

CHICHELE ESSAY 2010

Report by the All Souls Examiner

The characteristic weaknesses of undergraduate essay-writers are failure to read the question, and failure to plan the answer. On the evidence of these essays, even Tonbridge School sixth-formers are not completely exempt from such faults. A one-word question like 'Fame' looks simple, and those who did not think about it for long took it to refer simply to popular celebrity. This led them to offer some more or less connected reflections on the personalities who appear on television talent shows. I now know much more about these people than I did before, but much less than many of the essay-writers do, whose impressive range of knowledge was worthy of a less evanescent subject. As an historian I had particularly hoped for answers which reflected on the changing meanings of fame over the ages, and I was happy to read a number of them. There were apposite references to the Latin *fama*, and several writers introduced Homer's Achilles, though no-one actually quoted any Greek. I thought of Sophocles's ἀθάνατος ἀρετή, and some candidates were aware of the classical concept of fame as a sort of substitute immortality. No-one took up the point that Christianity, with its promise of the real thing, necessarily changed the currency of fame, but several writers made good use of Shakespeare and renaissance history to discuss the concepts of fame and 'reputation' in that era. The best essays drew on a wide range of reading, and I only occasionally wondered if I had really asked the candidates to 'Write an essay connecting all the books you have read this term.' I valued, too, those writers who proposed a serious moral argument about fame - more serious, that is, than condemning the shallow triviality of our age. Most essayists did that, and I certainly do not disagree with them, but it was good to read the thoughts of those who had thought beyond the obvious.

Among the best essays, I liked Edward Creamer's tracing of the shifting sense of heroism from Homer and Virgil to Henry VIII and the slightly unexpected figure of Erasmus. This essay makes the important point that popular fame was formerly won by great deeds, and presented to inspire others to great deeds, whereas now people are famous mainly for being famous without having achieved anything substantial. I was encouraged to learn from Fergus Butler-Gallie that 'we live in a post-Victorian age of self restraint and modesty' (which speaks well of the moral tone of Tonbridge School), and enjoyed his weaving of figures as diverse as Trollope, Julius Caesar, Cardinal Richelieu, Joseph Chamberlain, Origen and W.S. Gilbert into his discussion of fame, 'desired, if not necessarily desirable.' He concludes with the serious reflection that the contemplation of modern fame should teach us to look away in search of real and permanent values. Harry Hawkins slips lightly around a range of past and present celebrities, but makes some perceptive remarks in passing. Achilles, he observes, 'fought for a cause he did not believe in, alongside a man for whom he held considerable contempt (Agamemnon), in a war he knew would be his downfall' - and all for fame. Giuseppe Garibaldi, on the other hand, became famous in spite of trying to

remain obscure; 'by that same logic, let me conclude that I definitely do NOT want to win this essay competition'. To which the cynical historian must retort that Garibaldi, the revolutionary heart-throb of his age, well knew that begging to be left alone was the best possible means of attracting attention. Oberon Kwok relates the fame of Homer's and Virgil's heroes to those of Byron, Balzac and Scott Fitzgerald (plus a range of modern actors and actresses), but adopts for his theme Socrates's description of fame as 'the perfume of heroic deeds', concluding that however fame may be generated in the modern world, only good deeds can justify it. Tom Edkins offers a bleak view of modern society which links reality television to rising levels of poverty and depression. I was struck by his comparison of the technology of modern mass entertainment with Whitney's cotton gin in 19th-century America: a mechanical marvel which made slavery so much more profitable than before. Unlike some essayists, he does not pretend to have any neat answer to the weakness of our age.

It was not easy to rank the best essays in an order of merit, for their merits were all rather different, but in the end I chose Fergus Butler-Gallie. He has a good line of argument, contrasting passing celebrity with immortal fame, and he commands a rich diversity of reading and knowledge. Other writers were more self-consciously stylish, but this was a thoughtful essay marked by an original mind. Though it was among the longest contributions, it gave me the impression (which not all the others did) of someone who would have had more to say if he had had more time to write.

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