

The Townsend-Warner History Prize 2016 - Report on Paper Two

'I hope I have made you think about the power of a nation as a whole and how unfathomable it is. If one person can change the world then what can a whole country do?' This is not, as it happens, an oblique reference to the forthcoming referendum, but rather one example among many of the sometimes inspired, even inspiring, and certainly judicious comments, to be found readily among the Paper Two scripts for this year's Townsend-Warner History Prize. This was my first experience of marking Paper Two answers and I was not disappointed. Most candidates demonstrated abundant knowledge of their chosen subjects, while the responses of the strongest were sometimes remarkable.

Six schools stood out this year for the depth and quality of their entry, including Colet Court, Summer Fields, The Hall and Twyford, but two were pre-eminent, with King's College Junior School, Wimbledon, just pipping Westminster Under for the team award. King's had no fewer than seven candidates in the top thirty places and Westminster Under had five. Summer Fields and The Hall were not far behind, with three each in the top group. Those schools with fewer overall numbers, but some equally strong answers, included Newland House, Lyndhurst House, Sunningdale, Devonshire House, Quanton Hall and Wetherby Preparatory and this last named school not only provided the overall winner in Faris Firoozye, but also the top Paper Two script from Simon Billings, whose essay on the French Revolution was the best piece of writing in this year's competition.

Firoozye had the advantage of a very high Paper One score, but he justified his top position with an accomplished Paper Two. He wrote on the siege of Yorktown, the Falklands War, as a Jesuit priest in the Spanish Empire, offered a case for the prosecution of Genghis Khan and concluded with a moving essay on a family member who was with SOE in World War Two, captured by the Japanese and subsequently held a top military post in a country which achieved independence from British rule. 'If it was not for my Great Uncle's experiences, I would not be in this competition today.' This meant that Johan Orly from Westminster Under was not quite able to replicate his triumph of last year. Nevertheless, he wrote with great maturity, style and impressive frame of reference. In addition to the paper of Simon Billings (Wetherby Preparatory), there were also fine Paper Two scripts from Charles Hellens (Cheltenham College Preparatory), Hari Collins (Colet Court), Daniel Tirado (Sunningdale) and Andrew Lee (Westminster Under). There were also notable papers around the 80-82 mark and plenty of candidates reached 70 or above. All of these displayed a depth of knowledge which was really commendable, indicative not just of the ability and enthusiasm for the subject of these candidates, but also a tribute to the quality of teaching on offer to them. I congratulate them all.

Question 1 invited candidates to comment on two topics from a lengthy list. The best answers – and there were many excellent ones – eschewed narrative and aimed for elements of pithy analysis. Thus Boudica: 'possibly one of the first feminists ... she died, as she lived, defiantly.' And Sir Walter Raleigh: 'a stereotypical alpha male ... it was no wonder Elizabeth was rumoured to be attracted to him.' And the fault with Marxism was that 'it overlooked the problem of untrustworthy human nature.' There were strong answers on less fashionable topics like Samuel Pepys, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Thomas Hardy and especially Albert Einstein, but surprisingly, in view of the imminent anniversary, there were no takers for the Easter Rising. One of the most popular choices of all, with its own recent anniversary, was Magna Carta. There was much trenchant comment on offer, with one candidate believing that 'it symbolises how our society has evolved from land squabbles and random imprisonment into one of justice, rights and liberty.' The battle of Stalingrad was another popular theme and one candidate noted rather gruesomely that 'frostbite was soon eating through the German ranks, like flies through a corpse.'

Question 2 asked candidates to write three short diary excerpts. This was necessarily a more light-hearted assignment, but diarists were still expected to incorporate appropriate historical knowledge in their answers. In the event, there were numerous extracts from soldiers, fighting a wide range of battles across the centuries, from the campaigns of Alexander the Great to the Americans in Vietnam. Among memorable comments were those of one of the 300 at Thermopylae: 'Tonight we dine in Hell!' While a crusader, before the victory at Acre, wrote: 'Despite what they say, this is not "a land of milk and honey".' A soldier in William's invading army in 1066 was made to write: 'I really enjoy this kind of thing, because there's always the possibility of loot.' More poignantly, one diary entry, from the trenches at the end of Christmas Day, 1914, concluded: 'And out in No Man's Land, beneath the barbed wire, lies a blown up pig's bladder, surrounded by German and British footprints.' There was plenty of hyperbole ('My heart pounded like a Pullman locomotive'), as well as some imaginative choices. One writer chose to be an affiliate of Charles

Babbage, 19th century inventor of a calculating machine; another wrote about Henry Cavendish and the flawed theory of Phlogiston. Margaret Thatcher made an unlikely appearance in the row over the abolition of free school milk: 'I incurred the maximum of political upheaval for the minimum of political benefit.'

