

THE TOWNSEND-WARNER HISTORY PRIZE 2021

Report on Paper Two

'I am a huge believer in intergalactic travel,' was the startling opening to one essay this year, 'but before we look to the future, we need to see our past.' The Townsend-Warner History Prize exists to encourage that exploration, so it is well worth celebrating the 249 candidates who submitted scripts for Paper Two in 2021.

Busy members of staff, juggling schedules, deserve thanks for managing to find time for this worthwhile exercise, in this year of all years. As ever, there were some impressive papers and many more of highly commendable standard, including from those with relatively modest Paper One scores. I congratulate all these pupils and also their teachers.

Last year's winner, Luke Parker (Westminster Under) again wrote the best Paper Two submission, but he was not quite able to make up the deficit after Paper One on Johnny Moesel (Cothill House), who emerges as the deserving overall winner. Both wrote outstanding answers, showing impressive grasp of detail, allied to breadth of analytical vision. Not far behind these two were excellent Paper Two scripts from Kian Charania (Westminster Under), Qasim Choudry (Homefield), Ben de Laszlo (Twyford), Kiera Probert (Feltonfleet), Henry Cox (New Beacon) and Samuel Beukes (Homefield). All of these scored 80 or more. Particularly memorable answers included Moesel on the Indian Rebellion of 1857 and Parker on the Warsaw Rising of 1944, and notable essays were presented by Charania on Henry VIII, Choudry on Nelson and Beukes on the history of the tank.

There were some impressive school performances. In the final list, combining Papers One and Two, Homefield had two candidates in the first half dozen, while candidates from ten different schools filled the first dozen places. Westminster Under were very strong once again, with ten representatives in the final top thirty, but the most notable performance this year came from Feltonfleet. With a relatively small entry, candidates from Feltonfleet filled five of the first twenty-five places and their scripts were notably disciplined, well structured and fluent.

So, Feltonfleet deserve the team award this year. There was also much good writing in the large entries from Westminster Under, St Paul's Juniors, Summer Fields and Shrewsbury House. Among schools with smaller entries, both Cargilfield and Homefield are worthy of mention. It remains true (despite what some institutions of higher learning would have us believe) that it is not just what you know that is important, but how you frame and present historical arguments and debate. Many of those who sat Paper Two already display a mature command of language.

The most popular topic written about in Question 1 was the battle of Stamford Bridge, followed by the Great Plague of London, the German invasion of Poland, the Cuban Missile Crisis and 9/11. There were also plenty of answers on the Babington Plot, George Washington and more surprisingly, on Martin Luther. As ever, better answers went beyond narrative, or gory battle details, to put the topic in historical context. So, I understood the somewhat cryptic comment in one answer on George Washington that 'the best thing he did in his life was that he stepped down'!

Question 2 asked for 'the main reasons' behind a particular event. Here there was a very even spread of answers, with only 2d, on the loss of Normandy (1204), attracting no takers. The most popular theme chosen was the success of William I's invasion of England in 1066 and better answers moved away from mere storytelling of the Battle of Hastings. Among more modern topics there was much support for 2k (the American colonists' wish to break away from Britain) and for 2m, especially the World War Two option.

Question 3 inspired the greatest flights of fancy. One option offered the chance to devise your own TV programme around an historical theme. One candidate offered me seven well-defined episodes on his chosen subject. Another wanted to explore life in Roman Britain, including culinary habits and generously offered to 'take it upon myself to eat these foods on camera.'

No subject in the curriculum reflects modern concerns or obsessions more than History does. So, one candidate wanted to study 'Pandemics, to make people understand that COVID-19 could have been much worse.' Another offered the story of Boudicca, because 'it shows that women can do things just as well as men and that even in Roman times there was sexism.' While one anxious candidate, reflecting our overly litigious society, assured me that 'I am mindful that many viewers could be affected by the events and I would try to be as careful as possible not to hurt or offend anyone.' But there was also admirable balance on show. One writer, on a proposed programme on the movement for Indian independence, judged 'Britain's colonial history is hidden away from the public eye ... I feel we should be educated about the wrongdoings and achievements of our ancestors, warts and all.'

In the other part of Question 3 many were inspired by the memorial inscription to Sir Walter Raleigh – 'Reader, should you reflect on his errors, remember his many virtues and that he was a mortal' - to write about controversial figures of their choice. Popular subjects included King John, Henry II, Richard III and Henry VIII, but there were some more modern choices too. One candidate memorably wrote of Thomas Jefferson that 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness were not to be found on his Virginia estate, Montecello, where he kept over 200 slaves.' Another wrote about Margaret Thatcher: 'she was a hero to Eurosceptics, Tories, Republicans, city traders and conservatives, but a villain to globalists, Labour, progressives, pacifists and the left wing.' Most took to heart the message of the memorial inscription to reach reasoned judgements, such as this one on Winston Churchill: 'Although we must be wary not to turn our heroes into gods, we should also not transform them into demons.' And, in more general terms, another wrote: 'We should not impose our modern values on people who had no reason to share them. Greatness is not how few bad things you do, but how many more great things.'

In Question 4, Henry VIII was written about more than any other ruler in 4a, though Henry II was a popular subject too. The role of the navy in Elizabeth I's reign was another favoured topic, though answers needed to look beyond retelling the story of the Armada. In the more modern questions, Lenin and Stalin were popular choices in 4h, though both proved quite tricky to do well. The contribution of the tank as a weapon of war (4j) was also frequently tackled and elicited some broad-ranging and well-informed answers.

I hope it is evident from the foregoing that I much enjoyed reading these scripts for Paper Two. Enthusiasm for their subject matter was apparent in many submissions, as was a genuine attempt at structured analysis. The stronger essays also displayed an impressive grasp of pertinent detail. However, there were, as always, moments of light relief: 'Henry married Anne of Cleves but he thought she was a horse,' and 'Steaks helped to undermine the French at Agincourt.' And the last word in this pandemic year must go to the candidate who compared past plagues with our present predicament:

'Especially during the period we are in, cleanliness and hygiene are of the utmost importance. Oh, and also, thank God for toilets!'

Hugh Thompson
June 2021