

The Townsend-Warner History Prize 2017

Report on Paper Two

With over a thousand candidates tackling Paper One back in January, it is appropriate to praise all those who qualified for the rather different demands of Paper Two. Indeed, as the results attest, many who achieved relatively modest scores in the first test of factual knowledge and recall, then performed with some distinction in the longer exercises required of them in this second Paper. There was much fluent writing and many well-constructed essays.

This year a number of schools stood out for the collective strength of their Paper Two submissions. Particularly notable in this regard were scripts from Arnold House, Homefield, The Hall, The New Beacon, Summer Fields and Wetherby Preparatory. Nearly all their candidates wrote with knowledge, some understanding of broader issues and with a degree of imagination. St Paul's Juniors, King's College Junior School, Wimbledon and Westminster Under all had very large entries and their best candidates were truly impressive. Summer Fields, The Hall and King's Junior, Wimbledon were all well represented in the top thirty, but the team prize this year must be awarded to Westminster Under, with four candidates in the top seven in the final list and with nine in the top thirty.

At an individual level, any candidate scoring 80 or higher in Paper Two deserves special commendation. Across the field, fourteen achieved this and all wrote with an extra element of vision and flair. At the top of the pile, Hari Collins (St Paul's Juniors) just pipped Brendan Bethlehem (Westminster Under) for first place. He displayed a range from the Black Death to Pearl Harbour, and also wrote shrewdly about Sir Robert Peel in the main essay. The best individual scripts, however, came from Samvit Nagpal and Maxwell Delorenzo, both of Westminster Under, with Nagpal's essay on Elizabeth I one of the stand-out pieces this year.

Question 1 invited candidates to choose two topics from a lengthy list. The most popular selections this year were William I, the Black Death and the Navy in the Reign of Elizabeth I, with from the modern period, the Treaty of Versailles and Hiroshima, not far behind. Question 1 can tempt writers to put down all they know, whereas selective and representative knowledge, mixed with a degree of comment and analysis can be more effective, as, for instance, presented in Samvit Nagpal's comment that the Domesday Book is 'testimony to the remarkable power of the government machine in the eleventh century', and in another candidate's assessment that 'the navy in the reign of Elizabeth I was the saving grace of Protestant England.' Perhaps less judicious was the remark on the Plague that 'to prevent themselves from getting the disease, doctors when treating patients wore gas masks.'

Question 2 was quite demanding in requiring thoughts about the advantages and drawbacks of history being represented in novels, TV and film. Many were able to write enthusiastically, based on a book they had read, or a TV programme or film they had seen, and some commented that they had then been inspired to do their own follow-up research. One wrote a strong defence of 'Horrible Histories' as a source of her interest. 'Presenting history in a fun way is important. This alone will not get you an 'A' but it certainly starts you off on the path towards it.' Many were aware of the element of artistic licence in historical reconstructions, as well as a dumbing down effect. One candidate wrote of the 'Hollywood effect', where 'good entertainment does not always mean good history. The result can be historical drama looking more like an episode of Eastenders, with characters discovering scandals and skeletons in the cupboard.' Some representations of history can shade into propaganda. Thus, one answer dismissed Shakespeare's 'Richard III' as 'merely an intriguing story, to attract attention to the Hero and Anti-Hero, to please the Tudor monarch, Elizabeth.' Perhaps the best remark was from one who wrote that 'the writer's imagination told me more about the period his book was written in, rather than the period it was written about.'

Question 3 invited an eye-witness account of the events of a dramatic single day in history. As with Question 2, the sheer diversity of responses was impressive, but a popular choice was to write about a battle, with Hastings, Agincourt, Bosworth, Trafalgar and Waterloo all well represented. As with other questions, the best answers moved away from narrative, to make observations of varying degrees of political correctness. One defeated Saxon at Hastings rather unfairly concluded that: 'The lesson to be learned is, don't trust the French!' Whilst a Saxon peasant, on hearing of the death of William I, remarked: 'Long may he rest in misery, who made my chains and enslaved me!' One of the more unusual answers imagined President Obama on his last day in the Oval Office: 'I leave the United States in untrustworthy hands, but I promise you that my wife will run for President in 2020.' You read it here first!

Question 4 asked candidates to write an essay and there was a wide choice on offer. Of the topics named in 4a and 4b, the most popular were Henry VII, Elizabeth I, Oliver Cromwell and Napoleon. Those who chose to write about one of the topics in 4c had to address the issue of turning-points and the best answers were on the defeat of the Jacobites in 1745-46, the defeat of Germany in World War One and the defeat of the USA in the Vietnam War. Many opted to write about an individual of their own choice, including family relatives with interesting personal connections to wider historical events. Whatever the topic, it was important that everyone found something meaningful to discuss. This was perhaps not achieved by the essay on James I which began: 'There is nothing too interesting about what he did right or wrong.' Harsh judgements are not unknown in this context and I particularly relished the opinion that 'Puritans are quite sad and pessimistic people.'

There were also plenty of pertinent observations. Thus, on William I: 'He most certainly had militaristic ambition, but also economic and dynastic proficiency.' On Oliver Cromwell: 'He made many tactical moves that proved immensely advantageous and his opponents did not have nearly enough brute force or intellectual strength to challenge him.' And, on Napoleon: 'Mr Bonaparte even has the 'Napoleonic complex' named after him, showing how power corrupted him from being an egocentric, ambitious officer to become a sociopathic emperor.' As I am writing this a few days after International Women's Day, I leave the final word to Hari Collins, who wrote of Elizabeth I, that 'long before the Suffragette movement, Elizabeth was proving that women were just as capable as men.'

At a time when we are often told that there is diminishing time for the teaching of History in the curriculum, enthusiasm for the subject was often manifest in the answers I read. The sheer range of themes covered speaks volumes for the quality of teaching, and learning, evident in the schools represented in Paper Two. There was much shrewd analysis that belied the youthfulness of these historians. As ever, a few entertaining images stick in the mind. Thus Charles Darwin was described as 'a keen gastronomist ... who ate many exotic animals. Once, he only realised he had discovered a new species of rhea after he had eaten most of it.' And, more gruesomely, King Harold 'was so hacked to death that only his girlfriend could identify him as Harold, by piecing his tattoos together.'

Hugh Thompson
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