

TONBRIDGE SCHOOL
CHICHELE ESSAY COMPETITION 2021
ALL SOULS EXAMINER'S REPORT

I was delighted when I received an invitation to judge this essay competition, and I immediately knew what topic to suggest. I chose 'Memory' because, about thirty years ago, one of my friends was faced with that single word subject when he sat the All Souls examination at Oxford. We agreed then that its multiple layers of meaning provide excellent opportunities for candidates of every academic background and interest.

Whereas he had three hours, the Tonbridge students had only two, a restriction that made me still more impressed not only by the high standard of their essays, but also by their variety, energy and ideological commitment. I have been teaching Cambridge undergraduates for many years, and so thought I knew roughly what to expect. But I was pleasantly surprised by the superb quality of the 17 essays I was given to read, which were clearly structured, thoughtful and well-furnished with examples. And although this risks sounding like an academic quibble, the spelling was mostly excellent (but conscious and conscience presented challenges).

Faced with the near-impossible task of selecting a single winner, I adopted several criteria. One was the ability of the introduction to engage my attention. Unlike examiners, readers can exert choice, and so it seems crucial to persuade potential audiences that they are eager to continue past the first paragraph. I therefore gave preference to authors who avoided the safety net of bland remarks, but instead addressed their subject with originality and immediacy. For example, Jon Webber launched off with an account of the film 'Inside Out', which apparently explores a girl's emotions and core memories stored in a command centre, while Paddy Davies Jones opened by referring to Edward Thomas' poem 'Old Man', discussing the speaker's complex emotions at being unable to pin down the memories evoked by the scent of a plant. Of all the first paragraphs, my favourite was the intensely personal evocation by Ben Sibbald, who initially denied any claim that memories are alive and then continued: 'But, oh, how they live! Pangs of regret, sharp like pins and needles, as unpredictable as the weather in a British Summer...'

Even so, a stellar opening needs to be followed by a sequential argument. I appreciate how hackneyed the advice is to formulate a plan before you start writing, but several essays passed from thought to thought with little obvious direction. If you have an overall structure in your head, you can signpost the reader through your argument by starting each paragraph with the main import of its contents. Some authors succumbed to the temptation of giving detailed examples, or providing several to illustrate the same analytical point. Uniquely, Sherman Yip avoided that trap by starting from first principles and considering the distinction between events occurring in the present and memories surviving from the past. Using mathematical symbols as well as words, he tackled the riddle of time with courage and originality, and I wondered if he had come across the ideas of Henri Bergson.

In terms of style, short, pithy sentences are more effective than pedantic circumlocutions of the type 'Before considering A, it is necessary to conduct the reader on a tour of B...' They take a long time to write, but add nothing to the content. First person works better than the passive voice, but not the use of 'we', which immediately raises the problem of who 'we' might be. Schoolboys? English people? The predominantly white privileged classes (among whom I count myself)? Nobody has the right to speak for everybody.

And then there's the problem of tying everything together at the end, which is particularly difficult under timed conditions. In my opinion, a good conclusion is not simply a

summary of the essay, but should indicate how it might stimulate the reader to further reflection. For instance, to close his impassioned discussion of post-colonialism and the power of collective memory, James Craggs coined a neat paradox: ‘The greatest strength of memory is its disconnect from the absoluteness of truth. But the disconnect from truth is its greatest weakness.’ I was unsure whether I agreed, but that arresting statement summarised his argument as well as prompting me to explore it. As a very different example, after criticising the exam system by demanding to know why he should learn what Google can tell him in an instant, Jack Brant’s final sentence provided an eloquent and disturbing summary of memory’s importance: ‘Once we lose our memories, we are no longer ourselves.’

I looked up ‘memory’ in the on-line *Oxford English Dictionary*, and discovered it has 11 distinct definitions, each with numerous sub-headings, so attempts to classify different types of memory were generally less successful. To confront this intrinsic elusiveness and diversity, Alexander Lambert set up a series of dualities, starting with the opposition between a materialist view of thought as a series of biochemical reactions, and a more experiential perception that memories cannot simply be excised or implanted. I was also struck by how many students regarded memory as a distinctly human characteristic, and so I tended to favour essays that at least mentioned other living organisms and/or computers. Tommy Walker ingeniously combined both, reporting that scientists have successfully mapped the brain of an earthworm and recreated it on a circuit-board. Perhaps, he wondered, they could create a virtual earthworm by analysing the function of each neuron – and what might that imply for human beings? In contrast, William Kingston compared different types of animal memory, such as polar bears who learn from their parents how and what to hunt, but differ from creatures such as toads, who have inherited an instinctive feeding behaviour evolved over many generations. He also contrasted short-term memories with those apparently timeless ones he evocatively likened to ‘the walls of a ruined cathedral.’

The writers who concentrated on human memory were often concerned with its value, and collective memory was a common theme. Toby Peters began by focussing on the importance of memory in world religions, using biblical examples to illustrate his general argument that memory is subjective – people can hold conflicting recollections of past events. Similarly, Benjamin Gardner developed the concept of selective forgetfulness, arguing its necessity for forgiveness both of others and of oneself, insisting that the unquenchable quest for ‘happiness and love...forms an integral part of human identity and purpose.’ Tom Roxburgh also regarded memory as a positive attribute, welcoming its usefulness in learning from past mistakes as well as improving standards of living and governance. Although he acknowledged the existence of conflict, he valued memory’s importance for forging a nation with a common culture.

I admired the political engagement of several writers. In an essay informed mainly by philosophical doctrines, Hector Day-Lunn acerbically pointed out that the current political situation in Ireland indicates how humans have a limited capacity to learn from their mistakes. Other writers chose to investigate what they interpreted as the positive and negative aspects of memory. Olly Hughes turned mainly to the classics for illustrations of the tension between reliving painful memories of damaging events, and drawing informative lessons from past experience, both individual and collective. Rory Smith drew a contrast between positive remembrance and negative forgetting, arguing forcefully against obliterating the past by removing statues or touching up photographs. But the most impassioned attack on the insidious control that can be exerted by collective memory was by Patrick Thomson. Particularly incensed by the current debates about Critical Race Theory, he articulated a powerful plea to ‘tear down a constructed historical edifice, before tearing down the present oppressive capitalist edifice.’

As you can probably tell, I learnt an enormous amount from these essays and enjoyed reading every single one. Not for the first time, I also found myself questioning the merit of identifying a single person to win a prize. Forced to make a decision, I eventually chose one that was on the short side, which implied good preliminary thought and planning. After a provocative opening paragraph comparing human brains with computers, it moved on efficiently to genetic memory and Sigmund Freud. The author also considered the converse of memory (amnesia), the pain of traumatic memories and the value of learning from the past. And instead of closing down the argument, his final paragraph opened up further questions by directly challenging me, the reader, to consider what role bad memories play in my own identity. This deceptively straightforward essay was unpretentious, accessible and slightly quirky, but skilfully crafted to cover a lot of material.

So I'll end by offering congratulations to everybody, and of course especially to the winner. I have no idea who he is or what he studies, but his name is Alex Johnson.

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