

*The
Connell Guide
to
Alan Bennett's*

The History Boys

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Introduction

The History Boys, wrote Alistair Macaulay in *The Financial Times* in December, 2005, “is surely the richest play Alan Bennett has ever written. Wonderfully it blends wit and wisdom, now with knockabout humour, now with pain.” Underlying the play is a fascinating debate about knowledge and how we acquire it – “a marvellous epistemological concern that I usually associate with the plays of Tom Stoppard: how do we know what we know? What are the different layers of knowledge? And how does knowledge enrich our lives?”

Macaulay is not alone in comparing Bennett to Stoppard. Like Stoppard, says John Stinson, he likes to flatter his audiences with “a seeming assumption that they have a rather thorough knowledge of various levels of culture”. *The History Boys* “is never heavy and never dull. [Bennett’s] work is characterized by a kind of classical lightness and ease, a sense of never trying too hard or being too insistent.”

Not everyone warmed to the play. In *The Spectator*, Douglas Murray argued that while for many Bennett might be the “Queen Mother of British literature, a national treasure adored by all for his cosy charm and twinkle-eyed naughtiness”, this play is more like “the fantasy of an ageing gay man”.

Dissenting views like this were rare: most critics feel the play deserved all the plaudits it received: a

big hit on the stage which went on to become a successful film. But dissenting views are useful, as this play itself is anxious to show us. They concentrate our minds. In a warm if slightly mischievous review of Alan Bennett's diaries for the Times Literary Supplement in October 2016, Ian Samson, while fulsomely acknowledging Bennett's status as a national treasure, wrote about his tendency to self-deprecation and over-sensitivity:

Some writers are so sensitive to their own limitations and deficiencies, so aware of their own absurdity and so ambivalent about everything, including themselves, that they effectively put themselves beyond criticism – which means in the end, alas, that we don't take them as seriously as we should.

Alan Bennett's work, says Sansom, "demands the very best of us: not our praise but our attention". The aim of this guide is to give *The History Boys* just such attention.

What happens in *The History Boys*?

A group of eight boys at a northern grammar school in the 1980s hope to win scholarships to study history at Oxford and Cambridge. They are staying

on an extra term after their A-levels to be prepared for the entrance exams and interviews by Hector, a weary but passionate teacher.

The Headmaster – keen to improve the school’s reputation and his own – has also brought in Irwin, a bright young man, to train the boys in a contrarian, results-led approach. Hector disapproves of this. He believes, like A.E. Housman, that knowledge is “precious whether or not it serves the slightest human use”.

The play opens with Irwin in his forties. He has left the school and is addressing a group of MPs on how to “spin” an unpalatable bill in Parliament. We then travel back to the 1980s: Hector’s motorcycle gear is removed by five of the school boys, who name each item of clothing in French and show them to the audience “with a flourish”.

Most of the play is set in the classroom, with students and teachers exploring the purpose of history, literature and education. Hector is caught “fiddling” with one of the boys on his motorbike as he drives them home and is asked to take early retirement. The Headmaster uses this as his reason to ask Hector to leave, but admits to Mrs Lintott that it is his unquantifiable teaching methods he dislikes most.

While he stays on until the end of the term, Hector is ordered to share classes with Irwin, which increases the tension between them. The boys have a final session of interview preparation and come back from their Oxbridge interviews and exams

with good results: they all receive places at their chosen colleges, even the least promising, Rudge. On the last day of term Dakin, made reckless with success, decides to “push the boat out” and asks Irwin out for a drink; Irwin, after some cajoling, agrees. Hector takes Irwin on his motorbike for a final ride.

The last scene takes place at a memorial for Hector, who has died while riding his motorbike with Irwin (left injured and in a wheelchair). We hear from Mrs. Lintott and the boys about their futures, the careers and lives they go on to have, which amount to Hector’s legacy. It’s Hector’s words that end the play: “Pass it on, boys. That’s the game I wanted you to learn. Pass it on.”

What does the play tell us about education?

History repeats itself, and so, quite often, do writers – at least in choice of subject matter. Bennett has always been fascinated by teaching and the way our schooldays shape our future. His first play, *Forty Years On*, was set in a school; 36 years later, *The History Boys* is also set in a school, this one a northern grammar.

The middle-class English have a “special fondness” for schools that take them back to their educated adolescence, as Michael Billington says in

The Guardian, whether it be farces like *The Happiest Days of Your Life* or serious dramas like Terence Rattigan's *The Browning Version* and Julian Mitchell's *Another Country*. But Bennett's play is radical: it is the only school play in English drama about the process of teaching. "We actually get to see the heroic Hector and the insidious Irwin – the play's intellectual antagonists who happen to be in the same boat sexually – at work in the classroom."

