

Learning English in the 1960s

Grammar and spelling did not present an insurmountable problem to me. I could identify a Subject and a Predicate. I knew that every sentence had to have a verb.

However, nobody who knew me could ever have doubted where my interests and abilities lay. Anything of a scientific or technical nature attracted my undivided attention. On the other hand, compelling me to follow the Higher English course was gross stupidity.

From an early stage, the teacher had insisted that we should “*Never write a sentence until one knows exactly what one is going to write*”. Consequently, my essays consisted of blank pages. Mr Fletcher contained his resentment. I sat next to the door, and Mr Fletcher would find errands for me to run during the English periods. I would never read the notes he gave me to deliver to one teacher or another. In hindsight it was probably Mr Fletcher’s version of sending me for a long stand. He and his colleagues were probably playing “*Pass the parcel*” with me.

I spent many of my English classes wandering the corridors, usually in beautiful sunshine, so it seemed. The arrangement worked admirably, and I am very grateful to Mr Fletcher for having devised the scheme. My education certainly never suffered. I was really quite honoured to be given a legitimate reason to avoid the stultifying atmosphere of the classroom and spend my time thinking instead. Most of the other 1200 pupils at the school would have given all their pocket money to skive.

Whilst I had nothing to contribute to the world of pulp fiction, John Sweeney was a natural with languages and novels. English and French were not enough for him. John also studied Latin and Spanish. I would meet John at the No 6 bus terminus almost every morning, and spend the journey to school listening to him summarise the latest Ian Fleming novel or whatever. The only exceptions to this rule were the occasional days when Eve Smith was also at the terminus.

Most girls I remember from Glasgow were easily identified at long range by the manner in which they would chew on their words before spitting them out. I felt it would be possible to tell what they were saying at 50 yards without ever hearing a word. Eve was different. She was naturally attractive, neat, and quietly spoken. It was easy to see why John liked her. When Eve showed up I sat alone on the bus, gazing at the passing world through the clear patch on the misty window where I had wiped it with my sleeve. My uninterrupted thought processes reviewed progress on my latest electronic project or model.

Meanwhile I presume that John was bringing Eve up to date on the current exploits of “*Bond ...James Bond*”, and she evidently enjoyed his company. John and Eve would get off the bus together at Lincoln Avenue. Eve went to a different school, and John naturally adapted his route to take advantage of the situation. He was no fool.

What I hadn’t anticipated, was the day when John wasn’t around, and Eve was the only person standing at the bus stop. I had three older sisters. I hardly spoke to the oldest one, but from dealings with the other pair I knew that the only time a girl would speak directly to me was in order to make nasty remarks. Before many years had elapsed, Dad was to discover, too late, just how unpleasant this pair of daughters could be.

Seeing Eve alone at the bus stop, my subconscious went into overdrive, evaluating the lethal potential of the situation. I was walking into an ambush. “*Hello Jim.*” Her sweet voice cut cleanly through the crisp morning air clipping my ear like a gunshot.

I dived for cover.

How many girls could tolerate a conversation about transformers, frequency responses, decoupling capacitors, and grid bias resistors? Despite her civility towards John and her unassuming manner, I couldn’t imagine Eve would have been one of them. In my early teens I was socially inarticulate. The cause lay in factors outwith my control, and it is a tribute to the deviousness of the manipulators that I failed to detect their adverse influence on my personality.

John tried to broaden my interests. He insisted I should read a novel, and presented me with a much thumbed copy of “*SHE*” by Rider Haggard. What a drudge it was. For the next couple of weeks, I slogged through hundreds of pages of tedium. John would insist that I keep him informed of my progress on a daily basis. The only aspect of the story I enjoyed was the part when Ayesha shrivelled up after bathing in the flames of the eternal fire once too often. Serve her jolly well right!

William Golding’s “*Lord of the Flies*” was on the menu that year. It was another masterpiece of drivel, ranking with Shakespeare in its narcotic potency. Mr Bruce, the Art teacher, concurred. He deprecated the selection of Lord of the Flies as a school text, and advised us to read “*Free Fall*” instead. This latter work was also penned by William Golding. I must have respected Mr Bruce, because Free Fall is one of the few items of literature I have ever purchased. It was worth every penny, but was scarcely an investment as far as the final exam was concerned. Between them, “*Free Fall*”, and “*The Citadel*” by A. J. Cronin, take joint first place in my extremely short list of stories worth reading. However, I can thoroughly recommend “*Rupert*” books and the tales of “*Dudley Dormouse*”.

When my own sons were growing up, I discovered that too many people in the education system insisted upon having the last word. At Parent - Teacher meetings, the behaviour of teachers could be as immature as that of their youngest pupils. It seemed that any “*Mr Fletcher*” or “*Mr Bruce*” in their ranks had been weeded out. The new breed of teacher displayed a desperate craving for status and control. Instead of adapting their style to relate to the variety in children, these types categorised and stigmatised any pupil who did not relate to them. It did not mean that the views held by these teachers were accurate or justified, or that their assertions were remotely true. Their egos had to reign supreme.

For the father of young children, it was easy to identify many major structural problems in the education system. It was equally clear that deterioration was an established, and probably irreversible, trend. To the teenage boy at the No 6 bus stop, such understanding lay more than a lifetime in the future.

In due course, John landed an apprenticeship with “*Post Office Telecoms*”. His linguistic abilities and penchant for spy novels would no doubt have drawn him to GCHQ. John might well be an acclaimed novelist by now. As for Eve, I don’t know. I never saw her again after our encounter at the bus stop. I plead self defense for my response to her greeting. I hope life was gentle to both of them.