

JAMES COBBAN

How does one characterise in a few words the qualities of a man who had such a profound influence on so many young men who had the extreme good fortune to spend their formative years under his tutorship?

There was so much which we admired about him, and, continued to do so when we ourselves had become mature adults and men of the world, when the reverence which one naturally feels for one's former teachers could be expected to have palled.

There was first of all JMC's extraordinary intellect. We knew as youngsters that here was an unusually powerful mind that towered above its peers. In later life, when some of his Old Boys would walk with him in the English uplands which he so loved, we would struggle to keep up, both with the spanking pace which he set and with the sparkling conversation, anecdotes, and repartee which we tried vainly to match. I would return from these outings physically and mentally exhausted!

His was a life packed with purpose and fulfilment. We never ceased to marvel at the sheer productivity of the man, right through into retirement and old age – the fruit of a first class brain combined with inexhaustible energy and firm moral convictions. He took life at the run, and not just metaphorically speaking. Who can forget the sight of him racing across the gravel to his Classical Sixth class in the Heylyn Room, mortarboard and books clutched to his chest, hurdling over the hedges which then fronted the Science Block, gown streaming behind him in the wind. And woe betide us if we arrived after he did!

If his arrival at the classroom was unconventional his teaching methods within it could verge on the bizarre. He was a natural thespian, a facility which he once admitted to me was essential in a good teacher. I can still hear today ringing in my ears his stentorian "Scrooge and Marley, I presume" as he read to us from Dicken's Christmas Carol on the last few Evensongs of the Michaelmas Term. And then his extraordinary cavortings across the large tables of the Heylyn Room as he chided some inattentive lower sixth former who had allowed him to get away with some deliberately outrageous remark without a challenge. The pedagogy was unique, but like the cock-eyed javelin thrower, he didn't half keep us on our toes!

This was James the schoolmaster, but it was James the man whom I shall always think of with the greatest respect and affection. He was a man of immense humanity, the exemplar of that old fashioned notion of the Christian gentleman, - thoughtful, charitable, fair minded, self disciplined, modest, courteous and considerate to all sorts and conditions of men, a man of unquestionable moral courage and integrity founded on a deep religious faith in which he found manifest comfort and strength both in his

professional and personal life. And if all this sounds rather po-faced and sanctimonious, or “Johny head in the air” as he might have put it, nothing could be further from the truth. He had a huge sense of fun, and an encyclopaedia of funny stories which he would trot out on the appropriate occasion. Few speakers could equal him in wit or sheer articulation, and if from time to time some of his more cheeky senior boys would groan out loud at an oft repeated joke, an insolence which most masters would have been inclined to punish in the usual way, he would burst into laughter and pass it off with some well chosen allusion. Here was the bond which made for that extraordinary relationship which JMC had with his senior boys. He expected us to be irreverent with him, to challenge him, to be outspoken, and we did so but we never ever lost the massive regard and respect in which we held him. That was the mark of true leadership

JMC was a man of many parts. He was, of course, a traditionalist ever loyal to his Anglican church and the sovereign who governed it. He was also a romantic capable of strong emotion. One does not think of Headmasters as being naturally demonstrative or sentimental. He could be both, and the story of his courtship of Lorna had all the elements of a romantic novel. Lorna was the perfect companion for this ambitious, energetic and demanding headmaster. Gracious, home-loving, sensible and sensitive, she shared his mission and his burdens, until her tragic death at the early age of 45 in 1961 when JMC was at the height of his powers and at the zenith of his headship at Abingdon.

My last recollection tonight is of helping JMC to carry Mrs Cobban to bed after she had collapsed following a visit to the theatre in Oxford, James’s annual treat for the members of the Roysse Society. Despite being gravely ill she had insisted on accompanying the party, and helping to entertain us afterwards. What a privilege that was for a young man of eighteen! It is a memory which I shall carry with me all my days.

Historians, when they come to review the development of English education in the second half of the 20th century, will surely rank James Cobban as one of the great headmasters of his age. He believed absolutely in education as the great enabler, the route by which a man might better himself, routes which must therefore be open to all young people regardless of their means. James himself was the beneficiary of an education similar to that which he would make available at Abingdon. It was his skill, his commitment and his vision which set the pattern for the transformation of a small, rural, minor public school of no particular distinction into one of the most successful and reputable independent schools of our time. We were indeed fortunate to have served under James Cobban, and to be allowed to count him as a friend and mentor.

Terence Libby, November 2010.