

The Teaching, Assessment and Examining of English Language and Literature from the Education Act of 1944 to the Education Reform Act of 1988

A contribution to the debate on standards

D. Bryn Williams MA, M.Phil

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Mess. My Lord High Constable, the English lie within fifteen hundred
paces of your tents.
Const. Who measured the ground?

Henry V III.vii.124-6

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ABSTRACT

In the Preface, the focus is on the word 'standards' itself: the ineradicable human element in marking and the degree to which all marks and grades, particularly in the subject of English, are dependent upon a subjective evaluation of the quality of response – an essential component in the establishment and maintenance of standards. The various implications of the word 'standards' and the ease with which resultant ambiguities can lead the unwary commentator into wholly misleading statements are considered, and a definition is offered to serve as a touchstone for the thesis as a whole.

The main body of the thesis is divided into two sections and a conclusion.

Section One (containing Chapters 1–3) is largely based upon published writings about education: books, reports and papers issued by Government-appointed Committees and Councils, and officially ratified educational statistics; illustrated where appropriate by my own experience and research into the unpublished archives of Examination Boards. Section Two (containing Chapters 4–6) deals specifically with the development of GCE 'O' and 'A' level examinations in English, and is very largely dependent upon my interpretation of evidence derived from examination papers, marking schemes, examiners' reports and candidates' scripts.

Chapter One, Part I examines the part played by the teacher in the classroom, touching on the disparity between the general regard for education in the abstract and for teachers as individuals, and the way in which teachers of English have a tendency to stand out in educational reminiscences not generally favourable to the profession. The nature of English as a subject is examined, together with the problems of defining the purpose of education and the responsibilities of the state in providing it. Some attention is given to the shortcomings both of the Victorian equivalent of the National Curriculum and of the training of teachers, and to early emphases on rote-learning and moral values. The importance of the Newbolt Committee in its attempt to systematise and to gain recognition for the force and scope of English as a classroom subject is given some emphasis, which leads to the campaign to elevate the status of English at

university level, the influence of Leavis, and the changing nature of the common stock of literary references and of the values of society, culminating in the social and intellectual impact of two world wars and the reforming zeal of the Norwood Committee.

Chapter One Part II begins with an examination, and to some extent a re-interpretation, of the optimism of the Norwood Report and the more pragmatic provisions of the 1944 Act. Attention is paid to educational theorists of the 1950s (e.g. Blamires and Highet) who advanced the principles of pupil understanding and participation, the opportunity for enrichment rather than cramming, and an awareness of pupils as individuals with varied needs and aspirations; and of the 1960s (e.g. Holbrook) with their emphasis on teaching as a creative process – a training for life rather than for earning a living. The impact of the Newsom Report is examined, acknowledging the advances of nearly twenty years after the 1944 Act, and endorsing the improvements in social competence and personal development, but still demanding more attention to basic literacy and noting the growing and worrying shortage of skilled English teachers. Attention is paid to the work of Inglis at the end of the 1960s on teacher reaction to the demands made upon them and the contrast between these and their own instincts with regard to the importance of oral lessons, discussion and pupil involvement. The problems created by the 11+ examination are considered, together with the growth of demand for the CSE examination and the increasing sense of a division between teaching for examinations and good teaching. Attention is then focussed on the growth of the comprehensive system and with it the inevitability of an eventual merger of the CSE and GCE examinations, the delay in which resulted in GCE rather than CSE style dominance and the decline of recent promising innovations such as teacher control, coursework, and the oral component. The development of problems of factionalism within the ranks of English teachers leading to questions on the validity of literature teaching are touched upon (the Dartmouth seminar) as are growing difficulties of financing education and its effect on teacher morale, and the impact of the Bullock Report (language across the curriculum and the emphasis on the need for a common spirit of exploration). The failure of the government to implement key

recommendations from the Bullock Committee is referred to, and the chapter ends with the Kingman Report and the introduction of the National Curriculum. The conclusion of this study of the way in which a variety of writers saw the task of English teachers over the period in question is that there is no evidence of a decline in standards; though there is an unquestionable failure to raise them to the level envisaged in 1944.

Chapter Two examines the long standing argument about the validity of examinations, and the view that, particularly in English, they are unreliable as evidence of the benefits which pupils have derived from their teaching, and that they actually distort the very qualities which they set out to examine. Attention is paid to the recommendations to the Newbolt Committee that Literature should not be an examined subject, and the endorsement of this view in the Norwood Report; and also to the suggestion of A N Whitehead that all schools should conduct their own assessments, again endorsed by Norwood to the extent that it recommended a transfer of examination boards from University to teacher control. The early impact of the introduction of the subject-based GCE examination on schools and employers is considered together with the evidence that teachers were not competent, and in any case did not wish, to take on the burden of devising an examination system; and weighed against the view that a nationally recognised qualification was essential – and attention is paid to the growing view of educational writers that the way to reform was to improve the quality of examinations rather than to dispense with them. This improvement was seen essentially as ensuring that examinations changed to reflect developments in teaching methodology and approach, so that candidates in language papers could expect to have the imagination and liveliness of their writing recognised as well as the accuracy of their grammar and spelling; and candidates in literature could expect to be questioned on their feelings and reactions as well as their knowledge of background facts and their ability to understand linguistic difficulties. The initial resistance of the examination boards to change, and their insistence that their papers already represented what teachers wanted is also examined; and as an aspect of this topic the history of the sixth form Use of English paper is examined in some detail, since confidential and hitherto unpublished material on this subject was discovered in the course of research for this thesis.

This topic is also material to the growing insistence on reducing the university influence on GCE and making examination papers more accessible to those who were not going on to an academic life. Recommendations to this end (notably by Michael Paffard) included the introduction of unseen criticism as a test of reader perceptiveness, the addition of a coursework component to the examination, a less hidebound selection of set texts, and a test of the candidate's general reading; together with a growing insistence that the key to appropriate English teaching is that teacher and taught should share an enjoyment in the proceedings. Attention is paid to the progress made along these lines together with some thoughts about the conflict between the deep personal emotions which literature can evoke when taught in this way, and the clinical approach of examination preparation; and the fact that, even at a time when examinations are becoming more enlightened, examiners' reports and Board publications describing syllabuses are often couched in traditional jargon. Nevertheless evidence is available that the majority, at least of 'A' level students of English, claim to derive personal benefit from the course and this is yet further evidence to reinforce the general findings of the chapter that the relationship between teaching and examining cannot furnish evidence of declining standards.

Chapter Three is largely concerned with Examination Board and independent studies studies in comparability, with the recently published SCAA/OFSTED *Standards in Public Examinations 1975 to 1995*, commonly referred to as "Standards over time", and the accompanying books of statistical analysis, and with *Statistics of Education*, for many years issued annually by HMSO. Beginning from a 1996 newspaper article which suggests that standards in public examinations are being lowered by boards in competition for schools to register with them in the hope of improving their league table position, the chapter looks at available research into the relative standards of the various boards, notably by Forrest and Shoesmith but also by Nuttall, Backhouse and Willmot; and in the SCAA/OFSTED survey. Attention is also paid to recent publications from the Research and Evaluation Division of the University of Cambridge Examinations Syndicate, and to the two reports on "Quality and Standards at GCE Advanced Level" issued by OFSTED in 1993 and 1996. It is noted that no significant or

consistent discrepancies between Boards which cannot be accounted for by differences in clientèle have been discovered, nor, with the probable exception of Mathematics at 'A' level, has any decline in standards over time been established. The contribution made by this chapter to the thesis as a whole is therefore to authorise my reliance almost exclusively upon the evidence of two boards in Section Two, and to provide the supporting evidence of government sponsored statistics for my contention that there is no evidence for a decline in standards over the period from 1944 to 1988, and that such evidence as there is points in the opposite direction.

