged 16. I attributed my good fortune to merit and failed to understand that broader access to sixth-form education was one of the key improvements in opportunity to stem from comprehensive reorganisation (Benn & Chitty, 1996). I was lucky to be given another seven terms at school. As I chose English, history and geography for A level, the time was mostly devoted to improving my ability to read and write in my own language. I was very happy to leave the rest of the curriculum behind, especially science and mathematics, but I was humbled by having to re-sit French with a fifth-form class.

I remember the dullness of lessons in the lower sixth, with teachers spending weeks on end reading aloud from difficult texts (*England under the Tudors*; *Principles of Physical Geography*) that cried out for explanation and interpretation. We were supposed to listen and make notes but I found this almost impossible and eventually decided to tackle the books at home. Our Wordsworth lessons seemed to me lifeless and uninteresting. We were asked to compare the published text of *The Prelude* with lines deleted by the poet. Did we prefer, for example:

Wonder not
 If such my transports were; for in all things now
 I saw one life, and felt that it was joy.
 Or:
 Wonder not
 If high the transport, great the joy I felt.

I did not know or care. As a suburban schoolboy, I felt no affinity with rapturous 'transports', however they were phrased, and could not respond to high-flown sentiment about 'Nature and her overflowing soul'. I'm sure

pantheism was explained but I was an atheist who saw landscape as an aesthetic, not a religious form of experience.

I enjoyed our novels and plays much more than Romantic poetry. I found Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* and Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* accessible and liked *Antony and Cleopatra*. I did not suffer much from the absence of twentieth-century authors because I read reviews in the *New Statesman* or *The Observer* and found them for myself. Karl Miller, literary editor of the *New Statesman*, became an unseen influence on my developing taste. I failed to browse around the A-level syllabus and read modern novels instead, including John Wain's *Strike the Father Dead*, John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, John Braine's *Room at the Top* and Iris Murdoch's *Severed Head*. John Davenport, who led the EGS English department and later became the head of Stepney Green School, explained and questioned his way through our texts and encouraged class discussions of characters and events. I began to understand what to write about. Should we admire Fanny Price? Wasn't she timid and dull?

There were problems in history for the first time. I struggled to grasp why religion was so important in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (or at any time, for that matter) and often wrote about people like Henry VIII and Luther as power seekers who dressed their desires in religious clothing. My theatre visits encouraged this unhistorical thinking. Contemporary portrayals of Martin Luther (played by Albert Finney in John Osborne's *Martin Luther* at the Royal Court Theatre) and Sir Thomas More (played by Paul Scofield in Robert Bolt's *Man for All Seasons* at The Globe) made them seem like us.

I loved history plays but for some reason they were never discussed or referred to in lessons. I would spend my free periods reading Terence Rattigan's collected plays in the school library, losing myself in *The Winslow Boy*, *The Browning Version*, *The Deep Blue Sea*, *Ross*, *A Bequest to the Nation* and many others. But there was little scope for discussing recent literature. My friends had mostly chosen science courses, the numbers in English and history were small, and the A-level syllabus excluded the things that mattered to me.

This sense of intellectual isolation co-existed with energetic involvement in the social and cultural life around me. As a school prefect, I joined the rota for reading from the *King James Bible* in morning assembly. I bellowed hymns as if I believed in them. I struggled to sing 'co-eternal and con-substantial' and puzzled over the meaning of the phrase. I ran the EGS chess club, arranged all the matches and played for Kent. I was in the school hockey team and made myself participate in debates, although my body trembled whenever I rose to speak. I acted in *Peer Gynt* and *Antony and Cleopatra* (see above) and started *Sixth Form Opinion*, an ink-duplicated paper that was never quite as good as *VOX* had been. I provoked great interest by writing character sketches of my contemporaries. A group of us began to gather after school at a café on Eltham High Street. We sipped coffee, ate chips and discussed the state of the world. We wondered what would come next.

