

I was sorry to hear you were having trouble reading my article in the KNOX JOURNAL. It was quite easy to get my computer's printer to produce an enlarged print version. I hope it is easier for you to read with or without the magnifying glass. Hope you find it interesting

Love

David

Knox and 1984.¹

My last year at Knox was 1974 - the year of the 50th anniversary of the founding of the school. There were many official functions to mark the passage of so many years and my friends and I became rather tired of them after a while. With the pressure of exams looming and the difficult decisions about our futures to be made, we were not always cooperative or sympathetic when it came to yet another function with speeches and eulogies of the school and its past. Nevertheless, we eventually came to think of ourselves as the "Jubilee 6th Form" and it slowly dawned on some of us that this fact alone would make us different from any other 6th form the school had ever had. In our

1. The author, David Hart, attended Knox from 1966 to 1974, the year of the Knox Jubilee Anniversary. He went on to study history at Macquarie University, the University of Mainz in West Germany, Stanford University in California, and is currently working on a PhD at King's College, Cambridge in Great Britain.

own way we recognized this fact when we published the customary leaver's yearbook, calling it "The Year of the Jimbalee" - a schoolboy pun the relevance of which I can no longer recall. I still have my copy which I dutifully filed away with other memorabilia of the period.

Many of the 1974 school leavers did not appreciate the significance of the Jubilee Anniversary. In particular, they did not respond to the sense of history and the feeling of celebration which the school was trying to create after fifty years of existence. I'm really not sure why this was so. Perhaps we were too cynical and felt that fifty years was not enough time for the school to develop a real "history" in the sense we were used to. Or, paradoxically, perhaps we were too far removed from the school's origins in 1924 to have any understanding or sympathy. Although an official history of the school was written by Professor Bruce Mansfield none of us paid much attention to it, feeling that it was of only antiquarian interest. The reactions of our parents and grandparents confirmed this for they revelled in the old photographs and the

old names only remembered by them or found adorning buildings on the school grounds. If the 1974 Jubilee Anniversary did not give us much reason for thinking about the past, some of us did learn an appreciation for history in other ways.

In my case it was a combination of reading George Orwell and accidentally discovering history as an academic discipline. For me, 1984 is both the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the school and the title of George Orwell's famous novel of an oppressive society which is ruled by the iron fist of the party and which is constantly at war with its neighbours. Although most people would not see any connection between these two facts, for me they are rather closely related. The reason for this unusual association in my mind is that it was as a student at Knox in the early 1970s that I first became interested in history and where I first read George Orwell.

Our English teachers had us reading Orwell quite early on. By 4th year we had read *Animal Farm*, *Nineteen Eighty Four* and many short stories and essays. I came to share Orwell's

belief that it is our duty to understand history critically. As citizens, we need a critical and independent history of the society in which we live in order to be able to judge the actions of public figures and the justice, or more often injustice, of our political and economic institutions. We need to be able to critically evaluate the official version of events in order to correct omissions and distortions. If the faults and blemishes of the system are hidden from view by deliberate action on the part of officials in the "Ministry of Truth" or by intellectuals sympathetic to the ruling powers, reform of the system becomes almost impossible. Reform becomes completely impossible when the deliberate distortion of language renders individuals incapable of thinking critical thoughts.

Orwell warns us that, if we are to avoid the dangers of the misuse of language and history for political purposes, the average person must have some knowledge of political and moral concepts as well as a reasonable understanding of recent history. Everyone must be capable of using their knowledge intelligently in order to

avoid deception and misinformation by unscrupulous vested interests. Unfortunately, the average person usually only thinks about history when celebrating major anniversaries, such as the Knox Jubilee or the forthcoming Australian Bicentennial. Thus he or she is inexperienced in the skills which Orwell recommends for every informed citizen. This inexperience means that the average person is unable to evaluate the significance of historical symbols and references which are typical of official anniversaries.

I was lucky to escape this historical myopia by developing an interest in all aspects of the past when I was in my second last year at Knox. For reasons that are best forgotten, I was unable to continue studying French and the restrictions of the school timetable made it impossible for me to choose any subject other than history. Thus began my formal study of a subject which has occupied me ever since. I had the great pleasure of having Noel Baldwin as my teacher for two years. He made history one of the happiest and most enjoyable of all my classes and I am sure he would not be upset to learn that his patient and critical approach

to history reinforced and extended what I had read in Orwell's writings.

I was to continue my study of history at Macquarie University, completing my Honours Degree in 1979. It was at Macquarie that I learned at first hand how history can be used as a political weapon. Friedrich Hayek, the 1974 winner of the Nobel Prize for Economics, has identified how history can be used in this manner. He believes that most people learn basic economic and political principles from the history they learn at school or absorb through newspapers and television. I came across two good examples of this at Macquarie. On the one hand there were the Marxists who used history very cleverly to demonstrate the inherent evils of liberal democracy and capitalism. They also used history to show how "their" system would eventually triumph on the ashes of modern capitalism. On the other hand there were the conservative Christians who taught ancient and early modern history. For them there are two very special periods of history which are particularly blessed; the first century of the Christian era under the Romans, and the 16th century Reformation. For

these historians, all of history is dominated by the unique and all-important episode of divine intervention. By maintaining a certain Orwellian critical distance from these groups I was able to identify their political position and to take that into account. I was able to benefit from both groups without necessarily agreeing with what they said.

