

Stanley Revill

15 April 1907-1 July 1993

Stan Revill was in charge of history teaching at the Henry Mellish Grammar School, Nottingham, for over forty years; he then devoted himself during an active retirement for another twenty years to archeology and to oil painting. His contribution to local archeology has already been acknowledged by the appreciation published in the *Thoroton Society Transactions*. There has been no parallel note on his school mastering career, in part because his own ambivalence about the respect which he engendered among his pupils inhibited them from lionizing his character, but perhaps more importantly because the talent which he encouraged has been dispersed away from Nottingham. The conversion of the grammar school into a neighbourhood comprehensive reduced to almost nothing the already fairly weak old boy network created during the years of his ministrations. His memory is carried principally by those boys who went to university, particularly to read modern history at Oxford, and who by the very nature of this transference became socially and geographically mobile. Those most closely touched by his influence probably do not know that he died from cancer in the summer of 1993 at the age of 86 after a short illness. This note is for circulation among a number of his former pupils who have kept in contact with each other over the years.

The family privacy of his passing, depriving those who might have been tempted to mark his departure with a special ceremony, was characteristic of both the reality and the endurance of his most lasting achievement. He compelled socially inexperienced schoolboys to face up to their undervalued intellectual talents, not by presenting them with a grand vision of the professionalism in historical research but by insisting on them taking advantage of the public examination system without being regimented by it. His pupils learnt from him to rebel against the limitations of conventional grammar school ambitions, a decent school certificate followed by a white collar job in the non-graduate professions or the commerce of the region. The verdict of the HMIs who visited the school in 1950 was that "the tendency to limit the scope of teaching to narrow examination requirements [noted in the 1936 inspection] had not been reversed." "Boys could profit from a wider curriculum and a broader concept of teaching...." Stan was an exceptional master who "retained enthusiasm".¹ Like a theatrical agent he kept his eyes open in order to identify potential. He made his own selection and gave the individuals whom he chose his direct personal attention.

He was a resident sceptic in the school staff room. His body language betrayed a standing criticism of several of his colleagues whose performance as teachers brought good examination results but killed any affection for their subjects. He privately scorned those who taught from their own sixth form or undergraduate notes and who rarely kept abreast of any reading based on recent research. His barely disguised contempt for some of his fellow masters led to a certain withdrawal from common room contacts, such as regularly playing cards with Burnham and Hobson in the latter's physical education room or conducting his own private tutorials in the library store, a room of which he had gained control after having been selected to be the master-in-charge of the library. He was

1. Public Record Office ED162/1593: school number 432/4436.

perhaps at his most relaxed during the cricket season, either as an umpire or as a bowler in the staff side.

By the late 1960s after the retirement of Houston as headmaster he became even more detached, as the conversion of the school to comprehensive status began to take effect. The death of his wife in 1966 increased his disillusionment with the changes taking place in secondary education, as the end of selection and coeducation came to be considered the norms. His irascibility seemed to increase, and he became even more moody and gruff on occasions. His retirement in 1972 released him into the pursuit of those pleasures which he had long cultivated, archaeology, general reading, and then oil painting. He worked in archeology on local digs and at summer camps in South Wales, largely with W.F.Grimes, later serving on the Council of British Archeology and as chairman of group 14 district. He was disappointed when he failed to be elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries. In the 1950s he worked on Lenton Priory, the Moot Hall site on Friar Lane, Thurgaton Priory, and Stoke Bardolph Manor; in the 1960s and 1970s on Newstead Abbey. Several of the papers on his digs were published in the *Thoroton Society Transactions*. But he did not organise himself very effectively to secure regular publications. His findings were more commonly disseminated through the lectures which he regularly gave to branches of the Workers Educational Association.

The consequences of his schoolmasterly style were understandably not those associated with successful history teachers in public schools or top grammar schools who can look back at the prominent members of the historical profession whom they have nurtured. He was familiar with the products of the great public schools from his time as an undergraduate at New College, Oxford (1925-28). But he never attempted to pursue the links and personal contacts made between "beaks" in schools and "dons" in colleges. Those he selected by him for preferment went up to Oxford to take a scholarship examination without any of the feelers and hints that came out of other major schools, and certainly without any strong sense of the civic virtue or the contribution to public life with which that university was then associated. During the late 1940s around the time of his fortieth birthday he began to devote himself more keenly to pre-history and archeology, shrugging off the routines of a syllabus of School Certificate and Higher School Certificate dominated by the study of the 18th and 19th centuries. Those whose talents he encouraged after 1950 benefited from his knowledge of archives and of artefacts. Some of them were encouraged to enter directly after graduation into the newly formed and expanding archive and museum professions.

