It's a Don's Life

Mary Beard

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Extract

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For Tony Francis, Xjy, Michael Bulley, Anthony Alcock, Richard, Paul Potts, SW Foska, PL, Jackie, Lord Truth (Ronald Rogers), Jane, Oliver Nicholson, Lucy, Eileen, FG, Arindam Bandyopadhaya, Lidwina, Monica, Nicholas Wibberley, Richard Baron, David Kirwan, Bingley, Simone, Steve the Neighbour and all my other friends on the blog.

Illustration Credits

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Introduction

A don's life is enormously rewarding – and fun. I can think of few better ways of earning a living. It is also hard work, frustrating, and all too often misrepresented. In the absence of any other news, a desperate journalist can always fall back on taking a pot shot at the three-month summer holidays we dons are supposed to enjoy, or on whipping up outrage about the 'unfair' selection procedures of Oxford and Cambridge in particular. Do we really only let in those kids who can tell their sherry from their port, or have been trained to cope with our impenetrable – and, frankly, mad – questions?

Since April 2006, my blog – *A Don's Life* – has shared some of the day-to-day realities of working in a university, and tried to quash a few myths. No, the summer vacation is not a 'holiday'. You won't find us on the golf course or the beach (unless we are working on seashore beetles, that is). And no, we don't dream up interview questions about what it would feel like to be a light bulb or a strawberry, just to trip up the unwary (see p. 249 for the inside story).

Of course, Cambridge is not a 'typical' university. There's probably no such thing. I've worked in three, in Britain and the US, and each one has been very different. All the same, I'm sure that many of the themes of *A Don's Life* would be recognisable in any university, anywhere in the world (take a look at the 'willy waving' on p. 100).

I'm also a classicist – a species far less endangered than you have no doubt been led to believe. The blog tries to capture

something of the pleasure, and the point, of studying the Greeks and Romans: from ancient Roman jokes (p. 183) to the discovery of a battered statue from the river Rhône, which may (or, more likely, may not) be a portrait of Julius Caesar (p. 214).

The posts included in this book are published more or less as they appeared on the blog – with only the occasional explanation added, spelling mistakes corrected and (regular readers of *A Don's Life* will be relieved to learn) apostrophes inserted where required. You can dip into them in any order. But there *is* a narrative that runs from start to finish, from my very first tentative post 'Pink or purple' to the semi-professional blogger at the end.

I suspect that, over all, the blog makes my life seem more exciting and action-packed than it really is. I've tried to capture the flavour of an average day (p. 163). But in general there is not much 'blog-worthy' about an evening spent marking fifteen essays on the run-up to the Peloponnesian War (fascinating a subject as it is), nor about a morning in the library failing to find that crucial reference in Cicero (or was it Livy?) that you've lost.

And it's not easy to share all those hours spent teaching the students and thinking about how they are getting on. After all, no undergraduate wants to find the failings of their latest essay or exam discussed with the rest of the world on the web. No doctoral student wants to see the latest chapter of their thesis publicly dissected. Do bear this in mind as you read – and turn to the essay at the end of the book for further more leisurely reflections on the 'blogosphere'.

You will also find here a growing relationship with a wonderful group of commenters. The comments on many blogs are little short of abusive rants. Not so those on *A Don's Life*, which often reflect with wit, learning and experience on

the subject at issue, whether it be the bones of St Cuthbert, David Beckham's new tattoo or the real identity of that statue pulled from the Rhône. Some of my favourite comments are included here, as they appeared on the blog (occasionally shortened, but not edited in any other way).

I am tremendously grateful to all those commenters who gave permission for their comments to be reprinted. It is to those who have commented most often over the years that this book-of-the-blog is dedicated.

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You can find, and comment on, my blog at:
http://timesonline.typepad.com/dons_life

Pink or purple?

25 April 2006

Our undergraduates trooped back to college this weekend to be greeted by a big poster explaining how they could 'find their seat'. Not helpful advice from the housekeeping department. But timely information from the University examinations office to all those students who apparently don't know where their exams are held, and don't know where to sit even if they do.

Easter term in Cambridge is all about exams. Intellectual ambitions get traded in for an anxious diet of revision, morale boosting and what used (before it was banned) to be called 'hand-holding'. We give parties to take their young minds off it, supervisions to put them back on again. And more advice is asked for and given than even the biggest swot could take in.

In the old days we could escape a bit, by locking ourselves in our rooms and putting 'OUT' on the door. But now emails get you any time of day or night – sillier as the term wears on. 'Dear Professor Beard, Hope you don't mind me asking but is it OK to write in pink fibre tip, or would purple be better …?' as one emailed me last year. (Answer: Try black/What do you think?/No, I don't think you'll fail …).

