CLIFTON AFTER PERCIVAL:

A Public School in the Twentieth century

Derek Winterbottom Redcliffe, Bristol, 1990. 399pp.

D J Martin

Clifton College has made a significant contribution to the development of Australia's independent schools - such is the current orthodoxy amongst leading historians of Australian education. The starting point for their investigations which eventually led to this conclusion had been a conviction of long standing that Australian independent schools were founded upon the Public School tradition established at Rugby during the headmastership of Thomas Arnold between 1828 and 1842. According to the former Professor of Education and Foundation Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Sydney, Clifford Turney, writing in 1966: "The new spirit [Arnold] had introduced into the English Public Schools ... became a model and source of inspiration for an increasing number of secondary schools in the colony of New South Wales" - and "one of the first major colonial secondary schools to adopt in large measure the Arnold-inspired English Public School pattern" was Sydney Grammar School. The educational model that was to be adopted, however, did not arrive in Australia straight from Rugby but, rather, "seems to have come indirectly through men who in England had been educated in and inspired by this tradition not at Rugby but at the newer schools on the Arnold model". The original Arnoldian model - of a boarding school in a rural setting, with links to the Established Church, and catering in the main for the sons of an aristocratic elite not destined for the world of business or the professions - was quite inappropriate for an independent Australian school such as Sydney Grammar, located as it was in the midst of an expanding port city and whose pupils were essentially the sons of the commercial and professional classes, with a range of denominational backgrounds. It is at this point that Clifton College comes into the picture as one of "the swarm of new schools" which then appeared in England. Clifton, under its foundation headmaster from 1862 until 1879, John Percival, "reproduced the public school machinery in its latest form without leftovers from an immemorial past", thereby providing "a model for [Australian] schools, directly and pervasively"-

> *The beau ideal of the period ... is Clifton under Percival. This school was very influential in Australia because, not only did it have a large contingent of day boys from Bristol city, but a considerable number of them were Jews, so the Clifton ethos was insensibly led away from strict Church of Englandism, and anticipated the more relaxed religion of later generations... Bristol itself, and the student body, embodied commercialism and resembled the commercial cities of the Australian colonies.*[1]

A readily identifiable agent of the transfer of the English Public School tradition to Australia was Edwin Bean* (1851-1922). With his father employed as a surgeon by the East India Company, Bean was sent back to England at the age of 6 to receive his education, transferring to Clifton College when it opened at the end of September 1862 and thus becoming the sixth on the Register of its first 76 pupils. For his seven years at Clifton College he was a boarder in School House. This brought him doubly under the influence of John Percival, who in addition to being headmaster was also Bean's housemaster. Not having been a pupil at a Public School himself, Percival had served his "apprenticeship" in 1860-62 as an assistant master at Rugby under Frederick Temple, and in his establishment of Clifton he was to borrow from Temple's version of the Arnoldian model. After graduating from Trinity College, Oxford, Bean found his way to Australia and joined the staff of Geelong Grammar in 1874. Then, from 1875 to 1877, Bean taught Classics as an assistant master at Sydney Grammar. Having been one of the original editors of the *Cliftonian* magazine when it made its first appearance in 1867, Bean's initiative was subsequently responsible for the foundation of Geelong Grammar's *Quarterly* and Sydney Grammar's *Sydneian*. It was the cult of games - a post-Arnold phenomenon that, from the 1850s, became synonymous with the Public School system - which he had experienced at Clifton that Bean proved particularly keen to foster. He helped introduce rowing at Geelong. In addition to introducing rowing, at Sydney he organised cricket and football on a more systematic basis. To facilitate this Bean established a coordinating committee with the title "Big Side Levée", a copy of such a committee with an identical title at Clifton, which itself was a reproduction of the committee at Rugby with the same name. The overriding purpose of these endeavours was to foster amongst Australian schoolboys the same type of corporate spirit associated in Bean's mind with the English Public School. It might be gathered, however, that, unlike your archetypal Public School headmaster of stultifyingly autocratic disposition who put himself forward as the font of all knowledge, the headmaster under whom Bean served in Sydney was essentially a pragmatic administrator, genuinely prepared to listen to his staff and that, as a consequence, a number of the educational ideas carried by masters such as Bean not only came to be implemented by him but also acknowledged.

