

Remembering Clyde Chitty

Richard Harris

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This article, and the two which follow, remember Clyde Chitty and his unfaltering work to advance the cause of comprehensive education. Richard Harris gave the eulogy at Clyde's funeral; Derek Gillard offers a personal tribute; and Nigel Gann reflects on the social injustice of segregated schooling and Clyde's enduring legacy of struggle against it.

Clyde Chitty was a man of many parts: partner, friend, teacher, lecturer, professor, writer, campaigner, lifelong follower of *The Archers*, collector of a pharmacy of medicines, and a music lover – if not of the music of Beethoven.

Clyde was born in Guildford and as a young child moved to Putney. An only child whose strict father bullied his mother, Clyde found life at home far from easy. In later years Clyde described his father – who rose to high rank in the Metropolitan Police – as a homophobe, a racist and an antisemite. Clyde loved learning and liked the school he attended from the age of 11, Latymer School in Hammersmith, then a direct grant grammar school. A friend from schooldays was present at Clyde's funeral. Clyde's love of history blossomed, first at Latymer and later at Leicester University where he gained his BA in that subject. Love of learning, and the transmutation of that learning into the work of teaching, was the making of Clyde.

While at Leicester he came into contact with two significant figures, Dipak Nandy, chair of the Leicester Campaign for Racial Equality and later founder of the Runnymede Trust, and Brian Simon, historian, campaigner for comprehensive education and one of *FORUM's* founding editors. Their influence helped cement Clyde's political leaning and his commitment to comprehensive education, a commitment informed by hatred of the eugenics movement and of the concept of fixed academic 'ability', the bedrock of the system of selective education. In 2007, Clyde would publish an important book, *Eugenics, Race and Intelligence in Education*, with a foreword by Tony Benn, in which he linked the persistence of eugenic ideas with the perceived threat which mass education posed to the established order and its beneficiaries. Clyde argued the need to rediscover a belief in human educability. At Leicester, Clyde enrolled for the PGCE (Post Graduate Certificate in Education) course, which included spells of teaching in schools in the innovative Leicestershire School system, to which he would later return.

On graduation, Clyde returned to London and took up his first teaching job at Malory School in Downham, Bromley. Clyde remained lifelong friends with a fellow teacher at Malory. He introduced her to the person who would be her husband and acted as best man at their wedding. After Malory, Clyde taught for several years at Penge Secondary

Modern School for Boys, an experience that convinced him more thoroughly than ever of the need to campaign for a system of comprehensive schooling. At the young age of 29, Clyde then became deputy head at Roger Manwood School in Lewisham, formed from a merger of two local secondary modern schools.

Through his contact with Brian Simon, Clyde had attended an early meeting of the nascent Campaign for Comprehensive Education. This was one of the fruits of the Comprehensive Schools Committee, formed in September 1965 in the wake of the issuing of Circular 10/65, which announced the Labour government's intention to end selection at 11-plus and eliminate separatism in secondary education. The meeting was held in a house in Holland Park Avenue in London. Clyde knew no one there, but was impressed by a lady called Caroline Benn who steered the meeting. Only after he had left the house did Clyde realise her connection with the Cabinet minister Tony Benn, then postmaster-general. Clyde gladly joined the committee.

Around the same time as he became deputy head at Roger Manwood, Clyde started his work on the editorial board of *FORUM*. Clyde's commitment to the journal was incredible. He would be involved with it for upwards of four decades, and for more than half that time in an editorial capacity.

In 1976, Clyde applied for the post of senior vice-principal at the newly created Earl Shilton Upper School and Community College in Leicestershire. This was an opportunity to work with the principal, Roger Seckington, who was a member of the *FORUM* editorial board and, in Clyde's words, a wonderful headteacher. I'm glad Clyde got the job, as this is how we first met. I was one of the community tutors in the college. Over the years, Clyde and I both kept in touch with Roger Seckington, who has written to me as follows:

Clyde was a good friend and generous. He was capable of a prodigious workload. He was super intelligent, putting us plods in the shade, with a fantastic memory. Clyde was the neatest worker I have ever met, and, of course, an excellent teacher.

Clyde used that encyclopaedic memory to intertwine nuggets of information into his teaching relevant to the subject or to his students both in school and university, bringing the lessons alive and endearing him to the learners. Roger says that for a time Clyde kept *FORUM* going almost single handed. He tells of a post-interview situation when the successful candidate reluctantly declared he had a bad headache. Clyde announced that he had just the remedy in his car, so out to his car everyone trooped, and, in the boot, found that Clyde kept a medicine chest that would have done any rural GP proud. At home in Bickley, those same medicines were always on display in Clyde's kitchen.