And when the day of reckoning arrives, we're all so keen for our charges to succeed that we turn ourselves into an unpaid taxi service. Any morning in the second half of May, you'll find the same touching scene repeated all over Cambridge: a tutor driving to the exam room at top speed, transporting some burly young lad with a handsome golden hello from

McKinsey's already in the bag – all because his alarm clock didn't go off, or he was hung over, or he'd forgotten where his seat was. (In every other university in the country, I should say – except probably Oxford – getting yourself to the paper on time is thought to be part of the test.)

So is it all worth it? Some of us, given half a chance, would simply scrap the lot. 'Continuous assessment' would look more humane and it may well be fairer to women (who, across the board, don't do as well as men on the current system). And it certainly wouldn't take such a ridiculous amount of time and energy all round – which is in danger of seeming out of proportion when some 70% of these kids will now get a 2.1 in their final exams anyway.

For better or worse, grade inflation or superior student effort, gone are the days of the 'gentleman's third'; thirds are now the human tragedies. And I've even heard it, half-seriously, suggested that we should just give them all a 2.1 as a matter of course, and that exams should only be for those who wanted to 'bid for a first'. That would certainly cut down the labour.

But I can't help thinking that there's life in the old system yet. For a start, no problem with plagiarism. Unlike with 'assessed essays', done in their own time, you don't have to type every suspiciously clever phrase into Google to find out where it might have come from.

Anonymity, too, is a good protection all round. We don't actually know who wrote the scripts we are marking (and, as they now word-process all their term work, we don't even recognise their handwriting like we used to). While they don't have much clue who on our side is marking them – certainly not enough of a clue to be able to take the American option of sending their parents or lawyers into your office, or in the worst case appearing with a gun to demand higher grades.

And having lived through GSCE and A level course work at home, I can't imagine I'm the only one to think that 'continuous assessment' might be a lot more painful than this old-fashioned form of 'sudden death'. Just stress all the year round.

So here we go … only eight weeks and it's all over.

Sex in the sculpture garden

25 May 2006

The traces were undeniable. We were peering at one of the most famous Roman portrait sculptures in the world, discussing with art-historical intensity the provenance, the marble and the tooling. Then someone had the nerve to point out that on its cheek and its chin were the faint but clear marks of two bright red lipstick kisses.

The sculpture in question was the colossal head – known as the 'Mondragone Head' – of Antinous the young lover of the emperor Hadrian, who died mysteriously, Robert-Maxwell-style, in AD 130 after falling into the river Nile. So distraught was the bereaved emperor that he flooded the Roman world with statues of his beloved, made him a god and named a city after him. There are more surviving statues of Antinous than of almost any other character in antiquity (many from Hadrian's own villa at Tivoli). They all share the same sultry sensuousness and the luscious pouting lips that characterise the 'Mondragone'.

His usual home is in the Louvre, where he ended up in 1808, courtesy of Napoleon. But we were in Leeds, where he has come to be star of an exquisite show at the Henry Moore Institute which opened today. This has drawn together 14 of the many Antinous images, a little gallery of beautiful boys who have travelled from Dresden, Athens, Rome, Cambridge and elsewhere. One of the show's themes – appropriately enough – is the question of what makes a statue, or a body, desirable. What is it to 'want' a work of art?

The erotic charm of sculpture has a long literary history. Back in the second century AD, the Greek satirist Lucian told the story of one young obsessive who contrived to get locked up at night with Praxiteles' famous statue of Aphrodite at Cnidus. The young man went mad; but the indelible stain on the statue's thigh was proof enough of what had gone on. Oscar Wilde picked up the theme in his 'Charmides' – an engaging piece of doggerel, in which the hero smuggles himself into the Parthenon and 'paddles' up to Athena's statue.

Until today I had never quite imagined that this was anything other than a literary conceit. But the evidence was before my eyes.

The assault on the 'Mondragone' certainly did not happen in Leeds. The curators there were as gobsmacked as anyone to discover the tell-tale marks. But at some point between Paris and its unpacking at the Henry Moore, some latter-day Hadrian – man or woman – had given it a couple of real red smackers. In jest, in irony or in passion, we shall probably never know.

It couldn't have happened to a more appropriate work of art than this surrogate of imperial desire. Presumably it's much what the emperor Hadrian himself had in mind.

Big Brother at uni

6 June 2006

Living in a student ghetto in a student city can make you feel horribly middle-aged. It's not so much their extravagant – or extravagantly revealing – clothing, that you could no longer get away with yourself. Actually I rather like the annual summer display of belly buttons down King's Parade. And it's not their youthful argot either. Even I find myself saying 'uni', when I mean 'university'.

What is most dispiriting for us old liberals is more ideological. It's the way the students have come to take for granted all the things we fought against and lost. They can't imagine what life would be like with a nationalised railway or free eye-tests; and they can't think what a second post would actually be for.

But even more alarming is that most of them have entirely bought into the idea of a surveillance culture. Show them a gloomy bike shed, a leafy path or a picturesque bend in the river, and there is nothing that your average Cambridge undergraduate would like to do more than install a CCTV camera in it.