In Section Two, Chapter 4 deals with developments in the examination of 'O' level English Language. After a preliminary caution on the necessity of distinguishing between 'good' English in the sense of technically correct usage, and 'good' English in the sense of lively, fluent and persuasive writing – and the impossibility of teaching either by 'drill' methods – the chapter looks first at a School Certificate paper from 1930 which the author set as a mock examination to an 'O' level class fifty years later, then moves on to the last Oxford School Certificate paper of 1950 and the first 'O' level paper of the following year as evidence that the difference between them is virtually imperceptible. The slow process of change in rubric and in style of question is then observed through paper after paper; and also by reference to the proceedings of the Standing Joint Committee which monitored the responses of client schools to the papers as they appeared, and recorded the reaction of the Delegacy to the criticisms made. Attention is also given to the sequence of Examiners' Reports issuing from both Oxford and Cambridge which comment illuminatingly on the more frequently experienced shortcomings of candidates, and, in the case of Cambridge, also provide illustrative excerpts from scripts. Evidence is adduced that some teachers regarded the teaching of English language as formulaic preparation for predictable tests rather than as having any relevance to training pupils in the effective use of their own language, and that many candidates failed to see the examination papers as having anything whatever to do with the everyday need for communication. Increasingly adverse reaction to traditional papers is recorded in the SSEC Report of 1964 and the NATE Survey of 1966, and the

reasons for this are examined; together with the reaction of the Examination Boards, the modifications to the papers which followed, and the implicit evidence of an improved relationship between the Board and the Centres which entered candidates.

Attention is also paid to statistics specifically related to performance in this examination; to the evidence in later examiners' Reports of positive improvements in teaching, or, at least, in the preparation of candidates for the revised style of examination; and to the fact that Reports in the 1980s emphasise that examiners have found no evidence of any deterioration in standards. The evidence from thirty-seven years of this examination is that in terms of fluency and competence in handling the language, English examiners maintained their standards of expectancy; that English teaching got progressively better, even if patchily and inconsistently; and that over the period there was a more than fourfold increase in the annual number of successful candidates.

Chapter Five follows a very similar pattern in studying the development of the 'O' level examination in English Literature. It begins with the contention that, if there has been a decline in the standards expected of candidates for a pass in English Literature despite the threefold increase in the number of candidates obtaining qualifications in the subject, then it must surely follow that one at least of the following propositions is true: that the examinations have become shorter or require less breadth of reading; that the texts set for study have become less demanding; that the questions asked upon those books are less searching; or that the examiners are awarding pass-marks to answers of a lower calibre than was previously the case: and goes on to demonstrate that a study of the examination papers themselves discounts the first three possibilities, and that the examiners' reports and the illustrations provided by exemplar scripts equally effectively discount the last. The survey begins, as with language, with the last School Certificate Examination and then follows the structure of the 'O' level replacement in considerable detail, reinforced, as before, with evidence from Examiners' Reports. As with the Language examination, the impact of the NATE Survey of 1968 was substantial, and the practical effects of this in terms of modifications to the papers are studied in some detail. These include the long running debate between the Oxford Board and its

clients about the move to make an extended critical reaction to a lengthy extract from a set text an alternative to an essay about it; and the implications which this carries for the degree to which it is the quality of the teaching which is being examined rather than, or, at least, as well as, the ability of the candidate. Some attention is also given to marking schemes and their effect upon the examiners' reaction to the weaker candidates, which is not always proportionate to their number or to the nature of their shortcomings. The conclusion from this chapter is, yet again, that there is no evidence of any decline in standards in the examination or in the overall performance of candidates – though it may be not implausible to argue that some decline in the standards of literature teaching has become perceptible.

Chapter Six completes Section Two with another similar survey of the 'A' level English Literature examination from 1951 onwards. Again from the starting point of the 1950 paper, the last appearance of the Higher Certificate, there follows a detailed analysis of the variations to rubric, choice of text and nature of question which occurred in the history of 'A' level papers: and which establish quite unmistakably that there was no decline in standards under those headings. There follows a detailed investigation into the actual questions set on certain specific texts as these recurred over the period which demonstrates equally clearly that there was no watering down of requirement in this field either. Indeed, though no specific pattern can be established, it is suggested that there is a tendency for the demands made upon the candidate's capacity for personal response to increase. The chapter then moves on to consider marking schemes and Examiners' Reports as evidence of the attitudes of the writers and the nature of the standards they deem themselves to be setting and maintaining. This section also provides some insight into disputes, between examiners and the Boards which employed them, as to the proper approach to the setting and marking of questions, taken from the evidence of correspondence which survives in the archives. It was unrest of this kind rather than from the schools or organisations such as NATE which, for instance, seems to have been responsible for finally removing from the 'context question' section of the examination the requirement to paraphrase passages of Shakespeare and Milton; whereas the introduction of papers dealing with 'unseen' critical appreciation may very

probably be ascribed to external sources. The level of standards achieved over the period as evidenced by excerpts from actual scripts is also considered. In this chapter attention is also given to the critical writings of educationists, notably in the Schools Council publication *Responses to Literature – What is being Assessed?* which was influential in ensuring that the contribution that coursework could make towards establishing a higher level of genuine response and providing a useful outlet for the creative impulse was properly evaluated. Reference is made to the move which followed, towards ever larger proportions of coursework in 'A' level syllabuses, and which would have represented a major and significant break with the traditions of the past had it been allowed to continue: the decision to impose a totally arbitrary restriction on the amount permitted being not merely an instance of putting the clock back but also a clear illustration of the new practice of direct political interference in the educational process. Yet again the survey reaches the conclusion that there is no evidence of a decline in standards and some circumstantial evidence of an improvement. Since, however, the 'A' level examination continued in unbroken sequence through the 1988 Act and up to the present, the opportunity is taken to continue the study into the 1990s. Two pieces of research from the Cambridge Syndicate's Research and Evaluation Division are touched upon, more because they illustrate the care and concern of a particular Board over the minutiae of comparabilities, and reinforce the degree of reliance which we are entitled to place in published results, than because they tell us anything more about standards; and the chapter ends with some extracts from examination scripts from recent years which, when contrasted with earlier material of the same kind, reinforces the suggestion that today's candidates cannot obtain 'A' level passes on a lower level of output than obtained at any earlier period.

Each of the three chapters in Section Two is provided with an Appendix giving details of the number of candidates and the number of passes from both Oxford and Cambridge Boards in the relevant examination in illustration of the observations of the various Examiners' Reports quoted in the chapter.

