

The Women's College Chancellor's Dinner and presentation of awards and prizes

13 March 2006

Mrs Yvonne Rate and Dr Rodney Rate
Justice Michael Kirby
Mrs Mary Walker and members of the Women's College Council
Vice-Chancellor Professor Gavin Brown and Mrs Diane Brown
Pro Vice-Chancellors and Deans
Amit Singh, President of the Union and one of its finest leaders
Fellows of Senate and, above all, Members of the College

✂ I am delighted to respond to Amanda Green's toast to the University, as the Senior Student.

Today's "Australian" on its front page demands that I ask whether each of you are "*job ready*". The Business Council of Australia accuses universities of stifling the "*culture of entrepreneurship*". Moreover, "*employers are concerned about the lack of skills regarding creativity, initiative, oral business communication and problem-solving among graduates*". The BCA paper is sadly shot through with interchangeable references to training and education – as if they were the same thing.

Let me contrast these words of Pierre Ryckmans¹ from his 1996 Boyer Lectures "*That a man may survive for quite a while without food, but cannot live one day without poetry, is a notion which we tend to dismiss too lightly, as a sort of 19th Century romantic hyperbole*". He reminds us of Primo Levi who wrote as an Auschwitz survivor, chronicling daily suffering barely describable, never trading blows. Levi describes himself and a fellow educated Frenchman bearing, precariously, a bowl of soup for the entire Barracks. It is suspended in a heavy bucket on a pole. Spontaneously, deeply moved, he recites to his fellow inmate lines from Dante's "Divine Comedy". Then, sudden catastrophe; "*memory fails at the end of one stanza*". Levi returned to that moment in the very last book he wrote, *The Drowned and the Saved*, when finally he does trade blows. "*Culture was important to me, and perhaps it saved me ... when I wrote 'I would give today's soup to know how to retrieve the forgotten passage', I had neither lied nor exaggerated. I really would have given bread and soup – that is blood – to save from nothingness those memories which today, with the sure support of printed paper I can refresh gratis whenever I wish, and which therefore seem of little value*".

But if literature can be devalued because it is so readily accessible, an Oxbridge education may acquire an ambivalent value, precisely because of the games students could play to gain access to it. In Alan Bennett's² "The History Boys", the headmaster of a State Grammar School in Leeds with a

¹ Former Professor of Chinese at Sydney University and ANU. Described in the Boyer Lectures as "Scholar, writer and renowned sinologist", Pierre Ryckmans (whose pen-name is Simon Leys) is the author of 15 books, several of which have been awarded a number of prizes in Australia, France and the United Kingdom. Included among them are "Chinese Shadows", "The Burning Forest", "The Death of Napoleon", and a new translation of "The Analects of Confucius". He has also written widely on French literature and most recently "The Wreck of the Batavia and Prosper".

² Alan Bennett has been one of the UK's leading dramatists since the success of "Beyond the Fringe" in the 1960s. His television series "Talking Heads" has become a modern-day classic, as have many of his works for the stage, including "Forty Years On", "The Lady in the Van", "A Question of Attribution", "The Madness of George III" (together with the Oscar-nominated screenplay "The Madness of King George") and an adaptation of Kenneth Grahame's "The Wind in the Willows". His most recent play, "The History Boys", won *Evening Standard*

geography degree from Hull, is determined his brightest boys should win Oxbridge places. In apparent subversive opposition, there is a Falstaffian teacher, Hector, who has no truck with expediency or opportunism. **His** boys learn poetry by heart. They do so in an atmosphere of ribald humour, not for exams but for a lifetime of nourishment. I am reminded of Stan Goulston, retired doctor, teaching literature to Sydney University's medical students; that they might learn to express empathy with their stricken patients. There is a wonderful exchange between Hector and an Oxbridge pseud called Irwin. Irwin, the cynic, has been brought in by the Headmaster to teach the boys how to play the exam game, so to maximise their Oxbridge entry chances. Hector explodes when Irwin describes Hector's memorised poetry as but "gobbets", useful merely to titivate exam answers.

"Irwin ... For what it's worth, I sympathise with your feelings about examinations, but they are a fact of life. I'm sure you want them to do well and the gobbets you have taught them might just tip the balance.

Hector *What did you call them?*

Gobbets? Is that what you think they are, gobbets?

Handy little quotes that can be trotted out to make a point?

Gobbets?

Codes, spells, runes – call them what you like, but do not call them gobbets.

Irwin *I just thought it would be useful*

Hector *Oh, it would be useful ... every answer a Christmas tree hung with the appropriate gobbets. Except that they're learned by heart. And that is where they belong and like the other components of the heart not to be defiled by being trotted out to order.*

Irwin *So what are they meant to be storing them up for, these boys? Education isn't something for when they're old and grey and sitting by the fire. It's for now. The exam is next month.*

Hector *And what happens after the exam? Life goes on. Gobbets!"*

Then in contrast to both Hector and Irwin is Mrs Lintott. Though she taught her history class the value of knowing facts, she senses that history is more than that. Her angry insights come like a swift uppercut, as in these lines, wasted on her masculine audience:

"Can you, for a moment, imagine how dispiriting it is to teach five centuries of masculine ineptitude?

Why do you think there are no women historians on TV?"

And, on the A J P Taylor or Simon Schama sweeping style of TV history, though betraying a degree of intellectual insecurity:

"I'll tell you why there are no women historians on TV, it's because they don't get carried away for a start, and they don't come bouncing up to you with every new historical notion they've come up with ... the bow-wow school of history.

History's not such a frolic for women as it is for men.

and Critics' Circle awards for Best Play, the Laurence Olivier Award for Best New Play and the South Bank Award and is currently playing in Sydney at the Sydney Theatre Company.

Why should it be? They never get round the conference table. In 1919, for instance, they just arranged the flowers then gracefully retired.

History is a commentary on the various and continuing incapacities of men.

What is history? History is women following behind with the bucket.”

Let me conclude that I am **not** trying to be subversive. My attack is against what the Vice-Chancellor has called the instrumentalist view of education – it doesn't count unless it's good for getting you “*job ready*”. Of course examinations matter. They are after all a measure of your capacity to absorb knowledge and show you understand it. But real wisdom comes from deploying what you have learnt, not only in creative essays but in all areas of life where insight is required. The best employers are interested in whether you can apply your creative mind to novel problems. At Macquarie Bank they would want to know that you had the technical tools to do the job but would be well satisfied with your ready capacity to pick them up fast. What distinguishes this evening's university medallists and the finest students, those whose achievements Women's College celebrates tonight, is that capacity for imaginative insight each of you exhibit, along with quick and resourceful minds. Cultivation of the mind, with good judgment, is so much more than mere cleverness. A E Houseman, one of the poets Hector had his pupils commit to memory, said it very simply: “*All knowledge is precious, whether it serves the slightest human use*”. Like happiness, if you do **not** pursue it, it will find you! Whether in the intimacy of a Women's College seminar or enthralled by a University lecture – I mean of course from those that are truly memorable. So, like Judith Robinson-Valery may you look back at your time at Women's College and Sydney University as truly a time of gifts; for it is, above all in your engagement in things of the mind, along with the friendships and life of the College and University that make this time so precious.

Warmest congratulations to all of you.

G F K Santow
Chancellor
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