Billington singled out one particular scene in the play as "overwhelming in its emotional impact". It is the scene in which Hector takes "a shyly precocious pupil" (Posner) through Hardy's poem "Drummer Hodge". Hector explains his passion for the poem to the boy and dwells on its "Larkinesque use of compound adjectives". But beyond the specifics, the scene demonstrates, as Billington says, "the unfashionable virtue" of committing poems to memory.

And it conveys an important truth about literature: that "the best moments in reading are when you come across something – a thought, a feeling, a way of looking at things – which you had thought special and particular to you".

Summing up this scene, Billington says:

Bennett shows what teaching at its best is: a process of drawing out rather than putting in. But he does infinitely more than that. He understands that a school is a network of private relationships and a public institution; a place in which a

precariously maintained order is constantly on the verge of disintegrating into chaos; and, especially, a battleground for opposing views of life and education. But what he sees more sharply than anyone is that a school is a paradigm of national life.

Billington suggests that the 1980s grammar school in *The History Boys* is an image of Thatcherite Britain,

It has a dictatorial boss, a sceptical feminist element aware that history is a catalogue of “masculine ineptitude” and a central conflict between bustling pragmatism and beleaguered humanism. In *Forty Years On*, Bennett called his school Albion House. Here the symbolism is unnecessary. The school simply is 1980s Britain.

Too much can be made of this: the timing of the play, and its political setting, never seem especially important, insofar as they represent general trends in education and perhaps in British life. It is also too easy simply to call Hector “heroic” and Irwin “insidious”.

It is certainly true that Hector sees knowledge as an end in itself, whereas Irwin sees it merely as a means of advancement in life. The boys explain Hector’s teaching style to Irwin:

Lockwood: It's higher than your stuff, sir. Nobler.

Posner: *Only not useful, sir. Mr. Hector's not as focused.* (p. 37)

Hector himself would agree. As he says proudly to Mrs Lintott: “You give them an education. I give them the wherewithal to resist it.” (p. 23) Hector sees “education” and all its institutional hoop-jumping as narrowing the mind, good for nothing except embellishing a CV – a ‘Cheat’s Visa’, he calls it – and acquiring a job. Such utilitarianism debases knowledge and disrespects the people who gave it to us.

“Wittgenstein,” he says “didn’t screw it out of his very guts in order for you to turn it into a dinky formula” (p. 72). Wittgenstein, who wrote his *Tractatus-Logicus-Philosophicus* in the trenches of the First World War, said of its propositions that “he who understands me finally recognizes them [the propositions] as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them”. Rather than be used as a “dinky formula”, they are made to be climbed out, over and through, in Hector’s view.

Hector’s purpose, then, is simply to make his students better, more thoughtful people. He is an old-fashioned humanist who studies the past to gain a greater understanding of – and connection with – humanity. His view is akin to D.H. Lawrence’s: “the ultimate passion of every man is to be within himself the whole of mankind”.

Irwin is the new man, less concerned with humanity in general than in boosting the

performance of his students. The way to do this, he believes, is by making a compelling argument – ideally, one that overturns received opinion. To Irwin, art, literature and history are more like commodities which can be traded for material gain. “Poetry is good up to a point,” he says. “Adds flavour” (p. 26). He approaches writing an essay as an intellectual game:

The wrong end of the stick is the right one. A question has a front door and a back door. Go in the back, or better still, the side... History nowadays is not a matter of conviction. It's performance. It's entertainment. And if it isn't, make it so. (p. 35)

Irwin defends his pragmatism when he points out to Dakin that Hector is “not trying to get you through an exam” (p.41). Above all, his aim is to free the boys of their faith in right and wrong, correct and incorrect, to unsettle the humanist foundations of their education. Entertainment is more important than truth, he believes – and Oxbridge dons need to be entertained, and surprised. “I didn’t say it was wrong I said it was dull,” he tells Dakin when Dakin protests that an essay he has written is accurate and covers “all the points” (p. 18).

Later, Scripps defends the conventional view about World War Two – that it was caused by the unsatisfactory outcome of World War One – on the grounds that it is true. “What’s that got to do with it? What has that got to do with anything?” argues



Richard Griffiths as Hector in the 2006 film adaptation of The History Boys

Irwin. The truth might be good enough for Bristol University, or Manchester, but it will send Oxford dons to sleep.

Does the play come down on Hector's side?

Does Bennett load the dice too heavily in favour of Hector and the view that “all knowledge is precious whether or not it serves the slightest human use”?

You only need to look at the opening scene, says David Greenberg, which shows a “clever but cynical young historian” – Irwin after he has given up

teaching – advising MPs on how to get a bill through parliament that would restrict trial by jury. Irwin “condescendingly explains” how they should frame the argument: “‘The loss of liberty is the price we pay for freedom’ type thing.”

