

The happiest days?

Writer and film-maker **B S Johnson** recalls his love-hate affair with education.



Usually one can find a pattern in an experience as long as an education, draw the threads together to shape an article like this. I have thought for a long time about my own, but it has not been possible: how can you impose a pattern on chaos?

I started early. It seems that there was some distinction in being sent to Flora Gardens Primary, in Hammersmith, at the age of four; most others went at five. That must have been 1937, presumably September. We had to lie down in the afternoons on canvas campbeds, I competed at whopees-highestupthewall in the Boys', and disappointingly was too well-built to qualify for free codliveroil and malt. Of the learning process I remember nothing.

On the outbreak of war I was six, and was privately evacuated with my mother and the son of a Westminster publican to a farm that was really only a smallholding near Chobham, in Surrey. I went to the village school. St. Lawrence's I think it was called. Again I can remember very little of it, though my life on the farm has left me with very many sharply-felt memories. But I did learn to read during that time. I can date it no more closely than somewhere between my sixth and eighth birthdays, but it was at the end of some days in bed and I was feeling quite recovered from an illness but still not allowed to get up. The story was in one of the kind of comics which contain both picture strips with speech-balloons as well as stories in words with only a heading illustration, and I read it out of boredom, in desperation almost, after exhausting all the picture strips had to give me. It was a spy story with a boy hero who sent messages across the Channel by means of a petrol-driven and radio-controlled model aircraft; a highly improbable tale, I see now, but that afternoon I read it over and over again, with infinite pleasure, glorying in the fact that I could now read stories.

In 1941, after a brief period spent in London during the bombing, I was officially evacuated on my own to High Wycombe. At some point and at no cost my 'name had been put down' for Latymer School, then in Hammersmith Road; I think going to Flora Gardens was a preliminary to this and I would normally have gone to Latymer at perhaps seven. Latymer had earlier been evacuated as a school to a small village outside High Wycombe called Sands, and some administrative logic sent me there now I was of age. To accommodate the overflow, the village school had taken over a Presbyterian Church Hall opposite; the Latymer boys still wore their uniforms, were not assimilated. I went at my first billet, was given another the London side of High Wycombe; and for the rest of the next three years I made the long bus journey there and back to Sands every schoolday.

At some point, perhaps after a year or so, Latymer returned as a school to London; for some reason two of us were left behind at Sands. Virtually the last link with London was gone; from then on my isolation grew, my whole life was dominated by the fact that I was away from everything I had

known. I was wretchedly miserable, weepy at the slightest cause (or for no cause), bad company, a thoroughly unrewarding pupil for any teacher, even for the odd saviour I suspect.

In 1944 I sat what I now know to be the eleven-plus. At the time I did not understand what it was about. By then came a promise from my parents (my father an RAO private in Germany, my mother working as a shop assistant in London) of my first two-wheeled bicycle if I passed so I knew it was important. Two of us took it, in the Headmaster's room; from this I presume it must have been a London paper, for the other candidate was the only other Latymer boy left. Afterwards the Headmaster called me back, pointed with his pipe stem at my attempt at one of the questions. 'Couldn't you do even that one?' he said.

I had on a previous occasion been caught thieving fruit from an orchard in a mill; and humiliated when up before him by an offer of fruit from his own garden if that was what was needed. That was not what I needed, at all. I do not remember being told I had failed; and they still gave me the bicycle anyway.

The secondary modern they sent me to for the last year of the war and my evacuation was called Highfields, I think but certainly the headmaster was called Perfect. Here my form-master was the teacher who meant most to me throughout the whole of my education; and his name, remarkably was Proffitt. He took us eleven-plus rejects and shook us restored our confidence, showed us we certainly mattered to someone, to him. He really worked us, worked himself; all my memories have him on his feet, usually marching about, delivering, cajoling, enlightening; a balding, grey-haired, springy little figure of about fifty-five. He really brought something out of me; but he could also be cruel both physically and verbally. Principally, he made us compete: there were exams from the first week, placing encouragements to do better, to go up the scale of Mr Proffitt's esteem.

At the end of the first term I ranked third in the class which position was physically recognised by his placing me in the back row three from the window; the nearer you were to him, the less well you had done, the more you felt he had his eye on you.

Before the end of my first year at Highfields the war was over; I suspect they sent us home within weeks, whereas they could have waited till the end of term, July instead of June. But no. I remember saying to Mrs. Bailey, my fostermother that I would not have minded staying on in High Wycombe to finish my schooling. Whether this was an expression of dismay at the prospect of yet another change I do not know but I cannot think I meant it.

During the war my parents had moved over the river from Hammersmith and London to Barnes and Surrey. Hence I could not go back to Latymer for administrative

reasons, and I was sent to Barnes County Modern Secondary School. All my previous Proffitt brightness was now displayed outside the classroom, in cleverness, in putting people down. This I am sure was because there was no teacher in the school to bring it out, to give me a reason to compete; the other kids seemed to accept they were bound to go on to dead-end jobs (I met one of them again recently, as a conductor on the number nine bus to Barnes). Thirteen years later I was to do four or five months there as a supply teacher; a bizarre and unenlightening full turn of the wheel.

