THE TOWNSEND-WARNER HISTORY PRIZE 2022

Report on Paper Two

240 scripts were submitted this year for Paper Two of the annual Townsend-Warner History Prize. The paper itself was perhaps a little harder than some in recent years. Nevertheless, the best papers fully engaged with the challenges set and even the weaker answers often displayed enthusiasm for their subject matter. It reflected very well, both on the writers themselves and on those who have inspired them in the classroom.

Conrad Lai (Shrewsbury) was the clear overall winner. Building on his very impressive score in Paper One, he wrote with confidence and maturity and comfortably did enough to stay ahead of the field. The best Paper Two script came from Jeremy Adu-Poku (Westminster Under). He wrote with flair and imagination and was in command of his material. There were also impressive papers from Jack Cui (Sunningdale), Imaad Nasir (Arnold Hall), Emir Aksoy (Westminster Under) and from Edgar Hughes (Woodcote House). And much further down the field there was a particularly good script from Nico Cordonier Gehring (King's College School, Cambridge). It is a reminder that the skills required for Paper Two are different from those needed for Paper One.

There were many distinguished individual answers, indeed far too many to mention, but I should like to single out a few. In Question One, Lai wrote with excellent detail on the battles of Trafalgar and Kursk, putting both battles in their appropriate context. There were also fine answers from Cui on Sir Francis Drake, Hughes on trench warfare, Aksoy on the Russian Revolution and Nasir on Indian Independence. In other questions, Adu-Poku wrote with judgement on slavery in the 'standards and values' question (Q2, either), as well as a fluent essay on globalisation as revolutionary (4j). I was also particularly taken with Cordonier Gehring's analysis of Mary I as a 'heroic failure' (Q3, either).

In the final list seven different schools were represented in the top ten, but there was no denying Westminster Under the team prize this year. They had a large number of qualifiers from Paper One and no fewer than four in the top ten in the final reckoning and ten candidates in the top thirty. Congratulations to all involved! St Paul's Juniors were also well represented and many of their candidates wrote competently. Among the smaller entries there were very good Paper Two scripts from Arnold House, Cranleigh Prep, Hall Grove, Rokeby and from St John's College School, Cambridge.

In Question One the most popular topics included The Harrying of the North, Catherine of Aragon, Edward VI and the Trial of Charles I and in the more modern period, the Battle of Trafalgar, Trench Warfare and the Russian Revolution. The key to success was to strike the right balance between context, relevance and detail. So, in the question on Philip II and England for instance, a long description of the story of the Spanish Armada was not particularly helpful. Economy of words and judgement can both be helpful here. I enjoyed this pithy verdict on Tsar Nicholas II: 'He was a pious man, but also a weak man. Not strong in will, he was easily persuaded and yet stubborn after he made a decision.' Inevitably, there were amusing errors. Nelson's flagship was said to be 'Victoria' and 'he took the trouble to debrief his captains before the battle of Trafalgar'!

The interview option was the more popular choice in Question Two. Julius Caesar, Henry VIII, Napoleon, Hitler and Churchill were all favoured subjects for interview. One candidate wanted to ask Jesus of Nazareth, 'Does an omniscient, omnibenevolent God, your Father, exist?' Another wanted to interview Thomas Becket 'to see if I could find the man behind the halo.' And Karl Marx would be challenged 'if he truly believed that his communist utopia, set out in his Manifesto, could ever actually exist, or would it always be corrupted by human greed, aggression and cruelty?' In this question I also enjoyed the throwaway remark about Churchill, that 'in later life he wrote historical fiction'!

The first option in Question Two on whether we should judge the past by the standards and values of our century attracted plenty of interest too. There is not really a right or wrong answer to this one. Writers needed to use their imagination and powers of persuasion in arguing a lucid case, based on historical examples. Some candidates could see the ambiguities inherent in the debate. On Agrippina's attempted poisoning of her son, one wrote: 'given Nero's well-known depravity, was this a good act or a bad one?' Others turned the question around. 'What would Romans, watching people fight to the death, think about the way we treat our environment?' Some took the view that the past should not be judged by our values. 'We are judging figures against a mark scheme that did not exist when they were alive. In other words, we are asking them to see the future.' On the other hand, especially in terms of the debate over slavery, writers could be uncompromising. The slave trade 'saw people as currency and they were transported as goods … Leaders of this business should be held accountable even centuries after their deaths. They were acting like gods, but fulfilling the work of devils.'

Question Three offered three options and all had plenty of takers. The most popular 'heroic failures' included Leonidas of Sparta, Boudicca, King Harold and Wat Tyler, with Napoleon as the most supported modern choice. The best answers were able to articulate why their subject of choice should still be remembered today. The second option, on truth and lies in wartime, drew plenty of references to World War II and to the Cold War. As one candidate put it: 'Truth is indeed precious in war, as to know what your enemy is about to do is to know what you must do to counter it.' Had this Paper been tackled two weeks later than it was, candidates would surely have been tempted to discuss more contemporaneous events. In the third option, on the words on the memorial to Sir Christopher Wren, the most popular choices were William I, Napoleon, Churchill and Alan Turing. And there was even one vote for Joseph Bazalgette, the Victorian civil engineer and architect of London's sewerage system!

Question Four offered abundant choice. In 4a, the most popular choices were William I, Henry VII and Elizabeth I. Quite a number attempted either Henry VIII's break from Rome (4f), the revolution question (4j), or the World War Two option on turning points (4k). The best answers developed a series of arguments through analysis, rather than just writing narrative. They also offered wider asides that could be striking. So, one candidate finished an essay on the First Crusade with 'But there's another story here, a story of courage and human endeavour and a metaphor for perseverance and resilience.' Another concluded of a visit to a local exhibition that 'it gave me a new perspective on war, a personal insight into the tribulation, toil and horror war causes civilians.' In these rather grim early days of spring, I think we can all relate to those sentiments.

Hugh Thompson,

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