The Conclusion is an attempt to provide an answer to the obvious question as to why, if evidence of a widely-alleged decline in standards is as difficult to establish as the previous six chapters suggest, the charge is so widely accepted as proved. To do this it is necessary to see the matter of standards from a broader perspective than a factual focus on examination papers, candidates' scripts, examiners' reports, comparability studies and educational statistics. From the inception of the concept of a state education system there has inevitably been a political dimension to any discussion of standards, and political dimensions equally inevitably tend toward expediency and subjective reaction rather than objective assessment of perceived shortcomings. This is certainly true of the last two decades during which the political dimension has become more overt than ever before, and the gulf between political interpretation of educational achievements and that of the professionals involved has never been wider. It is the contention of the Conclusion that a key to this disparity lies in the history of the development of the National Curriculum, the nature of the political interventions therein, and the indications that these are based upon a consistent philosophy – which elevates knowledge above understanding, 'pencil-and-paper' testing above carefully weighted assessments, results above performance, and which supposes that the reintroduction of selective schools would be an automatic panacea.

The Conclusion therefore looks forward beyond the stated 1988 terminal point of the study to examine the developments of the 1990s, and backward beyond the stated starting point of the 1944 Act to examine the reality of grammar school achievement. It is the final contention of this thesis that it is the fallacy and self-deception of the nostalgia for the grammar school tradition which underlies and accounts for the falsity of the claims about declining standards.

PREFACE

"A grade is an inadequate report of an inaccurate judgement by a biased and variable judge of the extent to which a student has attained an undefined level of mastery of an unknown proportion of an indefinite material."

Theodore Dressel

This thesis was written less as the proof of a predetermined hypothesis than as the record of an investigation into a matter which had come increasingly to concern me. If, therefore, parts of it read as though the writer were sifting evidence in search of a solution rather than compiling a dossier to support a case, this is almost certainly an accurate reflection of my thought processes in the earlier stages of my research.

I began with doubts as to the validity of the frequent allegations that standards in education had declined and were continuing to do so, and considerable uncertainty as to the grounds upon which they were so confidently advanced. Thirty-five years as a teacher of English, the last fifteen as a headmaster, had left me with the contrary impression; and some years experience of the business of 'A' level examining, latterly as Chairman of Examiners in English for a major examination board, had encouraged me to believe that standards were, in fact, being rigorously maintained. Nevertheless, years of experience of dealing with pupils who did not seem in any meaningful sense to be worse educated than those of their parents whom I met or who wrote to me, together with experience of the detailed proceedings of a single examination board, hardly constituted the kind of evidence necessary to refute the allegations of decline that press and politicians seemed to take for granted.

I therefore resolved to make a positive search for such evidence, and it soon became apparent to me that it existed in some abundance. Thereafter, references to declining standards, particularly with regard to the teaching of English, ceased to arouse in me doubts as to their validity – rather, a conviction as to their misrepresentation of the actual circumstances of education over the last half-century: and this thesis is an account of the journey from those doubts to that conviction.

Since, as I have said, my researches satisfied me that the evidence adduced pointed firmly to an improvement rather than a decline in standards, what began as an open-ended contribution to 'the standards debate' became a statement of conviction that no such decline could be substantiated. But while this might legitimately be seen as an

appropriate conclusion in itself, it still left the vexed question as to why those allegations which I found objectively unwarrantable should have been levelled with such vehemence in the first place – and the conclusion to this thesis therefore seeks to provide a convincing explanation for this gulf between the actual achievements of the education service and the political and public perceptions of them. To do this it has been necessary to move nearer to the present day than my stated terminal point of the Education Reform Act of 1988, just as it was necessary to move considerably further back in time in order to place my official starting point of the 1944 Act in an appropriate context. For more than a century the provisions of the state education system have been a matter of political significance, and the on-going debate about standards cannot be understood simply through the objective analysis which, *inter alia*, I have sought to provide on the quality of examination papers, candidates' responses, examiners' reports and pass-rates. The 1944 and 1988 Acts represent two major upheavals in the area of political concern, but they are both part of a continuous process of the politicization of education – and events over the ten years since the 1988 Act make it easier to see the pattern within which political influence over both curriculum and assessment have become more overt than they have ever been. Yet the business of teaching and examining goes on much as it has done for decades – and to establish a valid assessment of the standards achieved requires a careful balance between the perspectives of professional educationalists and politicians.

This investigation must therefore begin with an attempt to establish for the much used and abused word 'standards' an effective definition which can be kept as a touchstone throughout the argument; and then go on to give detailed scrutiny to what such standards actually meant in practice throughout the specified period, considered from the varying standpoints of the classroom teacher, the public examiner, the compiler of official statistics, and the by no means infrequent official committee of inquiry.

I propose, therefore, to take as my starting point an area in which I have some personal experience in the setting and maintaining of such standards: an area which has enormous influence upon the destinations and future careers of eighteen year-old school leavers, but which lies, nevertheless, at the discretion of subjective human judgement.

Sometime toward the end of July each year, in the headquarters of each of the Examining Boards, there takes place for each separate A level subject offered by that board, a meeting of a group or committee charged with a significant responsibility.

The names of these committees may vary: one calls itself the Grading Committee; another is known officially and rather grandly as 'The Award'; yet another, with dated topicality, refers to itself as The Boundaries Commission. The functions of these committees are, however, identical. They exist to determine where lines shall be drawn between one grade and the next in the results to be announced to anxious candidates in the middle of August: whether a mark of 69% on a particular paper merits a Grade A, or whether, among this year's scripts it is merely the best of the Bs. The procedure is patient and meticulous – and having chaired such a committee for the last five years, I can say without hesitation that the experience has removed any last doubt that I used to have as an A-Level teacher about the probity and reliability of the system. Yet for the vast majority of students and teachers it remains a procedure impenetrable in its mystery; arid, inhuman, unaccountable and probably arbitrary.

It is, I believe, worth examining the nature of this procedure in some detail, since it has a direct bearing not only on my decision to embark upon this particular research project, but also upon the particular approach and emphasis which I have decided to adopt towards it.

Before the committee can begin its work, every script will have been carefully marked – in many cases twice. The senior examiner responsible for setting the paper and for issuing advisory notes on marking techniques to each of the examiners, will have collected in samples of marked scripts from all of them, and satisfied himself of the internal consistency of each individual concerned. Where this is established, it is necessary next to look at group consistency, so that a generous examiner can be noted, and 1 or perhaps 2 marks be deducted accordingly from each of the scripts he or she has assessed; while a similar addition can be made to each script which has been through the hands of an examiner established to be severe in his or her assessments. Where internal consistency is seen to be lacking, each script marked by the examiner concerned will

be re-marked, either by the chief examiner or by another examiner of established reliability. Finally, when compatibility has been established, each script will be subject to an arithmetical check, to ensure that the total for the paper written boldly on the front actually does correspond to the sum of the sub-totals from each of the component questions, and that any modification necessitated by the assessment of the examiner has been properly incorporated into the final total.

Once this point is reached the corrected results are fed into a computer, which produces printouts to show the distribution of marks among all the candidates for each separate paper. The stage is now set for the committee to begin its activities.