Some teachers were eager to stimulate our aspirations. Mr Renshaw [25] appeared one evening in the sixth-form common room with a group of

colleagues in their twenties (he was 27) and challenged us to demand more of ourselves, of the school and of society itself. We should not be passive recipients, waiting for something good to happen. He staged chamber concerts at his elegant London home and invited students from various state and private schools to listen to music and meet people from different social and educational backgrounds. The EGS contingent enjoyed songs (I remember Schubert), cello, violin and piano in a cultured ambience far removed from my music-free home.

Mr Sockett had a similar idea when he drove the debating team to Christ's Hospital in Horsham, where we were entertained for tea by boarders dressed in blue frock coats with pewter coloured buttons, a plain white starched collar and tabs, and yellow stockings. They showed us their accommodation, told us about the intricacies of the Blue Coat charity and explained for our disbelieving ears that those expected to win scholarships or exhibitions at Oxford or Cambridge had to wear special buttons and decorations with their uniforms. I wondered how failure might feel in such a status-conscious regime.

Despite these attentions, I was not enjoying my A-level subjects, apart from work on the novels, and found it difficult to get down to serious study. I wanted to be a teacher, sure enough, but was doubtful about my likely grades. Perhaps training college would be the right option. Until the spring and summer of 1963, I was at risk of losing my way. Then came two opportunities that changed everything.

My parents decided that I should travel alone to France for Easter (1963), in the vague hope that living with a French family would boost my chances of passing O level in the summer. I boarded with Madame Villiers-Derboule and her son and daughter at Caen in Normandy. Though we had weekend trips in their Citroën 'deux chevaux' to Bayeux and the coast, there were no distractions from Monday to Friday, so every morning I tackled a past examination paper, battling the clock to complete my translations. In the afternoons, I walked the local streets collecting data for a land use survey. In the evening, after a good supper with watered red wine, I settled down with Genevieve. She would correct my mistakes, check my pronunciation and otherwise encourage my feeble but increasingly persistent efforts. My time in Normandy was an opportunity to practise living and working independently but I also learned how to plan and schedule projects, from fieldwork in geography to passing French O level, and to speak and listen in another language.

After the holiday, Mr Davenport showed me the flyer for a residential conference at Manchester University. 'I think this'll be good', he said. C.B. Cox and A.E. Dyson, English lecturers and editors of the *Critical Quarterly*, had arranged a course at the Fallowfield Hall for intending university English students. Unknown to me at the time, they believed English should revolve around literature and were troubled by the utilitarian approach to grammar and composition apparently adopted in many schools and training colleges (Hilliard, 2012). My parents seemed happy to fund yet another adventure, so I signed up and secured a place, though I felt slightly fraudulent. Despite the tedious note-

taking and unwelcome emphasis on religious topics, history was already woven into my identity.

Through the *Critical Quarterly* I discovered William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* as well as the poetry of Thom Gunn, Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath and Ezra Pound. It was also how I became aware of fierce peer competition. Everyone at the conference [26] had read far more than me and spoke with confidence about ideas and perspectives that were new to me. This was when I learned to read critically and began to understand the complex techniques used by writers to achieve their effects. Until our lecture on *Lord of the Flies*, my attention had been fixed on character and narrative. I had not considered, for example, the idea that Simon was a symbolic, Christ-like figure. Awake at last, I began to scrutinise texts more closely. I was startled a few years later when the Cox and Dyson duo became editors of the *Black Papers* and denounced comprehensive schools for dangerous, progressive tendencies. Did I owe my intellectual liberation to reactionaries?

Almost overnight, the *Critical Quarterly* conference made me a more determined, better-informed student and provided new ways to make sense of literature. It also introduced me to contemporaries who equalled or surpassed my ability to argue and debate ideas. By chance, Geoff Hoyle reappeared in my life as I wandered the corridors at Fallowfield Hall. He greeted me warmly and said he now lived in Scarborough and attended the Boys' High School there. I was disconcerted by his Yorkshire accent and glanced at his face repeatedly for signs of the Theseus I had known in London.