At fourteen after passing some sort of simple examination I went to Kingston Day Commercial School, which was then at Hinchley Wood, near Esher, and a long bus ride round the Kingston By-pass from Barnes. Doug White was the other of my contemporaries at Barnes CSMS to go with me, and we felt ourselves privileged; for by the standards of Surbiton and environs Barnes was then largely rough and workingclass. At KDCS they taught shorthand (Pitmans for the girls, Gregg for the boys) typing, commerce and book-keeping; besides the usual things. Ted Britton was teaching maths there then. It was a two-year course designed to turn out shorthand-typists and clerks; those able and whose parents were willing could stay on an extra year and take School Certificate. I did. The Korean war broke out as we sat the papers; in the summer holidays I had a note from Ted Britton saying that he was pleased that White and I had gained matric exemption. I knew that this meant I had qualified for university, but no one had ever suggested that I stood any chance of actually going; no one had ever gone to university from Kingston Day Commercial School.

There followed five years of various accountancy jobs. I already knew I was a writer, though I had not actually written anything. I was lazy, cocky, distracted by (in particular) sex, soccer, and motorbikes. Gradually I saw that further education, perhaps even a degree in English, were there for the having, but the initiative had to come from me; no one was going to bring anything out. A friend at work showed me the Birkbeck prospectus, explaining the college was part of London University but held its lectures in the evenings for students with full-time jobs. From it I saw that my matric exemption was nothing of the kind; I had, in particular, to pass O-Level Latin. The same West Indian friend told me about Davies's, the crammers in Addison Road. I did O-Level Latin from scratch in eight months with them, sitting three different Boards in the hope of passing one and actually getting all three. My tutor was an old man of seventy-odd who was gross, ugly, fat, slobbery; and he overindulged in Dr. Rumney's Pure Mentholypus Snuff. I loved him; he was a real master/teacher.

I worked for an oil company in Kingsway during the day, and at six most evenings went to Birkbeck for two or three hours. The course was an internal equivalent of A-Level called Intermediate BA; I did English, Latin and History. I became secretary of the Literary Society, arranged a visit to and a discussion on the first production of *Waiting for Godot*, made friends I still have. Of the staff, Barbara Hardy ravished me with her intellect, Geoffrey Tillotson bored me with his pomposness, and Arthur Johnston made sense of Chaucer by reading the *Prologue* in the original pronunciation.

In the summer term I applied to go as a full-time student to two London colleges, King's and University. Both required applicants to declare which they preferred; I was honest and put King's on both simply (and now it seems so asinine, so grossly irresponsible) because I liked the sound of the name better. I was promised a place at King's for September 1956, at the age of twenty-three. When I told the Birkbeck Registrar he tried to dissuade me. 'You'll be surrounded with eighteen-year-old girls,' he warned me.

The fact that they were girls worried me not at all, but what did make me apprehensive was that they were all bright

enough to have come straight from grammar school, glowing with high achievement, and the roundabout way I had joined them after my failure at eleven led me to believe I should have to work very hard indeed merely to stay in their company, let alone compete with them. Not so. After only a few weeks I found very few to whom I might feel myself inferior; no doubt my five years' greater maturity made a big difference. I edited five issues of the college literary magazine, I wrote, directed, and acted with the Drama Society in London and on two tours of German and Danish universities. I had a disastrously important love-affair. I read *Tristram Shandy* and *Gawain*.

But the three years were unhappy and painful for me. I think (though there were other personal and emotional factors involved) it was because the course I was following unexpectedly seemed insufficiently related to the reasons for which I was following it. That is, much of what I was obliged to read seemed, by any standards I had and was taught, bad, boring and irrelevant; and the London English degree is notorious for falling between the stools of language and literature. Perhaps it is too much to ask that English departments at least take into account the possibility that they may have young writers amongst their undergraduates. It has always seemed to me strange that teachers in art schools are presumed to know how to paint in order to be able to teach it; but that English teachers are not required actually to be able to write a sonnet in order to teach other people's.

At the end of my second year I was interviewed and told how much they admired my efforts with *Lucifer* and the Drama Society, but when was I actually going to do any work?

I came down with a 2:2. I thought it was very fair. I would have been pleased with any sort of degree at all, in fact. According to their rules, I was a lower-second-class of person; I accepted that, as long as it was clearly understood that it was according to their rules. For the next five years, until I could support myself wholly by writing, it counted (somewhat ironically) as a Good Honours Degree to increase my salary as a supply teacher through dozens of London schools.

All my life I have been underestimated by the educational system, I feel. Now when I win the odd literary or film award it is often against, in spite of those teachers and contemporaries who so misjudged me that I feel I have won them. Not that it matters, of course; no doubt none of them even remember me, and I now know none of them.

Do I sound paranoid and bitter? Yes, I am, that is indeed the way I feel about my educators, that is the way they made me. No doubt the war was not their fault; no doubt there are worse things than a fractured, fragmented education like mine (David Storey's novel *Pasmore* is about someone who has a breakdown at thirty after a long smooth progression on an educational conveyor-belt); perhaps the usual optimist is already contemplating a letter saying: 'Ah, but you did win through in the end, you did get the university education for which your mind qualified you.'

Obviously I was university material, in the end; whether I was or not at sixteen seems doubtful. I tried hard to be an accountant, to be what my education had fitted me for. Even now I have the marginal benefit of being able to touch-type this article; my new novel leans very heavily on knowledge I gained in learning book-keeping; and I could have annotated almost every paragraph of this account with page references from my books where I have made professional use of material related to my schooldays.

The point is that very few people are writers and thus able to make some positive use of virtually everything that happens to them, including the disasters, the chaos; what do the others do? ■

B S Johnson is a poet, novelist and film-maker. His latest book, Christie Malry's Own Double-Entry, was recently published by Collins.