When Roger moved to another school Clyde became for some time acting principal at Earl Shilton before making a career change and transferring to higher education. He worked first at the Institute of Education in London as a lecturer in curriculum studies,

and subsequently, in 1989, at Birmingham University, progressing from reader to professor by the time he left in 1997. By now he was publishing widely and working and campaigning with Caroline Benn. 1996 saw the publication of their seminal work *Thirty Years On: is comprehensive education alive and well or struggling to survive?*. Thoroughly researched, the database for this landmark book included completed questionnaires from 1500 education institutions. One reviewer called the book ‘education dynamite’.

As Roger Seckington remembers, Clyde was capable of tackling a prodigious workload. He authored or co-authored over 30 books in addition to all his teaching and lecturing. At the end of their *FORUM* interview with him (transcribed in two parts: see issues 59/3 and 60/1), Melissa Benn and Jane Martin list 73 articles and editorials by Clyde which appeared in the journal between 1981 and 2017.

In 1997, Clyde became Goldsmith Professor of Policy and Management in Education, and then visiting professor at the Institute of Education in London. Wherever he taught he loved his students and they loved him. Since his death, former students have all paid tribute to his humanity, and to his skill as a lecturer. His friend and former PhD student, Peter Mangan, said: ‘His preparation for teaching was thorough and his teaching spaces were orderly and promoted the respectful interchange of ideas. As a lecturer he impressed by being able to speak without notes for up to an hour – a skill enhanced by an amazing memory. Even more impressive than this was his exercise of compassion and kindness’.

Another former student, Dr Mine Conkbayir, said it was an absolute privilege to be taught by Clyde. She likened the experience to being engaged in a free-flowing in-depth conversation concerning education. Although she had opted out of her teaching degree course, she took on board Clyde’s words to her: ‘The path you take in education doesn’t matter – you will still get to where you want to be’. She is now an author, lecturer and one of our leading academic specialists in the field of early years education.

Clyde continued to work with Caroline Benn until her death 22 years ago. He had become a friend of the Benn family. Melissa Benn says Clyde adored her mother and she him. After Caroline’s death, Clyde’s collaboration with the family continued. He and Melissa published *A tribute to Caroline Benn: education and democracy* in 2004.

As well as being a writer, Clyde was an inveterate collector of texts, cuttings and other written and visual evidence relating to education matters, all of it neatly recorded and documented in his office. His affairs were scrupulously well organised, as were those behind-the-scenes elements of *FORUM* for which he was responsible, including not only editorial records but also the records of travel expenses paid out to board members for attending board meetings, all of which Clyde noted down in his tiny, precise and distinctive handwriting. This care and attention to particulars extended to the arrangements for his own funeral, including his choice of music, ‘while I’m still well enough to do it’.

Clyde has been a family friend for 46 years. His first visit to our home was for

afternoon tea. It coincided with a broadcast from Wimbledon on the television. Clyde wanted to see this. Unfortunately, our two boys, then aged five and three, were engrossed in watching children's programmes. Somehow Clyde's wishes won out, and we turned over to the tennis. Roger Seckington has commented that Clyde had a way of winning out, an observation I think the editorial board of *FORUM* would echo! In any meeting he was never unpleasant, but the rest of the board would be in no doubt what Clyde wanted. When my family moved to Hampshire and Clyde came to stay, tennis would feature again. But this time Clyde would be playing the game with the boys on the beach.

He and I had great conversations, often on a left-wing theme. Professor Stewart Ranson tells the story that, following a heart attack suffered on a station platform, Clyde asked the ambulance crew who came to attend him what their politics were. They were Labour voters – so that was all right then! Jane Martin celebrated Clyde as exuberant, and that is exactly how my family and I will remember him. When we accompanied Clyde into a restaurant his voice would carry, causing people to turn and look. We all relied on his incredible memory. He could tell us the day, month and year for his every visit, relate what we did during it, recall the name of the restaurant where we had eaten, and outline what we had watched on television!

Though it was never an issue in his professional life, you can't separate Clyde from his sexuality. He knew the London gay scene and its gossip. Twenty years ago, he met Gang Chi. Four years later they entered into a civil partnership. Clyde's life was now complete, and he and Chi spent many happy times. In the photomontage which Chi compiled and showed at the funeral, their happiness and contentment together shone through.

Chi has been Clyde's rock, particularly over the last few years as Clyde's health and mobility slowly declined. Bedridden at home towards the end, Clyde continued to enjoy visits and phone calls from friends, watching TV, listening to music and to the output on Radio 4, including, of course *The Archers*. He needed good care from his professional carers, and received it, while Chi encouraged him to walk out into the garden when he could. I must pay tribute to Chi who looked after Clyde so lovingly as he became frailer and frailer.

We have said goodbye to a loving partner, a dear friend, an exceptional teacher, a prolific writer, a brilliant academic, a dedicated editor, a person passionate about comprehensive education and full of compassion in his teaching and friendships, and much more. He will be sorely missed by Chi and us all. A light has gone out of our lives. To many of us he will always be what Michael Armstrong dubbed him: 'The patron saint of comprehensive education'.

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