He introduced other boys from his school at the conference, including Paul Haworth, and we immediately set about making ourselves comfortable, shopping together for cups, coffee, sugar and milk, like undergraduates on their first meeting. We discussed Golding, Eliot and Hughes and visited the Library Theatre to see Patrick Stewart in Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker*. Two years later, tipped off by Geoff that both of us were Cambridge-bound, Paul and I exchanged visits. We saw Alan Ayckbourn's *Relatively Speaking* at the Library Theatre (Scarborough, 1965). At the time I dismissed the play as lightweight comedy and for years afterwards failed to appreciate Alan's dramatic genius in making people laugh at impossibly painful situations. I affected to prefer Eugene Ionesco and the Theatre of the Absurd.

Paul and I have been friends ever since. This summer (2014) we discussed *Mansfield Park* as if we were resuming a conversation in 1963. We talked about Crawford's horrible pursuit of Fanny and her family's cruelty in pressing her to submit. Geoff Hoyle is puzzled by how this came to pass. 'How do you know Haworth?', he says, every wrinkle of his face bemused.

Upper Sixth

I returned from Manchester in June 1963 with a new sense of direction and purpose but the benefits were not immediately obvious. I devoted long hours of the summer holiday to bringing my history notes up to date. I filled a large

black folder with detailed annotations of *The Franklin's Tale*. My determined efforts with Middle English did not bring much pleasure, however. Despite a real effort, I still disliked the intellectual process of deciphering vaguely humorous poetry set in the Middle Ages. I found 'Thise olde gentil Britouns in hir dayes' unappealing and the fact that their 'diverse aventures' were in 'lays Rhymed in their first Breton tongue' was another barrier. I knew Chaucer was an important figure in English literature but, without the examination hurtling towards us, he would not have been important for me.

Early in the autumn term, Mr Sirett [27] had a quiet word. He wanted me to apply to study history at Cambridge. I immediately thought of my Christ's Hospital sixth former with his gold buttons, almost my only previous contact with the idea of an ancient university. Mr Sirett's suggestion seemed unreal as well as unrealistic. But he seemed serious and invited me to his Eltham home to discuss what should be done. My parents were pleased and supported the plan that I should postpone applying for university until after A levels in 1964. I would take the Cambridge Entrance Examination the following November, with a view to admission in 1965. I considered my chances of success very slim but had nothing to lose. As the goal settled, my work became more ambitious.

During the year I wrote (typed) two long essays, one on the 11 years' tyranny of Charles I, the other about Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution. This was the first time that I had tried to combine different sources in a single essay. I made extensive notes using textbooks, Historical Association pamphlets, and a number of longer works, including C.V. Wedgwood's *The King's Peace* and G.M. Trevelyan's *History of England*. I laid my notes out on the bed beside my writing desk and shuffled through them for the information I needed as I typed.

I also extended my reading. I found William Shirer's *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* on my uncle's shelf at home and quickly moved on to Alan Bullock's *Hitler: a study in tyranny* and A.J.P. Taylor's *Origins of the Second World War*. Ved Mehta's *Fly and the Fly-Bottle* introduced me to controversies that involved contemporary historians. I identified, of course, with left-wingers like R.H. Tawny, Christopher Hill and A.J.P. Taylor, and disliked their opponents, especially Hugh Trevor-Roper. Taylor's lectures on television were inspirational because they projected his pyrotechnic enthusiasm and provided a rare example of intellectual power that could be switched on in suburban homes like mine. A.J.P. Taylor was much loved on the left as a political dissenter and campaigner against nuclear weapons, and his debunking instincts were much appreciated by my parents.

