IAN SHAW: IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

It is not given to all to be a role model and mentor such as Ian Shaw. It feels almost impossible to do justice to him. There is a temptation to be elliptical, allusive, slightly obscure and to challenge the listener to join the dots and discover the train of thought for themselves. But I can’t match the grandmaster of that approach.

Instead I shall proceed in the manner of a historian. As well as his beloved family, his pupils, his colleagues and his schools, Ian lived for history. I shall try to do him justice as a figure in and of his time, shaped by his origins and his experiences, striving to learn the lessons of the past, never lost for an historical allusion or apposite quotation. His exchanges of book reviews and recommendations on historical topics will be missed. Ian inspired many of us with the lifelong love of history and of learning. In the School Hall in my third year he confronted me with the question where was I going to University, Oxford or Cambridge? No other choice given. New aspirations took root. He enriched my life and in that moment inspired me to be better than I thought I could be.

Ian was unique but also a man in and of his time. A Yorkshireman to the core – witness the love of Yorkshire County Cricket Club - he also exemplified the best aspects of the post-war consensus in which he grew up. He was a product of his Calderdale boyhood and especially of his schooling. These educational values he fought to preserve when they had become unfashionable. That they worked so well for him was down to his personality, drive and sincere conviction but also to
another aspect of his times. Ian reflected the enduring values he had imbibed in his youth but also moved with the times. His willingness to champion change and progress, as seen in his commitment to the comprehensive ideal, was another characteristic of his generation. As a leader he understood both the inspiration provided by honours boards or other aspects of the old grammar school tradition, and also embraced the vision of equally inspiring all his pupils. This was never clearer than when I witnessed his commitment, energy and brilliance as a classroom teacher when I saw him transfix a CSE history group with his one man re-enactment of Lenin’s arrival at the Finland Station: Peace, Bread and Land he roared even as he came through the door.

As Roy has stressed he greatly valued the rounded education that meant involvement and enrichment beyond the curriculum. And he lived that himself through his active participation and enthusiasm. But woe betide the games teacher, never, ever forgiven, who when Mr Shaw arrived to help with lessons, allocated him, table tennis. ‘Table tennis, Michael, I polished me boots, and I’d packed shorts and me jockstrap, and they wanted me to take the ping pong.’

A man of his generation, Ian did not approve, nor I suspect, would he have been a natural candidate for the NPQH. His unique style that defied easy characterisation other than as one-off was suffused with traditional attitudes derived from own schooling and which focussed around a constant commitment to excellence in all things. A distinguished two-time Vice Chancellor whom we had persuaded to visit TBSHS in the nineteen nineties subsequently greeted me with an incredulous ‘I had no idea there were still schools where smartly
uniformed pupils stand up as one, unbidden, when a visitor enters the room.’ I responded that had probably not witnessed a single satchel or rucksack. He hadn’t, but he had been struck by how everyone kept to their side of the corridors and parted to let teachers through. How Ian beamed when I passed on that accolade.

Ian understood that of such good habits were bigger triumphs crafted. They mattered if talent was to be nurtured and aspirations fulfilled. These days we’d call it the culture of marginal gains. In this, as in his commitment to the extra-curricular, Ian was of his time but also a man ahead of his time, a visionary and a forerunner of a new breed of school leaders praised today for bringing back to their schools the values that Ian always brought to his. Decades before anyone coined the notion of the ‘gifted and talented’ as a distinct group with particular needs, Ian, in the mid-seventies, insisted that Whitby School must have an Oxbridge group if it was truly to provide for the whole range of abilities. His was an encompassing vision that sought to bring the best out of everyone. He led my schools, in Whitby and in this town, with foresight and ambition. It is fitting that today we will go on to Jobbers Wood. Ian’s vision for that project was long nurtured, long schemed for. At Jobbers we will be able to say, as of Wren at St Paul’s: *Si monumentum requiris, circumspice.*

There were many sides to Ian. They are best understood and their lasting impact illustrated through the type of vignette that he so frequently deployed to illustrate a bigger point himself:
o The caring man who broke terrible news to my friend Brian Schofield with a calm, a gentleness and a deft touch that I have never forgotten.

o The man who stopped an Oxbridge revision session in the house in Argyle Road, sorry to have imposed Barbara, so we could watch J.O. Tobin win the Champagne Stakes at Doncaster. Why that horse? I learned that day it shared a name with a famous economist. ‘Look him up, look him up, boy’.

o The man who declared me functionally illiterate when I turned up with no pen to help with the complexities of his unique timetable board but also relished my precocious comeback that I could still read. I learned my lesson. To this day I rarely go anywhere without pen, usually a fountain pen.

o The deputy and head who made a point of knowing names, always greeting pupils’ parents or siblings knowledgeably in school and out; who was always appreciative and solicitous of the dinner ladies and others whom he knew were so essential to the smooth running of any school. Ian never dismissed anyone just because of who they were, except maybe certain denizens of County Hall.

Ian’s tolerance and breadth of mind were notable. He supported and inspired his pupils, whatever their views and he didn’t try to force his views upon them. He loved new ideas, as when we sixth formers gave him a copy of the then trendy Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance. It was duly alluded to in subsequent lessons. It remained on his shelf for decades. Later in life I learned that few, if any, disagreements were so deep that they could not be hashed out amicably over a pint (occasionally more) at the Tanners Arms, the Hart Inn, Sandsend or
some other home of common sense. And that included his long, but always amicable feud with John McCloughlin over the merits of Sixth Form Colleges.

Ian was an inspiration, a superb mentor to whom many of us owe our careers. If I go to TBSHS, or to other local schools, to give any talk involving parents I have a trick to get that audience onside. I invoke my connection to Ian Shaw. I can pretty much guarantee that at the end I will be approached by someone saying how fondly they remember him: a great man, a one-off, a transformative leader. That’s inspiration for you. Decades on he remains a positive presence amongst those who were fortunate to have known him. He helped us to fulfil ourselves. We miss him.

MJS

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