Funny as it may be, this scene is significant in the way it “stacks the deck” against Irwin. So do the scenes which follow, as we watch Irwin during his teaching days; he is clearly Bennett’s villain, “shallow and facile, a liar, and a repressed and perhaps closeted homosexual to boot”. We are therefore naturally inclined to feel more sympathetic towards Irwin’s foil, Hector, an obese older man who is a “romantic traditionalist”, says Greenberg, and a “somewhat less closeted homosexual – in fact an unrepentant molester, who teaches the boys to revere ‘the truth’ (never defined) and to respond to events with hot-blooded feeling – something he accomplishes by making them memorise poetry and quoting them aphoristic snippets of Auden or Hardy”.

Because Hector is “enclosed within an aura of approval adeptly set up and managed by Bennett”, says John Stinson, we find ourselves going along with his enjoinder to the boys to abandon their ambitions to get into Oxbridge and instead set their sights on a redbrick university. “I thought all that silliness was finished with,” says Hector. “You believe in God. Believe also in me; forget Oxford and Cambridge.”

But is there a less elevated motive behind

Hector's appeal? We learn that he was a graduate of Sheffield. Could there be a conscious or subconscious attempt on his part to avoid the blow to his ego he would feel if his boys were to do better than he did? In his book *The Lessons of the Masters*, cited by Bennett in his "Acknowledgements" page, George Steiner argues that the Master never wants his students to surpass him. The relationship between teacher and pupil is one based on power.

Teaching could be regarded as an exercise, open or concealed, in power relations. The Master possesses psychological, social, physical power.

Stinson's point is that Hector is psychologically needy, and that his neediness leads him to abuse his power. His near-insistence that each day a different boy rides home with him on his motorbike while he "fiddles with" their genitals is surely an abuse of power, and of trust. That he is able to rationalise his groping is typical of a Bennett play. Duncan Wu (writing about the playwright before *The History Boys* appeared) has noted that:

Bennett's protagonists typically lack the awareness that would enable them to comprehend their foibles, and rectify the wrongs they inadvertently commit against others. Tunnel vision is their besetting sin, and it usually implies a more profound failure.

Perhaps the point Bennett is making is not just that inspirational teachers like Hector are likely to be flawed but that the students themselves are quite grown-up enough at 17 or 18 to take responsibility for their actions; indeed he himself once said in an interview: “Hector is the child, not them.”

There is certainly something child-like about Hector. His disappointments seem constantly about to break through his confident exterior before being masked by literary quotation. His cover breaks most memorably when he explodes at the boys:

Shut up! Just shut up. All of you. SHUT UP, you mindless fools. What made me piss my life away in this god-forsaken place? There's nothing of me left. Go away. Class dismissed. Go. (p.65)

After the Headmaster has asked him to retire, and to leave early, the coarse and desperate vernacular of these lines takes on added significance. It is as if Hector has seen through his own illusions. He soon composes himself, however, and, borrowing from John Milton and TS Eliot, finds a way of saying obliquely, yet clearly, what he needs to:

Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail.
I am an old man in a dry season. Enough.

The “Enough”, which is not in Eliot’s “Gerontion”, suggests frustration – is literature enough for him or has he had enough *of* it?

The truth is that Hector uses literature not just as an “insulation” against the “primacy of fact” (as he himself puts it) but as a buffer against reality. When faced with the news that he has been seen “fiddling” with a boy on his motorbike, and asked by the Headmaster to explain himself, he resorts to one literary quotation after another, as though by doing so he might flatten the particular experience of his own shame into the canon of others’ experience. This presents an opportunity to practise what he earlier preached to Timms – the use of poetry as an “antidote” to grief:

*Hector: The tree of man was never quiet
Then ‘twas the Roman; now ‘tis I.*

Headmaster: This is no time for poetry

Hector: I would have thought it was just the time.

(p.53)

But now, in context, to quote Housman’s *A Shropshire Lad* seems not so much an “antidote” as an evasion. In fact the reference to the “tree of man” from which the forbidden fruit was plucked is hardly flattering to Hector. Like Adam and Eve, he is unable to resist temptation.

When pushed, he says shamefacedly that “Nothing happened”, but we know this isn’t true. “A hand on a boy’s genitals at fifty miles an hour,” as the Headmaster says, is both a disturbing abuse of power and extraordinarily reckless. All Hector can say is that the “transmission of knowledge is itself

an erotic act”. Again, he reaches for the words of others – George Steiner’s *Lessons of the Masters* – and for humanist generalities. This is why Posner goes to Irwin for advice about his sexuality, because he knows Hector will just give him a quotation: “Literature is medicine, wisdom, elastoplast,” he says dismissively. It is everything and nothing. Hector proves as much here when he takes his own words to heart and uses literature as no more than a “verbal fig-leaf”, a way of hiding his transgressions.

Should we feel sympathy for Irwin?