After I graduated from Macquarie I had the opportunity to study in West Germany for a year. German history, like Russian history, fascinated me because it was a glaring example of state and party power run wild. For some reason, in both Germany in the 1930s and Russia in the 1920s, individuals abdicated their responsibility and permitted a state or political party to engage in barbaric acts against their fellow human beings. I was keen to learn German and to learn more about one of these modern tragedies at first hand. My official reason for going to the Federal Republic of Germany was to study the origins of the First World War, which some historians argue prepared the way for the breakdown of liberal democracy and the rise of Hitler. But I was also interested in all aspects of

twentieth century German politics and history.

It quickly became obvious to me that it was almost impossible for contemporary German citizens to forget the past. I learnt German at a Goethe Institute in southern Germany where students from all over the world wanted to know more about the Nazis. The teachers stoically answered questions and took upon their shoulders the guilt of an entire nation. When we went on excursions to Ulm, the nearest large city, we saw in museums pictures taken from the top of Ulm Cathedral of the total devastation of this once beautiful city on the Danube. When I finally moved to a small city near Frankfurt I was able to see the rebuilt "Old" sectors of the city but not as Goethe himself might have done. The ultimate reminder of the past came when some German students at Mainz took the foreign students on a bus trip to Dachau, near Munich. To see the shame and embarrassment of these kind people as we entered Dachau showed that when the evils of the past are remembered it can help people in the present avoid the same or similar mistakes.

Yet not all Germans care to remember the past. In this respect they are more like ordinary Australians or Americans. Most people are not very interested in their own country's history, especially the darker side. They buy prettily illustrated coffee table books, the occasional popular history and watch romantic historical films; but this interest is more nostalgia or an expression of resurgent nationalism than a critical interest in history as Orwell recommends. The same fact is true of the average German. What shocks us, however, is that we feel that they of all people should be more interested in learning from the mistakes of the past. Who can blame them if they tire of being reminded of the actions of their parents or grandparents? Many students I met solved the problem by disowning their parents or other members of their family for collaboration with the Nazis or even just tacit acceptance of the status quo. Younger Germans, like the high school students I saw in the darkened cinema at the Dachau museum, rejected the past by laughing and jeering at the pictures of starved bodies and carcasses being projected on the screen. They were behaving no

differently from Australian students I had seen (or had been myself) when on a school excursion. What was missing was some way of identifying with the victims of misdirected power. This might have enabled them to appreciate better the significance of the catastrophe they were watching.

After a year in Germany I went to Stanford University to begin work on a Masters degree. My wife and I found the standard of living in the United States easy to get used to and California's climate was very congenial. It came as quite a shock to realise how ignorant the average American is, not only of their own history, but of what happens in the rest of the world. Anyone who has watched American television, read American newspapers, or seen American high school civics textbooks will know how little time and space is given to reporting events in other countries. If other countries are mentioned it is often only to report what Americans are doing in, or to, that country.

It is quite frightening to think that the ignorance of the average American voter on matters concerning American policy in Latin

America will most probably give the American government a free hand to intervene yet again in the affairs of another country. No one is taught in school and no one reads in the paper that American armed forces have repeatedly intervened in Latin American countries since 1898. Nor do they hear about the repressive regimes which American money and arms have supported and continue to support in the name of stability and democracy. I found myself telling American students about actions of their own government which they had never imagined was possible let alone which was an everyday occurrence. An example of such a deliberately forgotten fact concerns the revolutionary leader of the North Vietnamese, Ho Chi Minh. Nobody cares to remember that he was supported as a nationalist by the American government during the war against the Japanese or that at the end of the war, when the republic of Vietnam was declared, the model for the Vietnamese was the American Declaration of Independence. The tragedy of American foreign policy in the twentieth century is that each attempt to limit or oppose communism by force of arms has had the opposite effect of creating

the conditions in which communism thrives - namely war, economic breakdown and political repression. A more critical knowledge of their own history and more sympathy for the nationalist aspirations of other nations would go a long way towards creating the kind of world I'm sure most Americans would like to see - a world in which life and property are protected and where people can choose the political and economic system they wish to live under.

The historical pantomime during the opening ceremony of the Olympic games in Los Angeles is another excellent example of the misuse of history for political purposes. A more critical knowledge of American history by journalists, commentators, and the general public would have prevented this travesty of historical truth from occurring. The need to boost President Reagan's chances in the forthcoming election and the desire to wave the flag at the Russians (for boycotting the games) overcame any scruples about presenting a fair and accurate portrayal of American history. No mention was made of slavery or of the wars with Mexico to conquer territory for settlement in the west.