The vast majority of its members will be experienced examiners, and the remainder will be accustomed to teaching English at sixth form or university level. They will be assisted by the Subject Officer of the Board concerned, who is there to ensure that the regulations laid down by the Board are scrupulously adhered to, and by a temporary employee of the Board who has been trained in the art of finding, distributing, collecting and re-filing specimen scripts. The procedures of the committee are also liable to scrutiny, and at some time during the period of deliberation it is highly probable that they will be joined by an official observer – originally from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Schools, later from OFSTED, and most recently from SCAA – who will produce a report on the validity of the activities observed.

In general terms, the task of the committee is to determine the A/B, B/C and E/N boundaries for every separate paper or component within the range of available options for the subject involved. When this has been done the Chairman will fill in the results on a form provided for that purpose and sign it; at which point the resultant marks will again be fed into the computer so that the remaining grade boundaries can be arithmetically established and so that any anomalies can be detected. It is, for example, clearly not acceptable that candidates prepared for one particular group of papers within an option system should have a lower hurdle to surmount than those prepared for another. It is also not acceptable, though not so immediately obvious, for the grades recommended for one year to differ significantly in distribution from those awarded in the previous year; or for one Board to seem to grade more leniently or generously than another. If the

computer alerts the Secretary of the Board to the possibility that any of these results might occur if the committee's recommendations as to grade boundaries are accepted, explanations will be requested; and if necessary the Chairman will be asked to reconsider. Not until the Secretary, too, has signed the form, is the work of the committee complete, and its members free to return to their more normal avocations. There remains to be described the technique by which the committee arrives at the three grade boundaries which it set out to establish. The process begins with the senior examiner responsible for setting and supervising the marking of the paper concerned giving a brief report on the scripts submitted, with a particular emphasis on any general or frequent strengths and weaknesses in the answers, and on the distribution of answers between available options. If, for example, almost all the candidates answered question 4a rather than 4b, it is a clear defect in the paper, the rubric for which promised a choice: if, on the other hand, almost no candidates have answered on one particular set book from the range available, the fault may lie not in the examiner but in the author, the teachers or even the English stock cupboards of the schools in question. At all events, the committee should be aware of any such anomalies before embarking on the detailed scrutiny which is to follow. Finally, the senior examiner will suggest the marks at which he feels that the key grade boundaries should be drawn. Let us suppose, for the purposes of illustration, that the paper in front of the committee requires candidates to answer four questions, two of which are marked out of 20 and two out of 30. The senior examiner has informed the committee that in his opinion, the A/B boundary should be drawn at 71, that is to say that 71 should be the lowest mark at which the paper is deemed to be worth an A, and 70 the highest mark of the range to be awarded grade B. The chairman will then ask for a distribution of scripts marked at 73, two marks above the suggested boundary, and each member of the committee will be provided with such a script, the Subject Officer ensuring that no scripts which have been re-marked or adjusted to compensate for severe or lenient initial marking are used if it is possible to avoid them. Sometimes, with less popular options, there are so few scripts at particular marks that it is impossible to avoid "dodgy" examples. Sometimes, indeed, there may be so few at a particular mark that it is impossible to

find one each for every member of the committee, in which case the chairman will establish a roster of engagement, and those excused will busy themselves in making a round of coffees or in some personally useful task. Assuming that our hypothetical case creates no difficulties of this sort, and that all members of an eight-to-ten strong committee can be provided with 73s, the next stage will be carried out in almost total silence, broken only occasionally by a snort of laughter or a grunt of appreciation as a member of the committee encounters a howler or a particularly felicitous comment. Even more occasionally, the rest of the group will be invited to share a particular gem – "In this poem Hardy's usual self-pity descends to the level of being jealous of a thrush" – "In the opening lines of *Anthem for Doomed Youth* Owen uses asterisk: marginal note, 'I have forgotten the word but I mean the noisy one'" – "Ever considered the evidence for Shakespeare as a Mason? This candidate says 'Hamlet enters Ophelia's closet with his shirt undone and one trouser-leg rolled up'" – which proves that examiners are human. It also proves that they are actually reading the scripts in front of them with real attention, not merely skimming the surface in search of a general impression. Such observations are, however, few and far between: the prevailing sound level is very low. Eventually, after ten minutes or so, scripts will begin to be laid down. The Chairman glances round to see who is still reading intently, and waits until he is satisfied that no-one needs more time. Then he begins on the task of collecting and collating verdicts. At two marks above the conjectural boundary, all the scripts round the table should be safe As, and most will be reported as such. Perhaps two of the readers will have reservations: "This is an uneven performance – I'd be happier calling it an A/B" or perhaps "I don't think this is really an A candidate; there is one extraordinarily competent answer which deserves the 19 it's been given but the rest is solid B". The Chairman summarises: "Seven As, 1 A/B and 1 fluke. I think we can call 73 a safe A. Anyone disagree?" Almost certainly, nobody will on such a response, but if there is not unanimity on the matter the Chairman might ask for more 73s in order to establish that the mark has sixteen safe As out of a possible eighteen and that the two discrepant scripts really were exceptions. Alternatively, he might call for 74s, and accept that the mark of 73 must be regarded as within the borderline band.

At all events his task is to establish the lowest mark which is agreed as producing scripts of unquestionably A quality. Assuming agreement on 73 as safe in the hypothetical case under examination, he would then call for scripts marked at 72 and so on until the scripts under review are clearly marginal. Next he will call for 69s, two below the conjectural boundary, and the whole process would be repeated, this time in search of the *highest* mark which is unquestionably of B quality. Perhaps on this occasion three of the committee will report their scripts as A/B or B/A, and the Chairman will call for 68s, but eventually everyone will agree that a given mark can be called a safe B. All that remains is to calculate the gap between safe A and safe B. If the answer is an even number the boundary is drawn in the middle; if an odd number the boundary is drawn to favour the upper grade concerned, in this case A. So that, if the lowest safe A were 73 and the highest safe B 69, there would be three intervening marks and the boundary would be established at 71. If the highest safe B turned out to be 68 there would be four intervening marks and the boundary would again be established at 71, which, in the imaginary case I provided, is where the senior examiner suggested that it should be. In my personal experience, such suggestions are right on about seventy-five per cent of occasions, but they are never anything more than an indication of where to start: the agreement of the committee is paramount. Once the first grade boundary is agreed the committee moves on to the next, and once all three grades on a paper have been established, the committee moves on to the next paper, pausing only for lunch: coffee and tea can be absorbed while reading.

An alternative method of arriving at the boundaries is for the chief examiner to select scripts marked by a reliable examiner to which the marks 73, 72, 71, 70, and 69 have been given and have them photocopied.