It should really be of no surprise that during the nineteenth century, as a part of the cultural colonisation which accompanied Australia's development, its educators - more often than not being British born themselves - should have been impressed by the prestigious metropolitan model of the Public School and sought to reproduce it. But seldom is such a transfer process carried through without modification, for example due to adaptation required by local circumstances. In the case of Sydney Grammar, it was to be a very incomplete Public School model which was transplanted. For example, Sydney Grammar was to cater essentially for day boys - an arrangement which deprived its masters of exerting the type of extensive influence their Public School counterparts typi-

---

** Edwin was the father of Charles Bean, best known as Australia's official historian of World War I and the moving force behind the establishment of the Australian War Memorial in Canberra.*

cally exercised over the lives of pupils accommodated in boarding houses. Most significantly Sydney Grammar was to have no official religious affiliation, for long its trustees being insistent that no provision even be made for prayers in assemblies. It has never possessed a place of worship such as the Chapel which was so integral to the life of a Public School and fundamental to Arnold's all pervading desire to fashion pupils into Christian gentlemen. (Indeed this is such a significant consideration as to raise serious questions about the appropriateness of locating Sydney Grammar within the Public School tradition, *pace* Turney.)

Therefore it is of more than passing interest that the point of departure chosen by Derek Winterbottom for his history of Clifton is the College Chapel. It was the crypt beneath the high altar there that Clifton's foundation headmaster, and later Chairman of its Council, chose as his final resting place - rather than Hereford Cathedral where he had presided as bishop for the last 23 years of his life. Thus it was that in December 1918, John Percival was interred in College Chapel by the Bishop of Bristol: this solemn ceremony marked the end of an era.

Percival had been one of those autocratic nineteenth century Public School headmasters *par excellence*. As was the norm he was an ordained Anglican clergyman. In the Arnoldian tradition he energetically set about establishing and maintaining for Clifton College what he considered the appropriate moral tone - a conventional method employed being his Sunday sermon. A major omission from the Public School scheme of things when the College opened its doors was a purpose built place of worship, Big School having to serve as a stop-gap. This was soon rectified, the Chapel being built and consecrated in 1867. When subsequently the schoolboy congregation did not join in the hymns in the whole-hearted fashion desired by their headmaster it was decreed that anyone not singing would have his head punched! With morning services three times a week and attendance compulsory at two Sunday services, Chapel became a centre-piece of Clifton's life, in line with other Public Schools. With his "remote and austere personality" Percival dominated the school. The respect and loyalty of his staff and boys was in not insignificant part the product of fear. "Many a Cliftonian had quailed in the early days before the study door of Percival": liberal use was made of the cane; for what were considered more serious offences, birching to the bare buttocks was employed. A colleague was to write: "We feared him, and we knew the fear was good for us"! Traceable back to Arnold, the overwhelming desire of many Public School headmasters to avoid rebelliousness by controlling as totally as possible the lives of the boys placed under their care - an objective pursued from the mid-nineteenth century especially through their imposition of compulsory athleticism - found expression in an oft proffered piece of Percival advice: "Don't live the life of a cabbage, man". To occupy the "loafer" and "slacker" he too was to use sport, causing one new arrival to complain: "I want to know why everything here is compulsory ... I like football well enough, but when I am forced to play whether I feel inclined to or no, it is not pleasant". According to another of Percival's contemporaries, "we were caught up in a cult of Roman stoicism and service suffused with Christianity".

The essential story Winterbottom has to tell is of how, during the twentieth century, Clifton College expanded and changed, during that journey jettisoning much of the baggage with which it had been supplied by its founding headmaster. And a very informative and well crafted story it is, the reader being rewarded with a good insight into the contemporary workings of an English Public School.

