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## Being an Inspector is Not a Bed of Roses

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**ABSTRACT** School inspection has always attracted great controversy, but especially since the inception of the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted). Over the years, many voices have entered the debate about inspection, but one particular voice has hardly been heard – that of rank-and-file inspectors themselves. This attempts to offer a glimpse of their perspective through an unusual lens.

In the 2019–2020 academic year, the first round of inspections under the new framework is taking place, and not without controversy. Inspectors working for the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) are coming in for criticism – some warranted, some not. The sad lot of schools and teachers being inspected is also getting a lot of attention – understandably and rightly. But what of the inspectors themselves? How do they see their lot?

Some insight into inspecting from the viewpoint of inspectors can be gained from an unusual and venerable source – Matthew Arnold, a poet, literary critic and Her Majesty’s Inspector (HMI) from 1851 to 1886. I have scoured collections of his published letters to try to get an insight into how he felt about inspection and the demands it made on him. Here, I quote from 10 of them. The subtitles and the comments in brackets are my own and reflect recent (and current) preoccupations. I beg forgiveness for putting words into Matthew’s mouth, but not for the titles or the thoughts in brackets.

### **How Shall I Get On?**

I think I shall get interested in the schools after a little time; their effects on the children are so immense and their future effects in civilising the next generation of the lower classes, who, as things are

going, will have most of the political power of the country in their hands, may be so important. (1851)

(Despite what critics think, the vast majority of inspectors become inspectors for good reasons and appreciate how important schools are for the pupils who attend them.)

### **It's Hard and Difficult Work**

I have had a hard day. Thirty pupil teachers to examine in an inconvenient room, and nothing to eat except a biscuit, which a charitable lady gave me. I was asked to dinner, this time at five, but excused myself on the ground of work. (1851)

(Despite appearances, inspection is hard and the conditions are not always congenial.)

### **I'm in Danger of Losing My Mind**

Here I am at last nearly stupefied by 8 months inspecting. (1853)

(Too many inspections over the course of a year are not good for the mental health of inspectors or for the schools inspected.)

### **I Need to Do My Best**

I more and more have the feeling that I do not do my inspecting work really well and satisfactorily; but I have also had a stronger wish than usual not to vacillate and be helpless, but to do my duty, whatever that may be; and out of that wish one may always hope to make something. (1854)

(Like teachers, inspectors can experience 'the dark night of the soul' from time to time when faced with the unrealistic expectations of the role entertained by the government, their senior managers and schools themselves.)

### **Writing Reports Can Be Difficult**

In all this discomfort [due to a cold] my introduction has gone on slowly, and it needs so much tact as to the how much and the how little to say that I am never satisfied with it. (1861)

(Writing reports that are more than cut and paste and faithfully reflect the individual character of a school requires both hard work and diplomacy.)

### **It's Been a Hectic Day**

I have been all day inspecting at Westminster, having gone at ten, inspected a school from ten to half past twelve, from half past twelve to a quarter past one heard pupil teachers read, from a quarter past one to two dined ... and from two to a quarter past four inspected another school. (1862)

(Inspections are pressurised for inspectors, as well as for those being inspected.)

### **I'm Getting Fed Up with Bureaucracy**

Inspections are getting more and more troublesome and mechanical as the Office lays down everything beforehand for the inspectors, and suffers no deviation from rules.

(Inspecting to a formula and to detailed instructions can be very restricting, even with a new inspection handbook.)

### **There's Too Much Tedious Claptrap**

It is a long, tedious business this week, hearing the students give specimen lessons at the Training Schools. There is little real utility in it, and a great deal of clap-trap, and that makes the expenditure of time, the more disagreeable to me. (1870)

(Routine inspection can be dispiriting – and not just for teachers.)

### **I've Learned a Lot by Working in My District**

The place and people were such as I never have seen and known if I had not been an inspector, such as I have now seen and known in great abundance and such as it is very good for one to have seen and known. (1871)

(Inspectors can benefit professionally from inspections, especially from working with exceptional teachers.)

### **I'm Retiring before the Job Kills Me!**

I announced yesterday at the office my intention of retiring at Easter or Whitsuntide ... meanwhile my life is drawing to a close and I have no wish to execute the Dance of Death in an elementary school. (1882)

(Like teachers, inspectors look forward to retirement!)

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Or, as Gilbert and Sullivan might have said (but didn't): 'An inspector's lot is not always a happy one'!

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