Question 3 asked examinees to imagine that a famous historical figure was on trial and they were asked to write an appropriate speech for the prosecution or the defence. They had a choice of ten and their answers readily entered into the spirit of this question. One writer wanted to send Napoleon to the Tower, on a diet of bread and water. 'Let him rot, sir! Let him rot!' Stalin was accused in another speech of creating a 'totalitarian dystopia', while another writer claimed, somewhat harshly I thought, that 'King John started being bad from birth.' One prosecution case, censuring Ivan the Terrible, concluded theatrically: 'He drowned his seventh wife – Lord knows what happened to the other six! If you find Ivan the Terrible not guilty, I will eat all the fancy Russian hats, including mine, in this courtroom.' One of the best answers, accused Oliver Cromwell of 'strange and dubious contradictions' and pointed out 'it was the tyranny that Cromwell now epitomises that he himself railed against during the Civil War.' I also liked the sober judgement on Henry VIII that he 'was seen as a progressive renaissance king, but if one took a look at the governing system, it was outdated.' Inevitably, perhaps, it was this king's matrimonial travails that excited the most comment. One writer solemnly accused Henry of a 'lack of respect for women and utter disregard for the sacred ideal of matrimony.' And one could almost see the finger-wagging behind another admonition: 'Women have rights too, Mr Tudor.' On the other hand, Henry had his defenders, one praising him for making divorce easier. 'That's a good thing otherwise we may have to stay with our partners for eternity.' Perhaps I'll allow the final word on this theme to go the writer who judged that Henry 'used women like matches, a brief moment of heat and passion, only to blow them out.'

The last question gave candidates the opportunity to write about the historical importance of a notable event, or on some aspect of family history. This was not, of course, an invitation merely to write a narrative and the best answers wisely steered away from this, to develop a series of well-argued points of analysis. This takes some doing at any age in life, but these young contestants often rose to the occasion in splendid style. As with Question 3, there was a wide spread of answers on nearly all the subjects offered, with the most widely discussed probably being the defeat of Germany in World War Two. The best answers not only considered the counter-factual scenario of a Nazi victory, but also made a genuine effort to interpret the actual development of the post war world. There were many strong answers on the Romans in Britain and the Norman Conquest, as well as on the civil rights movement in the United States. One writer considered the campaign for civil rights 'one of the most ground-breaking political shifts of the last century which has inspired people all over the world to fight for their beliefs and justice through voice and action.' Some of the best writing of all was on the French Revolution. Runner-up, Johan Orly, judged that the French Revolution 'showed the growing power of the "people", ignited revolution, liberalism and modern democracy and created a seismic shift in the concert of Nations.' Simon Billings, in a remarkably astute and elegant essay, claimed that the French Revolution 'marks the pinnacle of Enlightenment thinking and the nadir of human wrongdoing at the same time ... and its significance has never been undermined by time.' And again: 'It is perhaps the most famous revolution in the history of mankind, both creative and destructive, a huge sudden transition from the feudalism that had existed for centuries to the capitalism of our modern era.'

Finally, a small number of candidates were inspired to write about an aspect of their family history. 'I could write hundreds of pages on this' was one comment. Another claimed kinship with the inventor of the Mulberry Harbour, while 'my grandfather walked with Mahatma Gandhi' wrote another. I will leave the final word on this to the overall winner, Faris Firoozye, who wrote that in studying the personal history of his relative in World War Two and beyond, 'what I learned about was not just the war, but the many contradictions of colonial rule, including the grievances that the oppressed people could have against the British, but the loyalty which they gave to them nevertheless.'

As I hope the foregoing amply demonstrates, I was much impressed by the contributions on offer in this year's Paper Two. I received 241 scripts and even those towards the foot of this field should know that they were in the top quarter of the total entry, which topped a thousand for the first time this year. So many approached their work with enthusiasm, considerable knowledge and, at times, impressive insight. It was a privilege to read the scripts and I look forward to seeing the work of some of these young writers next year.

Hugh Thompson - March 2016