If Bennett’s treatment of Hector is more subtle than his detractors allow, the same is true of Irwin. “Despite his fondness for fondling, [Hector is] easy to root for,” writes David Greenberg. “Literate audiences can be counted on to share Bennett’s scorn for the superficial journalist-historians who value cleverness more than depth.” No good historian would defend the view which Irwin expresses that history “nowadays is not a matter of conviction. It’s performance. It’s entertainment.” This is sheer mischief-making on Bennett’s part, says Greenberg, and the character of Irwin is “ultimately unpersuasive”.

Is it, though? Bennett himself wrote a playful article in *The Owllet* magazine when he was only 17

entitled: “Examinationship (or the art of succeeding at examinations without cheating)”, and in his introduction to the published version of *The History Boys* he describes the way he himself prepared for a scholarship exam to Exeter College, Oxford. He notes, for example, that he

reduced everything I knew to a set of notes with answers to possible questions and odd, eye-catching quotations all written out on a series of forty or fifty correspondence cards, a handful of which I carried in my pocket where I went.

He also realised, he says, what somebody ought to have taught him but never had:

...namely, that there was a journalistic side to answering an examination question; that going for the wrong end of the stick was more attention-grabbing than a less unconventional approach, however balanced. Nobody had ever tutored me on examination techniques or conceded that such techniques existed, this omission I suspect to be put down to sheer snobbery or the notion (here ascribed to Hector) that all such considerations were practically indecent.

There are plenty of reasons for viewing Irwin as less than reprehensible, not least that his views on examination techniques appear to mirror the author's.

I can see that, of the three teachers in the play, I've had experience of two of them. I'd been taught at my own school in Leeds by somebody like Mrs Lintott, in a very straightforward, factual way. And then the way I got a scholarship to Oxford and how I got my degree really was via the method the character called Irwin uses in the play. So in a sense, I am Irwin. The person I have had no experience of at all is Hector, the charismatic teacher; I only knew about teachers like that from talking to other people, and also from reading. Temperamentally I cleave to that kind of teacher and that kind of teaching – while at the same time not thinking it practical. I suppose that the three teachers came out of trying to reconcile that. I think plays do tend to come out of things that you can't actually resolve other than by writing a play about them.

“The Truth Behind the History Boys,”
The Daily Telegraph (21st June, 2004)

Besides, Irwin's advice to the students to enter an exam question by the back door or side door may be a “trick”, but it might also encourage critical thinking and imagination. Nor is it a bad piece of advice, especially given that the boys Irwin is teaching (as the play makes clear) are likely to be up against more formidable, privately educated students competing for the same places. He may later be guilty of prostituting his talents, as we see in the scene where he is making a film for the BBC and

indeed in the opening scene, but, as Stinson says, the text gives us plenty of reason to believe that these talents are not simply “flash” or cheap or meretricious.

It is significant that when the play was turned into a film, the director, Nicholas Hytner, shifted the emphasis.

On stage, the central argument can seem weighted in Hector’s favour, as if there were no disputing Housman’s dictum, quoted in Hector’s first lesson, that “all knowledge is precious whether or not it serves the slightest human use”. The truth is that much of what Hector teaches is entirely self-indulgent, and his insistence on inflicting on his class the culture, high and low, of his own youth, is at least questionable.

Irwin, like Hector, may be arrogant and a bit of a fraud – he is not, it turns out, an Oxford graduate, as he has claimed – but he is shown as psychologically vulnerable and good at what he does. And, as a supply teacher hoping for a permanent job, he is astonishingly successful, doing exactly what he’s hired to do: all eight boys are accepted by Oxford or Cambridge. In achieving this, he accepts the need to make compromises with the world-as-it-is, but then so do all of us.

Perhaps the early scene in the play where Hector, like a Homeric hero, hands over his helmet as though it were armour to his student-soldiers,

suggests we should view both this teacher and the students with some scepticism. Both are adept at “performance” and we should be on guard against seeing Hector as a repository of purity and truth. *The History Boys* is a play about ideas, and while Bennett, perhaps nostalgically, is making the case for a particular kind of education (one he himself was denied, as most of us are), he is careful to show Hector as a flawed hero, and Irwin as far from a pantomime villain.

What view does the play take of history?

This is by no means to say that the play endorses Irwin’s view of history. Irwin, the temporary contract teacher brought in to counter, and eventually displace Hector, is a revisionist historian who believes writing history, like passing exams, is more a matter of show business than truth. “Truth is no more at issue in an exam than thirst at a wine-tasting or fashion at a striptease.”

In his introduction to the play, Bennett says he thinks “some of the flashier historians, particularly on television, are just grown-up versions of the wised-up schoolboys who generally got scholarships (myself included)”, and quotes R.W. Johnson reviewing Niall Ferguson’s *The Pity of War*: