

Tribute
Quinton Deeley
CPS 1971 - 1980

John had a deep love of the English language, which showed itself in many ways – the most obvious of which was the sonorous clarity with which he spoke. His love of English was also evident in the class-room. For example, he was fascinated by the history of English, and would spend lessons presenting Old English or Middle English poems to the boys to translate. The words seemed utterly alien and incomprehensible, until he drew your attention to the meanings and sounds of their descendants in modern English – and all of a sudden the centuries were bridged, and you found yourself understanding an Anglo-Saxon settler contemplating a Roman ruin, or thinking about Christ as a warrior.

John's approach to teaching was testing, stimulating, and original. The pupils were treated as capable of thinking, and encouraged to do so. In one of his English lessons (or was it philosophy?) he would place a brick on his desk and ask the pupils to write about it, then and there whilst observing it. It is hard to write about a brick for 40 minutes. In the next lesson the brick was turned over, to reveal the imprint of a dog's paw in cement. The pupils were then invited to write about this too. This encouragement to think meant that lessons with him were sometimes closer to a university tutorial than being at school.

Nevertheless, John was not only concerned with the intellectual development of the pupils, but also – and more fundamentally - the formation of their characters. This is evident in a thoughtful and reassuring speech to children from the lower school who about to join the upper school, and those from the upper school who were about to leave for new schools. John spoke about learning rules of a game to help the younger and older pupils think about the changes in their lives and the challenges that confronted them. This passage, when addressing the school leavers, revealed what he thought were the most important qualities in a person, and also how life should not be lived:

As for the bigger ones, I have a message for you too. It will be brief though it may be a bit more difficult. When I have been talking about the rules you will know I have partly been using a simile and not just talking about games or sums, but about some other rules as well. I mean what you must do and what you must not do if you are going to be a decent person, kind, good, helpful, useful, grateful, loving, pure, holy, the only true goal of any life. Playing games is good - we learn how to concentrate and to strive, whether singly or in a team to achieve a purpose, which is to win. And because we have invented the games and the rules, there are always clear cut winners and losers. But we have not invented life itself - and we have not invented its

rules. There are people who seem to live very successful lives, make a lot of money, come out on top... Very clever and smart, like good card players, but if that is all they make of life, [they are] no more grown up than clever children, who learn the rules of games faster than the others. No more of them. We are all going to be properly adult, and seek the true goal of life, which will bring our lasting happiness.”

John’s openness to ideas and interest in his pupils as people extended to all cultures and faiths. As the demographics of Coventry changed and children of different backgrounds (particularly Muslim, Hindu and Sikh) entered the school, their religious traditions were approached with great interest and respect. John was a man of deep Christian faith who nonetheless accepted that truth, value, and wisdom could be found in other traditions. Comments he made in a speech to the school about a former teacher who had passed away could just as well serve in this context:

It is a great joy and consolation to me that my judgement is truly limited and I do not see as God sees, or know as he does.

We cannot underestimate the challenges posed to John by ill-health in recent years, or indeed the particular hardships and difficulties of his final illness. His keenness and vigour of mind, his deep appreciation of friendship and life more generally, and his desire to see his memoirs in published form, must have made him wish that things would have been otherwise. He was greatly supported through his illness by his friend from childhood, Margaret. His strength of character was evident throughout. He spoke about his illness with honesty, a lack of self-pity, and great dignity. The teacher became the teacher again.

John was a person who thought deeply about his own life, and there is much to learn from him. In his memoirs he wrote about a remarkable occasion on which the school choir excelled itself in a rendition of Handel’s Messiah in Packington church in Meriden (where there is a Handel organ). As he wrote, “I was totally unprepared for the first entry of the boys’ voices all together all on the right note. It was stunning.” He went on,

“But to get to the point. As I wrote these words I was listening to a recording of the performance. No one who was not there can get any idea of those electrifying moments from this recording alone. It is distant and muddy and all that comes through really well are the wrong notes. You see the memory, held in the imagination, is better and more real than any recording. There is nothing like the memory. Do not therefore rely on such things as videos and photographs and recordings, but nourish and sustain your memory, for that is where the essence of a matter resides and grows with your understanding. In our remembrance and our love of former things we may even redeem them, rising above ancient pains and grievances, filling in the

gaps and making them better still for all time. It is a task that waits us all I think.”

We give thanks for the life of John Overton Phipps – son and brother, scholar, sportsman, schoolmaster and headmaster, farmer, author, and friend.