To Percival's great credit, however, he had outfitted Clifton for its journey into the future far better than had been most other Public Schools. Thanks to his liberal views and lack of pretension, from the outset the College was not encumbered by social elitism. The boys he enrolled as pupils were soon inculcated with the attitude that hard work has its rewards. Under Percival's rigorous leadership the school soon established - and has subsequently maintained - its credentials as an educational institution through the quality of its academic results, not the quantity of titled clientèle. The policy he commenced of recruiting staff who were, on the whole, academically very well qualified, provided the basis for continuing strong exam results. Further evidence of what, for his day, was an enlightened social outlook, was the establishment of a boarding house for Jewish boys. The acceptance of day-pupils, who have continued to constitute a very significant proportion of the student body, was contrary to Arnold's ideas, thereby distinguishing Clifton from most Public Schools. For someone who, like his contemporary headmasters, was by training a classicist, it is also significant that unlike many of them Percival fostered the teaching of Science. This provided something to build upon, with subsequent generations of Cliftonians making their mark in that field, two being awarded Nobel Prizes.

Evidence of how much Clifton has changed with the times is provided, for example, by certain policies of Stuart Andrews, headmaster from 1975 until 1990. He was of the view that "Clifton was a 'big' enough school to cope with a number of difficult ... pupils, and indeed looked upon such pupils as a healthy challenge". This was in total contrast to the method Thomas Arnold had refined at Rugby for dealing with such boys: expulsion. And Arnold would have been aghast at the introduction of co-education in 1987. Whereas drama was once discouraged, it now flourishes - thanks in part to the building in 1966 of The Theatre. Music has assumed a very high profile, being performed in a wide range of styles. By contrast, religious formalities have assumed less prominence. Life in general at Clifton has become far less regimented. More than thirty societies cater for a broad range of interests. For the more adventurous, the opportunity is open to join expeditions to such places as Iceland, or Baffin Island in Artic Canada, or Spitzbergen in the Norwegian Artic.

Whilst in other such histories some token effort is usually made to place developments at a school within a broader historical context, Winterbottom does this superbly. The reader is very well informed, for example, about the broader concerns that beset the 60s generation and how these came to be manifest in Clifton's own version of the student "revolution" which resulted in significant changes of attitude on the part of the authorities. The course of Clifton's development is often intertwined with that of Britain. Especially interesting is the discussion of the World War II period when, as a precaution against bombing, the decision was made to evacuate the College to Cornwall

thereby making its buildings available to the likes of US General Omar Bradley for the planning of Operation Overlord. Invariably school histories, as documents of record, present a cavalcade of personalities many of which are touched upon fleetingly and are really only of interest to the insider. Winterbottom manages fairly successfully to keep this feature to a minimum, although with Old Cliftonians including the likes of Field Marshals Douglas Haig and Birdwood, Sir Michael Redgrave and John Cleese the roll call often exudes an intrinsic interest for the general reader anyway. The standard school history tends to be of the "Great Man" variety with infallible headmasters dominating an institution. A feature of *Clifton After Percival* which particularly impresses is the way it broadens its focus beyond the usual narrow concentration on chief executives to provide a complex, variegated explanation of how, over the College's first 128 years, its eleven headmasters have interacted with a common room staffed by interesting characters.

Somewhat ironic it is that the school, whose evolution Winterbottom describes, is in many ways far closer in style to Sydney Grammar today than the latter ever was to the Arnoldian ideal of the English Public School.

Reference:

1. G. E. Sherington, R. C. Peterson and I. Brice, *Learning to Lead*: *A history of girls' and boys' corporate secondary schools in Australia*, Sydney, George Allen and Unwin, 1978, p18

Further Reading:

Bamford, T.W. *Thomas Arnold*, The Cresset Press, London, 1960.
Chandos, J. *Boys Together: English Public Schools 1800-1864*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1984.
Gathorne-Hardy, J. *The Public School Phenomenon, 597-1977*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1977.
Potter, J. *Headmaster: The life of John Percival, Radical Autocrat*, Constable, London, 1998.
Turney, C. 'The Advent and Adaptation of the Arnold Public School Tradition in New South Wales', Part I, *The Australian Journal of Education*, Vol. 10, No.3, June 1966. pp.133-144.