A set is then given to all members of the committee and the chairman seeks from each his personal vote as to where the boundary should be drawn. This method has the advantage of every opinion being based upon the same scripts and the corresponding disadvantage that only a single example at each mark is studied at all. Where the balance of efficiency lies is a matter of opinion, but since the second method clearly requires the preparation in advance of the meeting of photocopies of at least five scripts

at each boundary of every component of the examination, the time-frame of the marking process may not permit this approach: even if it does the possibility of disagreement on a particular boundary will necessitate the availability of alternative scripts and an effective return to the first approach. Whichever method is adopted, it should be observed that the committee is not, at any time, concerned with determining the final grade which will be awarded to individual candidates and which will appear upon their A level certificates. There would, indeed, be sizeable odds against any one member of the committee encountering two separate papers from the same candidate in the course of his deliberations. Instead, grade boundaries are established for each separate component of the exam., and the consequent results for each candidate are now released to the examination centres, as well as the final grade which appears on the results slip. The decision as to the placing of the overall grade boundaries within the range of the total marks available for the examination as a whole, and therefore the final grade to be awarded to a particular candidate whose component grades have been determined as, for example, A, C and C will be made, not by an examiner or even a committee, but by a computer programmed to ensure that appropriate weightings are given to each component, since not all will necessarily have been marked against the same maximum; and also that the proposed boundaries for individual components are adjusted as may be required, so that every possible combination of components gets equal treatment. Once the computer has produced its results the business of the Award is over; though there remains the matter of the Grade Review, which brings back the human element in the form of a detailed scrutiny of the scripts of those candidates at final grade borderlines who may seem to have been treated harshly by the final assessment or whose results were markedly at variance with those forecast for them; and whose allocated marks may be adjusted in accordance with the final grade boundaries if such a decision can be justified. Such instances will, however, concern only a tiny minority of the total number of scripts submitted.

For the generality of candidates, the key element in the whole procedure is the judgement of an experienced examiner: "Mr Chairman, this is a B". There is no micrometer, no litmus paper, no recognised standard of assessment against which his

decision can be measured – only the voice of a man or woman who has marked A-Level scripts for years and knows what constitutes A grade standard by instinct. The Board will, of course, have defined this quality for the committee – one such definition reads:

"Precise attention to the terms of the question. An answer of unusual clarity and aptness with telling analysis of well-chosen textual detail. Sensitivity to nuances of tone, imagery, dramatic effect etc. is obvious. Critical terms handled confidently."

The same board, assuming that the introduction of the A* grade at GCSE would be followed by the same innovation at A-Level, prepared for it by providing the following qualities for recognition:

"As A with originality, independence of judgement; exceptional, surprising, enviable. Examiner will feel exhilarated."

Again, hardly a scientific formula, or susceptible to statistical verification. Nor, I suppose, quite what is expected by those accustomed to talk of 'standards of comparability in diagnostic assessment'. But, I would suggest, to those whose trade is to teach English Literature, a label which is instantly recognisable, meaningful and very applicable. In the end, it is the 'informed cohort', the genuine experts, the academic equivalent of wine-tasters or whisky-blenders, whose antennae can detect distinctions in qualities of reaction to the stimulus of English language and literature, if not infallibly, at least as reliably as any other technique that can be devised for a subject which would cease to exist if it were exposed to the multi-choice question and computer marking system; and this fact is recognised by the Government's own watchdog over educational standards, OFSTED:

"The professionalism of officers and examiners is a notable feature of the entire examination process, and all GCE Boards place very great reliance on examiners' experience and expertise to ensure the maintenance of standards"¹

Year-on-year comparability depends absolutely on this instinctive capacity for evaluation: indeed it is difficult to imagine any practicable alternative for discriminating between levels of performance other than to determine a fixed percentage for each grade in advance and on that basis to determine the point at which A and B should be separated on the total number of applicants alone, which would, of course, reverse the progress of many years away from norm and toward criterion referencing.

¹ *GCE Advanced Supplementary and Advanced Level Examinations-Quality and Standards HMSO 1993* p8

If A levels are, as the government from time to time insists, the "gold standard" of our educational system, then that standard is maintained by the "nose" of experienced examiners for different levels of attainment and ability which can then be roughly translated into the grades with which we have, of necessity, become accustomed. It was such a grade that Dressel, quoted at the chapter-head of this Preface, cynically defined as:

"an inadequate report of an inaccurate judgement by a biased and variable judge of the extent to which a student has attained an undefined level of mastery of an unknown proportion of indefinite material"¹

and at one level of definition it is hard to dissent from this analysis. But if we accept it, these pages will necessarily be a conclusion as well as a preface. And in the real rather than the ideal world, examination systems are unavoidable and the recording of standards of performance has become an inalienable part of those systems. Yet it is an unquestionable fact that we use the term "standards" with different meanings and for different purposes, and for this reason if for no other we need to keep a very careful check on the precise implications of the standards that we believe ourselves to be recording.

This point has, of course, been made on several previous occasions: by Caroline Gipps, for instance, in her article *The Debate over Standards and the Uses of Testing*² which reminds us that the term 'standards' is used for a variety of legitimate educational purposes, such as levels of attainment or of provision; for educational/sociological aspects of assessment such as behaviour, dress and "attitude"; and for purely political point-scoring.

"Standards are always an issue in education, never more so than in an election year.....The interesting thing, of course, is the way standards are nearly always thought to be falling."³

In other words, there is little solid ground upon which an objective definition of "standards" can be based; even less upon which one might, with any sense of security, set up a system to assess the degree to which standards according to that definition were or were not being met in any given context; and a positive morass when it comes to the purpose for which such an activity should be conducted. To quote from Caroline Gipps' conclusion:

¹ *Grades: One more Tilt at the Windmill* in A W Cickering (ed.) AAHE Bulletin 35/8, 1993, pp10-13

² British Journal of Educational Studies Vol XXXVI No.1 Feb 1988

³ Op.cit. p 34

"What I hope to have made clear in this paper is that to use testing to set, raise, or measure standards is not as straightforward as some would have us believe" ¹

The difficulty was, and remains, that making the point clear is a far cry from persuading politicians to accept it, or even giving it reasonable consideration; an aspect of the contemporary educational scene made very apparent by the deeply dispiriting account of the making of the National Curriculum² by Duncan Graham, former Chairman and Chief Executive of the National Curriculum Council. In his Preface, Graham observes "The book strives to be objective, though doubtless there will be other views, other conclusions. From any perspective, there are lessons for us all", and it may well be that this is a very useful reminder: that the learning of useful lessons is of more importance than arriving at conclusions which must inevitably be disputed; that the purpose of educational research is to illustrate the proverbial truth that it is better to travel hopefully than to arrive; and that, in this specific context, objectivity is itself an illusion. What is not in question is that this particular book is of no great help in defining what is meant by, or even what Duncan Graham means by, "standards", though he uses the word quite frequently – at one point three times in four lines.

"...the report even avoided attack from the right as it quite demonstrably contained standards and rigour. At each stage the group set the standard consciously above existing practice on the basis that if you were going to go anywhere you should go up, a view, incidentally not shared by the science working group. The maths report set high standards...."³

In the first instance, the coupling of the word with 'rigour' is typical of Graham's usage of it: "standards" is an abstract but nevertheless a moral absolute without which no educational programme can be complete, as when he says:

"The new teaching methods also became a very convenient excuse for dropping standards in marking and correction. The teaching of English moved far away from traditional values and standards"⁴

and a little later,

"My own view was that a national curriculum English course needed more teeth than the one being offered by the working group. Rigour and improved standards would only come if the clock was turned back a little bit"⁵

In the second instance, standard has the specific meaning of 'target' – a level of achievement to be aimed at by teachers who had previously endorsed underachievement.