Introduced by our mothers at about this time, Julian Crowe and I were both relieved to find someone else who wanted to discuss politics, books, plays and films. We were lucky that our formative years coincided with the National Theatre's first season, performed at the Old Vic. We saw many productions before departing for university, including Laurence Olivier, Maggie Smith and Frank Finlay in *Othello*, Robert Stephens in *Royal Hunt of the Sun*, and Peter Shaffer's *Black Comedy* with Derek Jacobi, Maggie Smith and Albert Finney.

We would talk about the play on the train home, and sometimes continued the discussion with my parents at our house. We have continued in much the same way ever since, although we live at opposite ends of the United Kingdom. Our personalities are very different but we share a dissenting perspective on current affairs and have been preoccupied with history and literature all our lives. We both subscribe to the *London Review of Books* and often mull over the articles by email, sometimes writing at length.

I had discovered my strengths, imagined a future as a school or university teacher, and began to understand the work and organisation needed to give life to dreams. But my route remained uncertain and insecure. Although my trip to France was vindicated by a good grade in O-level French in the summer examinations, this small success earned no respite from humiliation.

You needed Latin to study history at Cambridge and I had failed twice, even with the aid of private tuition for the second attempt. So it was decided that I should join Miss Farr's fifth-form Latin set. Her class included my brother and his friends, three school years junior to me. They were confident while I was miserable with conjugations, declensions and Virgil's epic poetry. I also struggled with geography, especially after the teacher realised we had failed to cover the syllabus properly and needed a rush course on the omitted material.

In the end, I was fortunate to survive my various blind spots (religion, languages and poetry prominent amongst them) and was greatly aided by parents who were willing to keep me in school for as long as it took. I was awarded B grades in A-level English and history, and an E in geography. In the sixties, this was enough to guarantee a university place, although Bs did not augur well for Cambridge. But I sneaked O-level Latin, and my path to the entrance examination was clear. I was given a dedicated team of teachers to see me through. I was coached for the languages paper, which involved translating from French and Latin, while Peter Renshaw advised on my choice of college. Mr Sirett was in charge of my history and set essays on political thinkers (like Machiavelli) and a number of seventeenth-century European topics. David Wasp, another young teacher, later head of department, loaned me his Oxford history essays and tried to build my fragile confidence.

Mrs Mountfield [28] prepared me for the English essay paper. Candidates were expected to respond to wide-ranging, apparently content-free questions, e.g. 'Imagination governs mankind. Discuss'. She impressed me as an adult version of the very bright people I had met at Manchester, a wise and intelligent authority who had read English literature and knew everything. Early on, she asked me to write about Michael Young's (1958) *Rise of the Meritocracy*. I read and was outraged. My typewriter flew into action as I denounced the whole idea of a society governed by an intelligent, well-educated elite. I covered about 12 pages with single-spaced typescript, a passionate advocacy of democracy and of the need to respect ordinary people.

I hurried to submit my essay, as keen for praise as when I tried to show that the Roman Empire could have been saved. Unfortunately, my case was misconceived on both occasions. At the next lesson, Mrs Mountfield wore a

mildly pained expression and gave me a copy of Jonathan Swift's *Modest Proposal* (1729). The proposition was that poor families should fatten their children and feed them to rich landowners, thereby solving many of Ireland's problems. 'It's satire, Bernard', explained Mrs Mountfield gently, noticing my embarrassment but mercifully unaware of my leading role in the sixth-form satirical society.

The Cambridge Entrance Examinations, taken at school in the dental room in November 1964, marked the end of my learning at EGS. My final examination essay was on whether or not there was a Tudor revolution in government. Professor Geoffrey Elton had written the book and probably set and marked the Cambridge examination, so the challenge was formidable.

Conclusion

Although this is a participant's story, there are many similarities here with Medway et al's (2014) research-based portrait of secondary school teaching in London in the period. Most practitioners worked with an inherited, traditional conception of their subject, relied heavily on textbooks like *English Today*, and had little anticipation of what a comprehensive school curriculum might look like. Although a handful of pioneers (e.g. Douglas Barnes) questioned the role and purpose of teaching English language and literature, few educators developed strategies to cope with less able students. Wide variations in teaching seem to have been related to the age, education and training of the staff concerned. Younger teachers were often more qualified, tended to adopt less formal approaches to students and were more likely to prove sympathetic mentors.

Eltham Green's modernist buildings and inclusive mission appeared to challenge the social and academic order but the teaching I experienced was often more defensive and less imaginative than the innovative approaches developed by John Kemp, Harold Rosen and Douglas Barnes. Seemingly conservative structures were subverted in unexpected ways, however, with some teachers acting intuitively to create opportunities for learning beyond the official curriculum. We were taught Latin to validate the school's academic claims but Miss Farr's improvised response to an unusual student led into the world of mime. The 'dripping glucose vat' noted by Mr Maynard disappeared when I wrote about politics and education in the school magazine.

The head of English arranged for me to attend a *Critical Quarterly* conference where I encountered ideas never mentioned by my teachers. As sixth formers, we were introduced to *Honest to God*, although the book encouraged doubt about traditional Christian theology, as promoted by official religious education. Although the most interesting, challenging ingredients in my education seem to have been unplanned and serendipitous, they were not entirely accidental. EGS embodied the idea of new opportunities adapted to students' needs and teachers were eager to take risks and discussed their burning interests (in music, international affairs, religion) with the children.

I am not sorry I was introduced to language and literature as traditionally understood. My knowledge of grammar and grammatical terms has been useful in my professional career; for example, in helping students adopt active rather than passive constructions or edit long-winded, repetitive dissertations. I can spot and correct split infinitives and hanging adverbs in seconds. My familiarity with the literature canon (The Bible, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton) has provided a framework for understanding the history, ideas and culture of England.

Cultural knowledge and technical skills are not to be despised or discounted but I am now persuaded they were of marginal value in my development as a speaker, reader and writer. I talked fluently and confidently from an early age and read *Nicholas Nickleby* in my eleventh year. Aged 12, I wrote for the school magazine about the future of humanity and volunteered a speculative essay on the decline of the Roman Empire for a history teacher who caught my imagination. I seized every opportunity I could to read and write about subjects that excited me, especially history, politics and religion.

I enjoyed English and was relatively good at the subject, but the limitations of the teaching were obvious to me at the time and have become more obvious with the passing years. The formal structures and rules of language were explained and we were expected to work with examples until we had understood the virtue of the models of prose set before us. Opportunities to express thoughts and feelings or to develop and practise creative writing skills were not provided. Speaking was actively discouraged.

Much of the literature we studied was too difficult and was introduced too soon in our young lives. Rural villages and country landscapes filled with poetic birds and flowers were remote from our suburban lives and aged 11 we struggled to understand what plays like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* were really about. Personal experience has contributed to my strong belief that teachers should encourage self-expression, not the slavish imitation of noble examples and that practice, not prescription, is the best way to learn.

My story offers a broader perspective on the learning of language than Medway et al (2014), with their careful attention to 'secondary English'. My recollections yield a glimpse of other important influences on the development of talking, reading and writing. Cross-curricular and extra-curricular activities gave me extended and varied opportunities for improving my language skills. I found history, for example, a more congenial writing environment than English and was excited by the regular publication of my articles in *VOX*. I loved debates in religious education, in the International Society and at sixth-form conferences. My imaginative engagement with the theatre, nurtured by my parents, was further encouraged by the excitement of appearing in productions in the drama hall. On the other hand, a strong emphasis on learning grammar in French and Latin did not assist my search for an effective prose style. I became inhibited, pedantic and self-conscious as I struggled with the forms of language, rather than with the thoughts and ideas I wished to express. We were never shown how to develop an idea in plain words.

I am less sure about the role of primary education in my development. I remember feelings of pain, humiliation and uncertainty as well as an acute, identity-threatening awareness that I was behind the others. I was often bullied, was identified as a problematic left-hander, was banned from singing lessons because I was a 'grunter' and stumbled over the text of the *Jolly Miller*. My problems may have stemmed from an August birthday and relative immaturity but I was not helped by the school's obsession with the 11-plus and the crowded classrooms of that period. There was a good deal of arithmetic (all morning, every morning) and abundant practice in the basics, from handwriting and spelling to number bonds and the tables. This was useful if desperately unimaginative and was pitched without regard to the child's expressive needs.

How did I break through after this horrible start? My parents had formed a high opinion of me and must have been baffled by my dismal school performance. I'm sure my mother invested a great deal of effort in teaching me to read. I remember chanting the tables in the bathroom and puzzling over *First Aid in English* and a book of IQ test papers. There was an unpleasant emotional charge associated with this help but my classes were large and there was little individual attention for stragglers. But learning to read is a strange business and none of us quite remembers how the miracle happened. Suddenly, you can do it. I remember the acceleration from the *Jolly Miller* to *Swallows and Amazons*, from not being able to read to being able to read anything. After that, my parents provided an amazing variety of books (fiction, non-fiction, reference) and this must have added to the acceleration that carried me through the 11-plus.

I recognise in retrospect that my family was more unusual and influential than I perceived at the time. I was brought up in a dissenting home that identified with the Labour Party and believed in public service, and from an early age engaged in vital debate and discussion. My parents valued talking, writing and painting above all things, and set out to support their children's schooling with every available resource. My mother's high intelligence and grammar school education was perhaps the most important influence in our young lives. Suburban people were often written off in those days as soulless and materialistic (Carey, 1992) but in reality a new generation had emerged from the war, armed with the social and cultural capital necessary to question historic injustice and to demand the best possible education for their children.

My dispositions and outlook (Bourdieu, 1977) were formed by countless interwoven experiences between 1946 and 1965 when I left home, but my own personality, foibles and limitations were also significant in shaping what happened to me. I adopted and internalised family habits but also exercised agency in responding to particular teachers and in selecting activities that excited or interested me. I was inside the EGS Black Box and at times disrupted the wiring through my immaturity, unpreparedness and undue self-confidence. Within the contexts provided by home, school and friends, I engaged emotionally with some things and not others, so evolving an identity and agenda of my own.

My journey through school to university was slow and uncertain. Left to my own devices, I might have settled for an office job of some kind or perhaps teacher training college. I was enthusiastic about extra-curricular activities but bored by many of the lessons. I stumbled through the hurdles but my parents and school were remarkably patient and kept me in the GCE game until my final term, when I caught up at last. This was not, however, the end of a steady effort to improve my use of English. My identity as a would-be writer and teacher was now formed but I was a long way from finding an Orwell-approved mode of spoken and written expression. I wallowed in complexity, I left the glucose tap open and dripping, I tried to impress people with my cleverness. I had another 12 years of university education in front of me, and even after a lifetime of writing I still strive to communicate my ideas clearly.

This account of interrelated, interacting influences (and their uncertain consequences for an individual's growing ability to talk, read and write) illustrates the complexity of what is involved in learning English and suggests that many teachers underestimate the task before them. Language, it seems from my experience, is embedded in social reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). The social and cultural differences between children are woven into their very being and are not easily overcome.