They say it makes them feel safer. And I suppose that you can't entirely blame them for not bucking the general trend. Ever since that macabre CCTV image of a pair of kids walking off with a toddler set the police on to the killers of Jamie Bulger, CCTV has had a peculiarly unchallengeable status among the British public as a crime detection or even prevention device.

Whether it is really effective or not is quite another matter. When my own faculty was broken into for the usual haul of laptops and data-projectors a few months ago, the police didn't even bother to look at what might have been recorded by the camera trained directly at the front door. 'Wouldn't be a good enough image, luv.'

All the same, the majority of the population is, I suspect, rather proud that we have more CCTV cameras per head than any other country in the world – even though a glance at most foreign newspapers suggests that, from the outside, it looks like a very odd enthusiasm for a liberal democracy.

And it's on those civil liberties grounds that I have always found the students' embracing of CCTV such a puzzle. I wouldn't mind it if they said, 'Look, we know what the libertarian arguments are, but on balance we think that it's worth the risk.' But in fact these highly intelligent young people (and half of them Amnesty members) just look blank when some old grey beard like me warns darkly about the dangers of surveillance. If anything, they'll mutter the stupid mantra that you have nothing to fear if you've done no wrong. How could this be?

I was beginning to blame the usual suspects – viz. they must have been taught this at school – when confirmation of these suspicions arrived by an unexpected domestic route. My son appeared at home, just before some big exams, having lost his backpack with all his notes. He seemed remarkably insouciant. (I wasn't.) But sure enough the next day he came home, the backpack found.

What he had done was go to the school CCTV controller clutching his school timetable – and so he could be tracked through the day. There he was entering the French lesson with

the backpack, and here he was coming out of it without. Hey presto, it was found in the French room.

This, I realised, must be a wizard procedure repeated over and over again in schools throughout the country, as disorganised adolescents get re-united with belongings thanks to the CCTV cameras. If Big Brother has always helped you find your lost property, no wonder you have a softer spot for him than I do.

Tampons for Africa

13 June 2006

I do have a soft spot for *Woman's Hour*. I like the way it squeezes in wonderfully subversive feminist reports next to those drearily wholesome recipes for tuna pasta bake. And I have a particularly soft spot for it at the moment because one of the current producers is the inestimable Victoria Brignell. Victoria did Classics at Cambridge a few years ago, was clever and sparky, moved on to the BBC – and happens to be quadriplegic.

But, uncharacteristically, on Monday they missed a trick with a pious little item on sanitary protection in Kenya.

It was indeed tear-jerking stuff. There were interviews with young girls who missed school, even dropped out of education entirely, because they didn't have pads. They couldn't bear, they said, to go to school with blood on their clothes. So there's a campaign – backed by NGOs and Kenyan women MPs – to get sanpro (as the trade calls it) given out free in schools, and to get the world's women to donate their surplus.

To start with, it all sounded pretty compelling. But soon it was clear that a lot of questions were going to remain unanswered. What, for example, did the women of Kenya do before the prospect of Western sanpro was trailed before them? There were a few dark references to dung and lack of hygiene. And my mind raced to the idea of menstrual exclusion and the wonderful prospect of women all menstruating in the menstrual hut together, doing their school work and having a great time – until some well-meaning anthropologist came

and told them they shouldn't buy into these ideas of pollution. Who knows?

In this case it was hard to resist the conclusion that they might once have had some reasonably effective local method of dealing with the bleeding. But now these poor girls were sitting there worrying about making a mess on their skirts – and waiting for a supply of commercial pads that would never quite meet the demand.

More to the point – who is actually making this sanpro for Kenya? Was the campaign looking to build local, and locally owned, pad factories? Or to develop hygienic, reusable and eco-friendly methods? No, the idea seemed to be that we should airlift in the products of the great multinational companies, who already make a mint out of menstruating first-world women.

A quick trawl of the web shows that the business world has already spotted the African continent as a burgeoning market for top price sanpro. It recognises that there is a certain difficulty in 'enlarging the consumer base' and that 'lower income groups are less likely to purchase sanitary protection' (a market research triumph, for sure). But then, if you can get us to buy it and donate, you've made the profit anyway.

The case of Zimbabwe is horribly instructive, There is a pad crisis there, too. Why? Because Johnson & Johnson moved out of the country in 1999 when the economic going got rough and they have been forced to import from South Africa.

I thought that we had learned from the 'baby formula for Africa' débâcle. But, even if on a smaller scale, this looks like much the same story.

Comments

Mary, your 'menstrual hut' fantasy might have been fine 100 years ago but we're talking about modern girls going to contemporary secondary schools trying to get a professional education. The idea that these aspirations have been foisted upon Kenyan girls by 'anthropologists' is insulting. We're not talking about girls sitting round in villages grinding mealies while their menfolk hunt lions. These are girls who have to take the crowded public mini-bus to school, who wear uniform as they walk down city streets just like the girls you see in Cambridge … Oh, and I wouldn't describe myself as a subversive feminist. I'm an African man.

BOMAN'GOMBE