And in the third instance, the thing that is being endorsed is the quality of writing by

¹ Op.cit. p 34

² *A Lesson For Us All* Duncan Graham with David Tytler, Routledge, 1993

³ Op.cit. p 32

⁴ Ibid. p 45

⁵ Ibid. p 49

a subject working group for a political audience whose preferences in the matter had been made clear. It would be pleasant to suppose that "high standards" here refers to excellence of style or argument, but as the context makes clear, a nearer synonym would be 'efficiency' or even 'expediency'. This book emphasises, over and over again, the degree to which the whole field of education has become an arena of political dispute, and the extent to which educational expertise is disregarded in favour of the gut reactions of those who, for the time being, hold the reins of power¹. Graham expresses this simply enough:

".....the problem that was to haunt the [National Curriculum] Council continually: the balance between knowledge and understanding, with ministers concentrating on knowledge while the weight of professional opinion lay with understanding.Baker's stance was entirely ideological and gave NCC its first glimpse of the ministerial thrust towards knowledge in the attainment targets which required regurgitation of numbers, dates and facts. He insisted that the attainment targets should be specific so any suggestion of understanding was considered to be too woolly. Knowledge was all, a position which was to reach its full extension in History under Kenneth Clarke. The argument was lost forever with maths despite the overwhelming support given to the inclusion of the practical profile component by all those who took part in the consultation"²

and again, more brutally;

"The whole idea of working groups and the National Curriculum Council was absolutely different from anything that any education professionals had experienced before. The Education Act reforms were not born of these people, they were not consulted about them, indeed the government considered them to be the enemy."³

One senses Graham's growing disillusion with the post he held, with the disparity between political promises and reality, and above all with the permanent civil servants in the Department for Education and Science; and if he is not a particularly easy man for whom to feel sympathy, neither is he a man whose own sympathies are entirely with those whose mixed and vague intentions he tried to bring to a meaningful reality. What those intentions were may be reasonably inferred from the contents of an announcement made by the Secretary of State at the DES in September 1994:

"There is nothing more important to the future of our nation than to improve our educational standards. Our children must leave school with the confidence, versatility and adaptability to succeed in a rapidly changing world. That means above all acquiring a secure foundation in the basics of literacy, numeracy and scientific understanding on which they can build.rigorous assessments and tests are vital levers for achieving this."⁴

This brings us back neatly to the conclusion from the article written by Caroline Gipps

¹ v. sup. p 506

² Op.cit. p 36

³ Ibid. pp 12-13

⁴ *Assessment and Testing of 7, 11 and 14 year olds in 1995*, DES, p 1

whose lesson had still to be learned seven years later.

In order to make any contribution to the debate on standards based upon understanding rather than knowledge, or, still worse, the kind of prejudice that masquerades as knowledge, it will be necessary to establish a meaning for "standards" to which future usages of the word in this thesis can be referred back; and to do this I turn to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which devotes nearly four pages to the word "standard" and lists no fewer than thirty-five distinct meanings, or 'senses', of the word's usage. While many of these have specialised and individual meanings, enough relate to the general sense in which the word tends to be used in an educational context, to be the source and cause of a considerable degree of confusion.

Some of this, of course, is deliberate and humorous – as in the comment upon the least effective of recent Secretaries of State at the Department of Education, that the nearest he got to raising standards was in his proposal that every state school should have a flagpole. Other confusions are, however, less deliberate, not in the least amusing, and potentially far more dangerous. I would, by way of example, cite two of the definitions from the *OED*:

"serving as a standard of measurement, weight, or value; conformed to the official standard of a unit of measure or weight;"

"serving or fitted to stand as a standard in comparison or judgement."

The first of these, containing as it does the key word 'official', is only appropriate in an educational context when the reference is to some generally acknowledged and verifiable measure of performance or achievement; such as, perhaps, a Reading Age, or IQ score, though some authorities would, I am sure, dispute the attribution to either. Whether a grade A pass at A level deserves to count in the same category is part of the debate to which this thesis sets out to contribute.

The second definition is, however, specifically lacking the imprimatur of official recognition. Judgement, whether informed or otherwise, and comparison, whether illuminating or misleading, are within the competence of anyone with an opinion and the desire to convert others to it. The danger arises when the second of these is confused with the first; and the mere opinion of the man who can command the attention of the media, exercising his personal judgement in the form of a comparison

of what he has been persuaded to believe of the present with what he thinks he can remember of the past, is generally supposed to have been pronounced with the authority which comes with specialist knowledge. The decision to restrict to 20% the permitted proportion of coursework in the total mark for any GCSE or A Level examination is a case in point; and as evidence that such instances are not confined to one end of the political spectrum, we have the recent desire to legislate for a specific amount of homework as the minimum appropriate for pupils at both primary and secondary levels. No serious meaning can be attached to the allegation that "standards have declined" (or improved, for that matter) when the standards in question are purely arbitrary and based upon prejudice rather than fact; yet facts, in the sense acceptable to a statistician, are notoriously hard to come by in the business of comparative assessment of educational achievement, and not necessarily helpful when finally tracked down. To return to the *OED*, the only definition of 'standards' which relates specifically to education is

"in British elementary schools: Each of the recognised degrees of proficiency, as tested by examination according to which school children are classified."

The exemplifying quotation which accompanies this definition reads:

"the sixth is the highest standard which children are ordinarily required to pass, the seventh being intended mainly for those who are to become teachers"

For the problems attendant on the system which produced this specific instance we have the eloquent testimony of Matthew Arnold; and while there has seemed to be a positive desire among those responsible for educational legislation in recent years to move education backwards to some mythical golden age of superior competence and attainment, as opposed to the alleged inadequacies of modern (and invariably 'trendy') educational practice, I am far from attributing to them a desire to return to the Revised Code. Yet the system prevailing for most of the second half of the last century was perhaps the last at which a child's standard of achievement was an absolute and unchallengeable fact, as validated by examination and confirmed by regular inspection. However desirable such a state of affairs might seem, regardless of the validity of the educational process which accompanied it, I do not believe that it is attainable today or that "educational standards"

can again be brought to have an exact and quantifiable definition. Perhaps for our purposes the most relevant of the definitions offered by the *OED* is :

"A definite level of excellence, attainment, wealth or the like, or a definite degree of any quality, viewed as a prescribed object of endeavour or as the measure of what is adequate for some purpose."

Such a definition provides, I believe, an appropriately flexible basis for a meaningful and effective examination of the progress of education between 1944 and 1988, even if it lacks the statistical rigour which is demanded by specialists in educational assessment and, when applied to a subject like English, fails to give any guide as to what is meant by excellence.

Depending upon context, each of the answers "Just under a foot", "About ten and a half inches", or "two hundred and sixty-four millimetres" might be the most appropriate. What matters is the ability to judge that context. It is for this reason that I chose the quotation on my title page. The question "Who measured the ground?" emphasises the importance of human involvement as against purely mechanical computation in reaching an assessment; the essentially subjective element which is part of the evaluation of responses to a literary stimulus – and to me it symbolises the significance of understanding rather than mere knowledge in a pupil's reaction and of validity rather than statistical reliability in a teacher's or examiner's grade.