Notes

- [1] R.H. Davies, MSc had been head of Sheffield City Grammar School until 1956.
- [2] As measured by IQ (intelligence quotient) tests.
- [3] An earlier selection from their exchanges, interwoven with letters written by famous lovers (e.g. Heloise and Abelard, Virginia and Leonard Woolf), was published in Garfield (2013). Praised by reviewers around the world and read at the Hay Literary Festival by Benedict Cumberbatch and Louise Brealey, the letters show words and love overcoming loneliness, war and destruction.
- [4] F.R. Leavis at Downing College, Cambridge was a prominent advocate of this approach and edited the critical quarterly *Scrutiny* until 1953.
- [5] Muriel Spark used the phrase in 1961 but our teachers described us in such terms in the late 1950s.
- [6] 9 Hartnoll St, N7. The house was demolished in the 1930s and the Barker family moved to a new home on an LCC housing estate in Tottenham.
- [7] The UPW's London Metropolitan branch.
- [8] My mother had resigned from the post office when my father returned from the war in June 1946 and became the classic mother and housewife of the period. She later developed a significant career as a painter, potter, weaver and enameller. My father rose through the post office ranks to become Assistant Superintendent in charge of London Chief Office in the King Edward Building (near St Paul's).

- [9] Hulton Press published Marcus Morris's *Eagle* in full colour from 1950 to 1969 (it was relaunched in 1982). My brother and I were avid readers throughout the 1950s.
- [10] I was at Kidbrooke Park JMI School from 1951 to 1957 and at Eltham Green School, London SE9 from 1957 to 1965.
- [11] But back home I lined up my teddies and called the register. I decided to become a teacher and my resolve never faltered in the years ahead.
- [12] These were popular makes of ballpoint pen.
- [13] The LCC presented every child with a copy as part of the coronation celebrations in June 1953.
- [14] I saw my personal records when I worked in the school office as a sixth former and found out that my IQ was 110. This placed me in the top class at Eltham Green because few children who had passed the 11-plus chose to go there. My score was, nevertheless, well below the 120+ achieved by most university entrants in the 1960s (Hudson, 1967).
- [15] The General Certificate of Education (GCE) was awarded at Ordinary (normally taken at 16+) and Advanced (A) level (taken at 18+).
- [16] Shortly afterwards he was placed in charge of commercial subjects. I wonder whether he had an English degree. He never taught sixth-form English.
- [17] Personal information (supplied by another EGS history teacher, many years later).
- [18] Hugh Sockett subsequently obtained a PhD in the philosophy of education from the University of London and progressed to become dean of education at the University of East Anglia and professor of education at George Mason University, near Washington, DC in Virginia. His latest book is *Knowledge and Virtue in Teaching and Learning* (2012).
- [19] Then Bishop of Woolwich and in 1963 author of *Honest to God*.
- [20] A pangram contains every letter of the alphabet, e.g. The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.
- [21] My parents were friendly with Mr and Mrs Crowe through the Blackheath Labour Party and CND. They introduced Julian and me during the academic year 1963/64. Julian had left Dulwich College but had not yet decided to go to university.
- [22] Julian could not remember the particular play.
- [23] D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* had been banned under the Obscene Publications Act. Penguin Books decided to publish and were prosecuted. At the famous trial in 1960, the jury found in favour of the defendant and the decision led to a general liberalisation of publishing, often regarded as the beginning of the 'permissive society'.
- [24] In *Politics and the English Language* (1946).
- [25] Peter Renshaw graduated in music and history from Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge and later became a philosophy lecturer at Leeds University

before his appointment as principal of the Yehudi Menuhin School and then as head of research and development at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama.

- [26] Every delegate I met came, inevitably, from grammar and private schools.
- [27] Geoff Sirett was a University of Leicester graduate who taught me sixteenth-century European history. He was later head of history at a comprehensive school in Dronfield near Sheffield before becoming head of Stanney County School in Ellesmere Port, and eventually of Neston High School in Cheshire.
- [28] Anne Mountfield was educated at Merchant Taylor's, Crosby and Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford. She joined EGS in 1963.

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Bernard Barker's private and professional papers are deposited with the UCL Institute of Education Archive and have informed the above account. Chris Barker's private papers are held at the Mass Observation Archive, a special collection at the University of Sussex. *Correspondence:* rekrab3@gmail.com

