

THE TOWNSEND-WARNER HISTORY PRIZE 2023

Report on Paper Two

‘No matter where your backstory lies, with enough perseverance and will, you can still be a success.’ It is always fun to read such pronouncements and, as ever, there was much to admire in many of the paper two scripts for the 2023 Townsend-Warner History Prize.

Many displayed some understanding of cause and effect, allied to a usually sound grasp of detail. The more confident writers were not afraid to inject an element of humour into their answers (Question 3 offered some scope for this) and there were also some nice personal touches. One writer had seen the Bayeaux Tapestry for herself. Another remembered a visit to Tyne Cot Cemetery, while one writer claimed that his family was in possession of a piece of the Berlin Wall.

This year six schools filled the top ten places in the final list and no fewer than eighteen schools were represented in the final top thirty. Feltonfleet, Westminster Under and Arnold House all figured prominently, but the team prize this year goes to St Paul’s Juniors. Not only did they have three of the top five places, but nearly all their candidates wrote very competent Paper Two submissions. This was also true of some schools with fewer paper two entries. The best in this category were Arnold House, Summer Fields, Brighton College Prep, Cargilfield, King’s College School, Cambridge and St John’s, Northwood.

The two outstanding scripts this year were written by Imaad Nasir (Arnold House), the deserving overall winner and by Huck Acott (Westminster Under), who was a worthy runner up. Both wrote five lively and informative answers, with impressive grasp of detail. This is no mean feat in the two hours allowed for this paper. There were also very good paper two scripts from John Zhou (Westminster Under), Yidong Xu (St Paul’s Juniors), Elias Bernasconi-Tserendorj (Arnold House) and Jackson Chen (King’s College School, Cambridge). Many more candidates scored over 70 in Paper Two and deserve much credit. All these young writers (and indeed plenty of others) demonstrated an enthusiasm for their subject which can only reflect very well on those who inspire them in the classroom.

In Question 1 the most popular options in the medieval period proved to be the Battle of Stamford Bridge, Magna Carta, the Peasants’ Revolt and the Battle of Agincourt. In describing Agincourt one writer, perhaps inevitably, had Henry V proclaiming: ‘We few, we happy few ...’ The Accession of Elizabeth I and the Restoration of Charles II also had many takers. In the more modern period, the Battle of Trafalgar (‘Kiss me Harvey’ wrote one candidate), Napoleon’s Retreat from Moscow, the Battle of Britain and the Berlin Wall were all favourites. One key to a good answer is always to place the subject in context and many were able to do this convincingly.

Question 2 asked for a list of reasons for the named topic. Some listed all the facts they could think of, but the stronger answers focused on causes and supplied several lines on each point,

with a degree of evaluation. In this question the murder of Becket, the Dissolution of the Monasteries, the start of the English Civil War and the beginning of the Cold War were all tackled by many candidates, but the reasons for the defeat of Japan in World War Two was the most popular theme of all.

In the first option of Question 3 there was certainly scope for some thunderous denunciations and the chief victims turned out to be Henry VIII ('Hell is guaranteed upon death!' wrote one) and Mao Zedong, who was told in another courtroom drama that the deaths he had directly caused were 'smears upon mankind'. Of course, it was important that prosecutorial venom was rooted in accurate factual evidence and this was often achieved, especially by those charging Charles I and Oliver Cromwell with high crimes and misdemeanours.

The alternative part of Question 3 invited candidates to imagine a grandfather talking to his grandchildren about the three most important events of his lifetime and explaining why they were crucial. Stronger writers were able to do this whilst also introducing an element of personal life story into the proceedings. 'I can remember it like yesterday' wrote one 'grandfather' about the Wall Street Crash. Another concluded his reminiscences by announcing that 'the gong for supper has been sounded'!

Question 4 offered a very wide range of essay topics. The reasons for the defeat of Germany in World War Two (4g) was the most popular task tackled. One writer convincingly argued in terms of the resources available to each side and succinctly summarized: 'The USA was out of reach, the USSR had relocated its factories to Siberia and Britain had a quarter of the world to fall back on.' Napoleon and Stalin were frequently written about in 4a, which asked for explanations as to how they acquired so much power. I was surprised, however, by how many opted to write about Genghis Khan in this question. 4d invited candidates to choose any one historical year that they deemed especially important and to explain their choice. There was no agreement of course, though 1066 had most adherents. But I particularly liked the choice of 1989 by one writer, who paired the fall of the Berlin Wall with the Tiananmen Square massacre. There was also some good writing on Abraham Lincoln (4e). One writer, approving of Lincoln's 'moral compass', continued: 'He knew that slavery was a moral evil, a fact not often acknowledged by the American populace, even by anti-slavery northerners.' Elizabeth I was the most popular choice for a ruler who deserved the title 'Great', but this question (4h) also elicited judgements of a thoughtful and general kind. Thus, one candidate mused: 'In the eyes of history, greatness is not defined by kindness or hospitality, but rather by the ability to further a country's success.' Another, writing about the Spartan king, Leonidas, concluded: 'A good captain will always, must always, go down with his ship.' Perhaps there is a lesson here for politicians, sportsmen and sportswomen and indeed for all of us!

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