His principal monument is thus a diversity of self-made men, some history masters like himself but the majority a mix of people who by accident and entrepreneurship have found themselves in interesting jobs or self-employed in fruitful occupations. They range from Robin Bailey, a repertory and National Theatre actor, through Frank Musgrove, a research professor of education, to Sir Neil Cossons, the director of the Science Museum. Many of them may not be able to recall the exact moment when his eye spotted the potential in their immaturity or the way he handled his intervention. But his direct approach and challenging manner touched many schoolboy lives at critical moments.

The psychological basis of his influence was to some degree his own unfulfilled ambition to be a journalist. He had succeeded in getting an

article published in *The Manchester Guardian* on coming down from Oxford while teaching in south Manchester, but this had not led to a writing career. Volumes of poetry such as Yeats, Tennyson and Herrick were among his first book purchases, and he always slightly regretted that he had not graduated in English, because he often found that he enjoyed attending the lectures given by the English faculty rather than those in the History. He taught those he selected for his own personal attention to realise that syntax, word order and style were of supreme importance to command the attention of readers and to express ideas. Schoolboys who would never have tackled subjects outside the syllabus were told to read widely in art history, science, and foreign literature. Influential books were placed under their noses without any introductory comment or warning about their possible ideological content. The library ordering system and the store stockroom gave his selected few a special access to books which would not have normally been added to the library stock, then a collection of 7,000 volumes for which he had a renewal allowance of £100 a year. It would be interesting to know how many boys were influenced in the choice of books which they made for school prizes at the customary visits made before speech day to Sisson & Parker in Wheelergate. His turning to prehistory was in part coming to terms with the accidents of his own career; it gave him just that range of opportunities and contacts which he valued in order to escape from the drudgeries found in the world of formal schooling.

He had himself won a free scholarship to Manchester Grammar School and then to Oxford from a fairly modest home; his father was an electric tram driver and his mother a former pastry cook. He met his wife Phyllis (known as "Pip") while they were both still at school; they were married in 1932 after he had been living in lodgings in Basford with Ernest Burnham and another master from the Mellish, and they moved into Bedale Road in 1934. The economic depression of 1929 had been the context of his arrival at the Henry Mellish when it was first opened, a new and prestigious venture by the county council. Both he and his wife were keen to give instruction through the Workers' Educational Association.

Their son and only child, David, who went to Cambridge (Jesus College, 1958-61), had left home before his mother's death, joining the schoolmastering profession and becoming deputy headmaster of Exeter School before his father's death. Stan took pride in his two grandsons, Richard, who went to his own old college in order to read Chemistry and then into scientific journalism, and Charles, who had no academic bent but became the manager of a building society branch. The contacts Stan made in archaeology gave him a companion in later life, Pat Oliansky, whom he had met on a dig in the Dale Centre and whom he had visited in the United States. She was the divorced wife of a Hollywood film director. They used to see each other at least once a year during the 1980s when they booked a hotel in Gower Street and visited museums and art galleries together. That companionship was tied to his increasing absorption in the techniques of oil painting. He felt that archeology had become too technical and no longer part of the humanities. He also helped with the repair of books in the Nottingham Subscription Library attached to the Thoroton Society. Such a long and interesting retirement did not entail any attempt to build upon the respect he had inspired among his former pupils. He had no desire to attend a rally of those whom he had strongly influenced.

But he had erected his own pantheon of successful pupils, although at a distance and often without any proper knowledge of their careers. Those holding pride of place in his temple of esteem were such luminaries of the museum world as John Morley, an expert on Regency style, or of the freelance writing fraternity such as Paul Wheeler, the author of television scripts and a fictionalised account of the Australian body-line controversy of 1932-3. Stan professed that he was not interested in reencountering the men whom he had helped to begin in life. But this was a certain false modesty and suppressed pride. He knew only too well that the accident of accepting the post of a schoolmaster in 1929 and his perhaps cavalier pursuit of his own interests within that framework had had unintended but significant consequences. His passing is a reminder that there is more to the fostering of latent talent than the initiatives of governments which constantly reconstruct educational systems. The fruits of learning are not garnered in barns that gain value from performance measurement. A symbol of Stan's own scale of values is the empathy which he had for working-class boys who found difficulty in breaking away from their immediate family and neighbourhood. He cherished the memory of Walter Hayes, a good all-round athlete at the Mellish who ran to school from Hucknall each day. This pupil selected for special tuition won a scholarship to Oxford just before the outbreak of war, but went missing believed killed on active service in Malaya and therefore never lived to take advantage of his success. Potential and bright prospects are the marks of achievement, not the vagaries of career promotions or the manoeuvres necessary to compose a respectable *curriculum vitae*.

J.M.Lee

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Publications of Stan Revill

in the *Transactions of the Thorton Society of Nottinghamshire*

'An excavation at Gibbet Hill, Shelford', 75, pp 59-63

'The excavation of a ring ditch at Shelford', 78 pp 7-12

'King Edwin and the battle of Heathfield', 79 pp 40-9

'A 16th century map of the River Trent near Shelford', 75 pp 81-90.