The history lesson which could be drawn from the opening ceremony was that all blacks were happy gospel singers who enjoyed working in the cotton fields. These unsavoury facts have disappeared down what Orwell called the official "memory hole" of history.

I can remember a similar misuse of history in 1976 when the Americans celebrated the two hundredth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence from Great Britain. No established government, least of all the American government, likes to remember that it was the product of a revolutionary war of independence against a powerful and interfering empire, which imposed onerous taxes and offended the colonists by garrisoning a large army amongst them. Two hundred years later, taxes have reached levels far above those considered intolerable by the tax rebels of the Boston Tea Party and the American government has only recently withdrawn a very large army from South Vietnam, where a struggle for national independence was taking place. In order to avoid these uncomfortable facts, the official bicentennial historians had to do some fancy footwork.

I sincerely hope that a bowdlerised and sanitised version of Australian history is not created as part of our bicentennial celebrations in 1988. Unfortunately, history suggests that such a history will be written and presented to the Australian people as an authentic description of our own and our ancestors's life on this continent. Certain events will be chosen to typify "the" Australian experience. Others will be selectively forgotten. Most probably they will be those of the aborigines or the non-anglo-saxon immigrants. The average Australian's personal pride and their attachment to Australia as a country could too easily be perverted into a chauvinistic nationalism which seeks to exclude others from sharing in our good fortune and which exaggerates our position and importance in the world. Only a desire to remember both the good and the bad aspects of Australian history and to give all racial and social groups their due will avoid such an occurrence.

Historical contortions are not confined to the United States or Australia. Equally good examples appeared in 1977 when the Soviets

celebrated the 60th anniversary of the October Revolution. George Orwell has a wonderful description of the process of selectively remembering the past for present purposes. Unpleasant facts which might call into question the legitimacy of the powers that be are swept into the "memory hole" and forgotten. The danger is that unless someone remembers the past and is able to pass it on to future generations without interference by vested interests like the state or the party, then the type of history which is handed down from one generation to the next is only the official version. This happens constantly and in a very crude fashion in Russia and the countries of Eastern Europe. Courageous men and women have attempted to challenge the official version of the communist past (one of the most famous being the novelist and historian Alexander Solzhenitsyn) and have been arrested, banished or murdered for their troubles.

I am now living and working in Cambridge, a city filled with old and beautiful buildings and where one feels the proximity of its history at every turn. This year has had its share of anniversaries for the university; the

seven hundredth anniversary of Peterhouse College and, in particular, that of the world famous Cambridge University Press which is celebrating 450 years of continuous publishing. To commemorate this event the press has published a book of reminiscences by famous men who have studied here over the centuries. It is interesting to read the excerpts about life in Cambridge because it creates a feeling of continuity and shared experience with those, like myself, who are living and working here now.

The sense of history is not just felt by the students and fellows who spend their days and nights living where so many have done so before. It is also shared by the many visitors who come here each year. Each summer thousands of tourists from all over the world visit the city and its colleges and admire the chapels, court yards, and river frontages. I watch many of them from my window overlooking King's Parade and King's College Chapel and I wonder why they come. Many come just to admire the beauty of King's Chapel and the famous courts of the colleges. They are obviously interested in the past and the artifacts which have

survived the centuries or they would not have made the effort to come here. However, I doubt whether many visitors ask themselves about other aspects of college life or the function of Oxford and Cambridge in English history. I have in mind the role which Oxford and Cambridge, out of all proportion to their size, have traditionally played in producing an elite which rapidly rises to the top in industry, parliament and the civil service. Nor would they know about the difficulties that women and students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds face when they enter a rigid college system which continues to be dominated by males from a particular social and economic class. Those who come for a day trip to Cambridge will not see this less appealing aspect of college life. It takes a little more effort in reading and talking to people before the facts emerge from behind the stone façades.

As I look back on the anniversaries I have lived through it is interesting to speculate on the relationship between history and the kind of thoughts and emotions which anniversaries provoke. Anniversaries encourage people to

think about the past. They stimulate us to think about our origins and the institutions with which we are associated. They also are a cause for celebrating the mere fact that we have survived this long in spite of adversity and frustration. We remember our successes and think fondly of those who are no longer with us. I do not want to deny the celebratory function of anniversaries, but I would like to insert a word of warning - the celebrations and reminiscing should not overwhelm what I believe is the true significance of history. History is not only remembering the past in order to celebrate the present. It also includes remembering the dark and evil aspects of the past in order to understand all aspects of human behaviour as well as to judge and correct the abuses of the present. The most difficult task for anyone, historian or not, is to achieve the right balance of criticism and celebration. If there is too much criticism then the present is not seen to have any redeeming qualities whatsoever and the temptation is to destroy everything and start afresh. If there is too much celebration, whether of the Australian Bicentennial or the

Knox 60th anniversary, then it is too easy to gloss over the errors and injustices and to claim that we live in the best of all possible worlds where reform is not necessary. In my professional work as an historian and in my personal recollection of my own past and Knox's place in it, I am still trying to reach that happy balance of criticism and satisfaction which is the mark of the enlightened and tolerant person.