

THE TOWNSEND-WARNER HISTORY PRIZE 2018

Report on Paper Two

Candidates for this year's Paper Two of the Townsend-Warner History Prize wrote on a hugely varied range of topics, often displaying considerable knowledge and conviction. Even the weaker scripts usually contained some good writing and the stronger answers were often extremely well argued and written with style. I congratulate all 251 who qualified for this paper and of course all those in the classroom and beyond who have been their inspiration.

Westminster Under dominated this year in terms of numbers, but there was also strong representation from King's College Junior School Wimbledon, Summer Fields, St Paul's Juniors, Vinehall and Wetherby. In the event, Westminster Under must retain the team prize this year, with ten in the final top thirty, with half of these in the top ten. Their entries showed real strength in depth. But also highly commended is the smaller entry from The Hall, with three of their number in the top seven places. All of their candidates wrote with genuine flair. In all, fourteen schools were represented in the top thirty, with individual candidates from The Chorister School, Durham, Lancing Preparatory at Worthing, Walhampton and New College School doing especially well.

The overall individual winner this year was Raphael Leon-Villapalos (Westminster Under), who added to his excellent Paper One score an unflashy, but consistently analytical, Paper Two. He wrote well argued essays on The Franco-Prussian War and on Clement Attlee, as well as an especially perceptive piece on Abraham Lincoln, in which he credited that President as much for what he did not do, as for his actions. Thus, on the winning of the Civil War 'not interfering in troop movements meant that Generals Grant and Sherman could conduct the war without having their judgement clouded by a non-combatant.' And, on the Emancipation Proclamation, 'he was no hard line abolitionist, but laid the foundations for the equal rights movements.'

Benjamin Bethlehem (Westminster Under) was undoubtedly unlucky to finish as runner-up for the second year in a row. He wrote with impressive detail on Emperor Hadrian, Edmund the Confessor and Eleanor of Aquitaine. Any candidate who scored over 80 wrote a paper of some distinction, but the very best contained an extra dimension of analytical comment with a willingness to make judgements. So, for example, Wilkie Dent (The Hall) on Eleanor of Aquitaine: 'throughout her life she would reject decisions ... made by others that were out of her control.' And, James O'Connell-Nash (The Chorister School, Durham) on the Suez Crisis: 'having failed partially due to a lack of American support, Britain and France had to accept their inferiority on the world stage.'

Question 1 provided a generous list of topics, on which candidates were invited to write two answers. In the medieval and early modern period the most popular subjects were the Bayeux Tapestry ('the most sophisticated piece of propaganda in history' in the view of one young writer), the Domesday Book, motte and bailey castles, the Princes in the Tower, Catherine of Aragon and the execution of Charles I. Mary, Queen of Scots was another frequently visited topic, though details of her life were occasionally muddled with those of Mary I. In the more modern period, the Boston Tea Party, Napoleon's retreat from Moscow and the Normandy landings all had many takers.

Question 2 gave candidates the chance to write a more imaginative piece, in the form of diary entries from a general fighting in World War One. The best answers incorporated references to actual historical events. One such diarist had a general grumbling about the 1914 Christmas Day fraternisation between opposing troops on parts of the front line: 'Note to self – this must never happen again.' Another diary entry described an aerial scrap between a Fokker and a Sopwith Camel. Question 2 also offered candidates the alternative of writing about any war of their choice. The key thing here, however, given the wording of the question, was not description, but focussed explanation and analysis.

Question 3 offered the opportunity to write about an historical figure, explaining why that individual should be remembered today. Perhaps, inevitably, Churchill was regularly chosen, but so were Henry VII, Henry VIII and Elizabeth I. In the more modern era, there was much support for Horatio Nelson, Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela. King 'was a leader, he was a preacher, he was a father, he was a peacemaker, he was a revolutionary and above all he brought change.' While Mandela's 'perseverance, determination and utmost commitment to his cause should serve as an inspiration to others, and the grace and love he showed to the white people who he had fought against should equally stand out.' Two more judgements: 'The tale of Caesar represents the follies of populist leaders and how what seems like a leader backed by the people can become a leader unacceptable to the people.' And this dogmatic assessment of Alexander Hamilton: 'Born to a prostitute mother and an unknown father ... he was the greatest by far of the Founding Fathers and what riles me is that some people want his image off the \$10 bill, which he happened to invent.' Perhaps these last two opinions bear more than a passing resemblance to two excellent theatrical productions currently running in London.

Question 4 offered a wide number of options, all of which attracted some answers. In 4a, there was support for Shakespeare, Leonardo da Vinci, Beethoven and George Orwell, but more surprisingly there were also answers on Evelyn Waugh and Agatha Christie! In 4b, the slave trade offered some nuanced responses, often more intelligent than the megaphone condemnation of modern activists. I particularly appreciated this youthful judgement: 'The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution present a problem that Americans ... have been contending with from the beginning: how to reconcile the values of those texts with America's first sin, slavery, the flaw that marred the country's creation and even plunged it into a civil war.' In 4d, candidates were invited to consider various classic historical rivalries. England/Britain and France attracted the most answers. I liked the view that 'when the essence of what makes rivalries is revealed, it is the competitiveness of what the two sides have in common, that powers the fiercest rivalries.' The witchcraft question (4e) also drew a number of responses, with one answer citing the seventeenth century witch craze as 'a classic example of scapegoating: putting the blame for something beyond your control on something within your control.' In 4h, on famous women, Elizabeth I was by far the favourite choice, followed by Eleanor of Aquitaine.

Finally, in 4f, on British Prime Ministers, there were more answers on David Cameron than on Pitt the Elder, or Younger, with Brexit looming large in the discussion. One writer dismissed the present government as 'clearly incapable of these tough talks' and predicted that this might lead to 'a socialist republic led by Jeremy Corbyn!' There was much good writing on Churchill and it is fitting to end this survey of Question 4 with this fine summary from the pen of Mathieu Yap (King's College Junior School, Wimbledon), whose paper was one of the very best. 'Overall, through his countless speeches and meetings with other world leaders, he raised public morale higher than any expectations, cemented essential alliances, created and coordinated war strategies and ultimately inspired the public in Britain to fight the evil that was Nazi Germany in times of desperate need.'

Amid the pressures of reading and marking scripts on every conceivable subject (from the Emperor Aurelian to the composer Charles-Marie Widor), there was always time to savour an arresting image, whether accurate or not. One writer considered that Elizabeth I 'under her make-up and tightly fitted corset, was a dark, jealous and hateful woman.' Another envisaged Drake 'playing chess whilst fighting the Armada!' And James I was said to have written a famous bible. But my favourite this year was the description of highlanders at the battle of Prestonpans 'where they pulled down their Tam O' Shanter's over their foreheads, making them go cross-eyed.' So that's why Sir John Cope's men fled the field of battle ...

