

An Extraordinary History Master

I am often asked whether my interest in history is down to one particularly inspiring history teacher. The answer is no – it goes back far further than my education – but that does not mean I did not *have* an inspiring history teacher. In fact, I had at least three. My father was the first: he realised that I was particularly interested in the subject at an early age, and encouraged me. As I have written in ‘31 August 1997’ (published in *Flickering Antiquity*), parents are ‘the true writers of history’. The second was John Turner, the history master at my preparatory school, Bickley Park. And third, I had the very great privilege of being taught by Euan Clarke at Eastbourne College.

Euan Clarke. I am minded now to write about him due to a visit to the College earlier this month – the first time I have been back for twenty-nine years. I met many people whose faces I did not recognise, and a few whose faces I did. In most cases where I did not recognise the individual, I remembered the name, and then gradually the memory of the boy he had been in 1985 returned. But there were also people whose names I had forgotten. Entirely. It was not that I could not recall anyone or that my mind was blank; conversations soon revealed we all remembered some people – particularly those who were violent, obnoxious or bullying. It dawned on me that those revisiting the school were the middle ground, and the reason why I had forgotten so many of them was because they were the ones who had *not* bullied me. They were the nice guys. And that really made me think: is my memory populated disproportionately with negativity? Do I remember those I have despised more than those I have liked? Do we all have an inclination only to remember the malicious, selfish and depraved? That's a disturbing thought.

The reassurance that this was not the case lay on a table in the school hall: the name badge of Euan Clarke, my history master from Lent term 1981 to my departure, in 1985. He was expected to arrive later that day. And I remembered an awful lot about *him*, despite not seeing him since leaving the school. And he was about as far from the ‘bad guys’ as it is possible to get: a man of boundless energy, enormous enthusiasm, great sympathy, and colossal inspiration.

When he took over my history education in January 1981, I was 17=/19 in my class, one from bottom. I didn't like being a pupil. I was very happy to learn but anyone who tried to teach me something against my will was wasting his time, and frankly Nazi Germany bored me stiff. ‘Ian does not seem to exert himself unduly, whether it be strolling to class or doing his work in this subject,’ Euan wrote in my report after teaching me for one term. In December of that year, however, he was able to write ‘Ian has consistently been at the top of this set and he has been a remarkably conscientious and willing pupil. He displays considerable powers of imagination in his written work and he will do very well in this subject if he continues to discipline himself in essay writing.’ A year later he gave me a copy of *Roget's Thesaurus* as a prize for an essay I had written, with the inscription ‘May your literary career be enhanced by a few more words. Euan Clarke, Summer 1982.’ Thanks, Euan, it has been.

What was it about him that brought about this transformation? He managed to combine my willingness to learn with his drive to teach. He broke down my natural resistance to things that

did not interest me, like Nazi Germany, so that I could apply myself to them more fully. Or, you could say, he widened my areas of interest so that I could apply myself to subjects that I had previously found tedious.

The way he did this was through his personality and his reflections on life, so that History was not in one box and Life in another: Life and History were one and the same thing. 'It's all very well navel-gazing and wondering why we are here on this planet,' he said one day in class, 'but ultimately you've just got to pull yourself together and do something worthwhile.' In his natural, fluid unorthodoxy he was like the English master in the Dead Poets Society film. Except that, unlike the Dead Poets Society man, Euan Clarke was all for discipline and action, not flights of fancy that could not be achieved. He encouraged you to stick to dreams that *could* be achieved.

It was in the sixth form that I got most from him – when my peers and I were old enough to appreciate that history was not just a mass of facts but had real meaning and could teach us much of value for our own lives. Euan outlined his purpose on Day One of the Lower Sixth. 'My job here is not to show off to you how much I know,' he announced, 'my job is to help you become a better historian than I am, before you leave'.

Boyish enthusiasm helped. While teaching us a module on the Crusades, he held a re-enactment of the Battle of Hattin for the class in appropriate costume (our chain mail was net curtains stained grey). The three teenage girls in that class were most embarrassed at having to wear something so untrendy in the street. There was also a champagne breakfast at 7am one morning on the seafront at Eastbourne to celebrate the end of the exams. That was more my idea of an education.

It was Euan who introduced me to Stephen Runciman's books on the crusades - the finest historical writing I have ever read. He pointed out the absurdities of aspects of the past: one line he quoted still sticks in my mind – in fact it appears in the twelfth century chapter of my next book. It was when the master of one order of knights turned to his counterpart and asked whether the 1,200 of them ought to attack the 14,000 Moslems in the valley below, at the Springs of Cressen, and heard a negative in reply. 'You're just too fond of that blond head of yours,' he responded angrily, setting spur to his horse. Few of Euan's lessons passed without the reverberation of some bon mot or a point of inspiration.

There was also something slightly glamorous about him, despite his somewhat shabby appearance, disorganisation and complete lack of pretensions. His great-great-grandfather had been Speaker of the Manx Parliament. He himself had been headboy of Harrow School, after a shaky start at that institution. This latter experience gave him a great platform for philosophising on fairness and inequality. As a junior at Harrow he had been the victim of some rather unkind comments from a fellow pupil about his (Euan's) lack of a title. Euan thought about this – and realised a little while later that the only reason the bullying young twerp of a lord could be so offensive was, in Euan's words, 'because his ancestors had killed more people than my ancestors'.

He said one thing that I have repeated hundreds of times over the years. It was a response to a girl in our class who had said the one thing that you should never, ever say at a fee-paying school: 'You're *paid* to teach us.' Euan responded with two sentences of perfect rhetoric that

were delivered to impart a strong philosophical message to everyone within half a mile and which, I might add, incorporate the basic justification for a high-quality educational system. 'I am *not* paid to teach you; your parents pay for you to have the opportunity to learn. If you do not wish to avail yourself of this opportunity, you can get out!'

On the day I revisited the school, I did not meet Euan. His name badge lay there, untouched, all day. (It turned out that a car crash had unavoidably delayed him.) However, the very presence of his name was enough to dispell the idea that we only remember the bad guys. Even now, nearly thirty years after we last met, I still think of him as the complete embodiment of gentlemanly virtue. It does not surprise me at all to hear that today he is still involved in education, and still working for people less privileged than himself and those he taught. He is the Director of Education for the Kalisher Trust (a legal charity which supports those who aspire to become criminal barristers, no matter what their background might be), and he is also an ambassador for Children on the Edge, a charitable organisation that helps deprived youngsters. I read on the website of the latter organisation (<http://www.childrenontheedge.org>) that the staff there have a nickname for him: 'Tigger'.

I know exactly why.

Ian Mortimer,

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