Using as an illustration the subject of English, chosen because it has always been a key subject in terms of qualifications at 16+ and happens also to be the most widely taken subject at A level, this thesis will examine the theory and practice of teaching before and during the period under survey, together with the ways in which pupil performance was examined and assessed, with a view to establishing clearly what pupils were expected to understand and, more importantly, what use they were expected to make of that understanding so that, "viewed as a prescribed object of endeavour or as the measure of what is adequate for some purpose", it may be checked for decline, improvement or fluctuation over the period in question.

The answer cannot emerge as a percentage, or indeed in any statistical form that might lend itself to some form of graph, pie-chart or league table; but my conclusion that there has been a general trend towards improving the standard of what is considered adequate for success in the field of English studies will, I believe, prove convincing.

CHAPTER ONE

English in the Classroom

PART I - Before 1943

"No person, really qualified for the office of schoolmaster by moral character, mental energy, amiability of temper, and proficiency in all the elementary branches of education, together with aptitude in imparting knowledge, will doom himself to the worst paid labour and almost the least appreciated office to be met with in the country."
[Report of the Commissioners of Enquiry into the State of Education in Wales, 1847]

"To the members of the most responsible, the least advertised, the worst paid and the most richly rewarded profession in the world" [Ian Hay 1914]

"Upon the education of the people of this country the fate of this country depends"
[White Paper on Educational Reconstruction 1943]

One of the more intransigent problems facing anyone who seeks for some kind of truth about the standards of English teaching is the essential dichotomy between the reverence paid to the concept of education as a vital wellspring in the development both of the civilized individual and of the civilized nation of which he is a part, and the almost total lack of reverence, or even respect, paid to those in whose hands lie the task and responsibility of providing that education.

Perhaps this state of affairs is natural and inevitable: perhaps teachers have too much power, authority and influence over the young, so that escape from their dominance becomes (even if subconsciously) the aim of the adolescent, and resentment the instinctive reaction to the lengthy delays before that escape can be achieved; but whatever the reason the schoolteacher had earned the description¹ from 1914 which stands at the head of this page long before Hay wrote it, and there has been no significant improvement in his situation since.

Robert Protherough has examined in considerable detail the ways in which the teacher is treated in works of literature², and observes:

"It is still virtually universally suggested that teachers are seriously underpaid, and this is frequently supported by comments that the salaries keep able men out of teaching, that it is impossible for a man to marry on a teacher's salary, or that a teaching career normally leads to an impoverished or destitute old age."³

Nor is this jaundiced view the product merely of some endlessly reiterated literary convention: exactly the same theme runs through official papers throughout the period of

¹ *The Lighter Side of School Life*, 1914, Dedication

² *The Teacher in Literature*. Unpublished Ph.D thesis for Hull University, 1980.

³ *Op.cit.* p 451

Protherough's study, which concluded with 1918, and subsequently. For instance:

"The first improvement which I think of very great importance is that of training up suitable persons for teachers, and that these teachers should have adequate encouragement; for the fact is, if a man is very clever as a teacher, he is generally picked up for some other employment, and it is not worth his while to continue in that pursuit; and for a man to be a clever teacher, he must have qualifications that would entitle him to double the remuneration he would get in average day schools" [Report of the Parliamentary Committee on the State of Education, 1834] ¹

"I think five hundred thoroughly good teachers, if they were adequately encouraged, could obtain instant employment; but if teachers are to have the wages of porters or ploughmen, you will never get fit persons for teachers" [as above] ²

"No person, really qualified for the office of schoolmaster by moral character, mental energy, amiability of temper, and proficiency in all the elementary branches of education, together with aptitude in imparting knowledge, will doom himself to the worst paid labour and almost the least appreciated office to be met with in the country." [Report of the Commissioners of Enquiry into the State of Education in Wales, 1847] ³

"It is not our task to frame new scales of salaries for teachers. That is the business of the Burnham Committee. But we do suggest certain criteria by which the emoluments of the profession should be judged. Salary scales would satisfy four main tests:

- (a) a test of personal need: they should make possible the kind of life which teachers of the quality required ought to be enabled to live;
 - (b) a market test: they should bear a relationship to the earnings of other professions and occupations so that the necessary supply of teachers of the right quality will be forthcoming;
 - (c) a professional test: they should not give rise to anomalies or injustices within the teaching profession; and
 - (d) an educational test: they should not have consequences which damage the efficiency of the education provided in any particular type of school or area."
- [Report of the Committee to consider the Supply, Recruitment and Training of Teachers and Youth Leaders. (The McNair Report) 1944] ⁴

Despite the continuity of official awareness of the problem, however, serious attempts to tackle it have been wide-spaced and short-term in their effectiveness – and exactly the same problems of recruiting suitable people to become effective teachers for the future are as widespread and as vehemently expressed today as at almost any time in the past. Nor, as Protherough again points out, are serving teachers customarily in the forefront of the battle to persuade their students to become their successors:

"What is more, unlike doctors, lawyers or clergymen, teachers themselves frequently represent their own profession badly. They are quick to lament the low status and poor conditions, and the good or inspired master or mistress at the centre of a novel written by a teacher is generally surrounded by many bad, incompetent ones." ⁵

¹ In *Educational Documents England and Wales 1816-1967* ed. J. Stuart Maclure, 1967, p 31

² Ibid. p 34

³ Ibid p 59

⁴ Ibid pp 217-8

⁵ Op.cit. p 476

Here again we are not dealing with a literary convention. It is not only in novels written by members of the teaching profession that the good and inspiring teacher stands out like a beacon against a dull and unfocussed background, but also in autobiographical writing

"I longed most of all to leave the place and never see it again.Then, quite suddenly, a miracle took place.the English mistress had been replaced by a young infantry officer who had come home from France without several of his fingers and with his face atrociously mutilated and his legs and arms stiff from wounds. He proceeded to knock us, mentally, all of a heap. He treated us with extreme detachment but with extreme kindness, and we were very much impressed.

I particularly was impressed, and I believe I showed it by writing an essay on Shakespeare without mentioning Shakespeare. At any rate the new master was pleased with it. Foolish as it may seem, I date my literary career from that moment. Within a few weeks I was writing my first poems and short stories, I knew a great deal of English poetry by heart, and life began suddenly to be higher and different in a way I had never suspected.Now, when I look back at the utterly useless and dreary years preceding that simple miracle, I begin to feel almost furious – with the school itself, its unnecessary attempts at conformation with public school standards, the constant talk of tradition and the honour and good name of the school, with the little personal tyrannies, with the examination system, with the whole complete system that enslaves masters and boys alike by its insidiously foolish rules and conventions." ¹

and one finds something not dissimilar in Kipling:

"I remember nothing save satisfaction or envy when C- broke his precious ointments over my head. I tried to give a pale rendering of his style when heated in a 'Stalky' tale, 'Regulus', but I wish I could have presented him as he blazed forth once on the great Cleopatra Ode – the 27th of the Third Book. ...There must be still masters of the same sincerity; and gramophone records of such good men, on the brink of profanity, struggling with a Latin form, would be more helpful to education than bushels of printed books. C- taught me to loathe Horace for two years; to forget him for twenty, and then to love him for the rest of my days and through many sleepless nights." ²

The effect of Edmund Kirby upon H E Bates, and of William Croft (who appears disguised as Mr King in *Stalky and Co.*) upon Kipling, to whom he taught English Literature as well as Latin, reinforces two separate points derived by Robert Protherough from his examination of teachers in literature:

"....occasional attempts to suggest in narrative what being a "good" teacher means. It is nearly always inspirational, defined in terms of influence on a particular pupil, and concerned with humane values. It is also presented as being quite exceptional, outside the ordinary run of school experiencecontrasted with the aridity of other lessons in which pupils have 'drudged' through texts with masters who have to 'mug up notes'." ³

and

"Much of the livelier teaching represented in novels seems to be in English lessons" ⁴

¹ H E Bates in *The Old School*, Essays by Divers Hands, ed Graham Greene, 1934, pp 28-29

² *Something of Myself*, 1937, pp 32-33

³ Op.cit. p 377

⁴ Ibid. p 375

It is only from cameos such as this that we can gain any impression at all of what teaching used to be like in the time before our own memories or those of friends and relations begin to provide more reliable and consistent information – and it may well be unfair to rely upon such individual responses and assume them to be typical. Yet no other assumption can possibly be justified in face of the weight of the evidence, reduplicated as it is from so many sources. Whatever may be the case in respect of rote learning, and even allowing for the rare example of inspirational teaching which contrasted so memorably with the prevailing drudgery, standards of teaching and of pupil understanding have unquestionably improved between the Victorian era and our own, because the philosophy behind the educational process has undergone a transformation. English teaching seems to have come better out of literary treatment than any other subject, perhaps simply because most authors have a natural bent in that direction, but it seldom seems to compare with what we would expect of a "good" English lesson today. Robert Protherough, professionally accustomed to evaluating the classroom performance of teachers, recognises what Kipling is trying to convey in his picture of Croft in *Regulus* :

"He prods, asks supplementary questions, locates difficulties, offers variants of his own, seeks the cause of misunderstandings, makes digressions to retain interest and pushes the abler pupils." ¹

This is clearly a 'good teacher' conducting an effective lesson, but I suspect that Kipling derived more pleasure, even if less genuine benefit, from Croft provoked into an impassioned monologue, as in *The Propagation of Knowledge*, where work on the Augustan period is held at bay by a deliberate red herring in the form of a suggestion that Bacon was the author of Shakespeare's plays:

"Mr King began to explain, on lines that might, perhaps, have been too freely expressed for the parents of those young (though it gave their offspring delight), but with a passion, force and wealth of imagery which would have crowned his discourse at any university. By the time he drew towards his peroration, the Form were almost openly applauding.....Stalky kept tally of the brighter gems of invective; and Beetle sat aghast but exulting among the spirits he had called up." ²

Beetle is, of course, the fictionalised version of Kipling himself and perhaps the most telling part of this account of a series of English lessons is the fact that he represents

¹ Op.cit. p 366

² In *Debits and Credits*, 1926, pp 292-3

himself both as fascinated by literature, to the despair of his companions, ("This ain't your silly English Literature, you ass. It's our marks" ¹) who are concerned only with satisfying the Army Class examiner; and as convinced that there was no connection between that fascination and anything that might happen in an English lesson. Croft, or Mr King, is represented as acknowledging but deprecating the same distinction:

"Since, said he, the pearls of English Literature existed only to be wrenched from their settings and cast before young swine rooting for marks, it was his loathed businessto prepare for the Form a General Knowledge test-paper which he would give them next week. It would cover their studies, up to date, of the Augustans and *King Lear*, which was the selected and strictly expurgated Army Exam play for that year. Now, English Literature, as he might have told them, was *not* divided into water-tight compartments, but flowed like a river. For example, Samuel Johnson, glory of the Augustans and no mean commentator on Shakespeare, was but one in a mighty procession which - At this point Beetle's nodding brows came down with a grunt on the desk."

Two more of the points deduced or illustrated by Robert Protherough in *The Teacher in Literature* are thus provided with further support: the generalism on the nature of the teacher's rôle and the specific problem of the place of English in the curriculum -

"From time to time there is an underlying or explicit suggestion that the system itself demands a teacher's adherence, that it is almost impossible to work differently. The system demonstrated by Mr George [in *The Soul of a Teacher* by Roger Wray, 1915] is characterized by words like automatic, fixed, repetitive, monotonous, routine. However he is also described as 'a most successful and scientific teacher', successful in that he drives home facts effectively, though not necessarily accompanied by any understanding. Examination success, and any form of payment by results, seem to establish a pattern of what the teacher 'had to' do; there is 'nothing for it' but to comply" ³

and

"It was not just because of the 'utter remoteness and uselessness of Latin and Greek' that they were 'slackly, tediously and altogether badly taught'. Much of the English teaching described in the period employs similar methods drawn directly from Classics: learning by heart, concentration on the meanings of words or allusions, formal analysis using the terms of Latin grammar." ⁴

or,

"Traherne comments that in the brief period of time allocated to English, most masters do not know what to teach: 'Some spend their time in parsing and analysing, though what utilitarian benefits are to accrue hereafter from this it would be hard to see. Others read a play of Shakespeare, which is a euphemism for note-taking and note-learning, a philological discourse or an exercise in repetition.'" ⁵

[From *A Schoolmaster's Diary*, S P B Mais, 1918]

Among the illustrations of how the function of English in the classroom might be most profitably interpreted, that offered by Dickens in *Hard Times* is almost certainly the best

1 Op.cit. p 284

2 Ibid. pp 273-274

3 Op.cit. pp 373-374

4 Ibid. p 369

5 Ibid. p 376

known: indeed, there can be very few teachers of English practising today who have not committed to memory the line "Girl number twenty unable to define a horse!" as an example of the horrors of English teaching in a bygone era, though it does not necessarily follow that their own teaching profits from the opprobrium focussed on Mr. Gradgrind, Mr M'Choakumchild, and the outlawing of Fancy; or from the fact that this chapter is entitled "Murdering the Innocents". Perhaps even more chilling is that passage in Chapter IV where Louisa has to admit to her mother and Mr Bounderby that her father had caught her with Thomas "peeping at the circus", and Mr Gradgrind responds "And I should as soon have expected to find my children reading poetry." This total dismissal of literature as having any conceivable value or part to play in the education of children is an exaggeration of a trend that was clearly present in the nineteenth century, but matters were not greatly improved when people of power and influence decided to reverse it. In his *General Report for the Year 1880* Matthew Arnold begins by observing that among the subjects on offer in the state schools of the day:

"English Literature, as it is too ambitiously called – in plain truth the learning by heart and reciting of a hundred lines or two of standard English poetry – continues to be by far the most popular. The choice of passages to be learned is of the utmost importance, and requires close and intelligent observing of the children. Some years ago it was the fashion to make them learn Goldsmith's *Deserted Village* at the recommendation, I believe, of the late Lord Lyndhurst; or rather he had given high praise to this poem, and recommended it as a poem to be got by heart, and so it was supposed that the children in the elementary schools might with advantage learn it. Nothing could be more completely unsuitable for them, and this being soon proved by the event, the use of the poem for the purpose in question has happily almost ceased." ¹

Arnold himself had a clear idea of what use might be made of poetry, and how it could effectively be done:

"Good poetry does undoubtedly tend to form the soul and character; it tends to beget a love of beauty and of truth in alliance together; it suggests, however indirectly, high and noble principles of action, and it inspires the emotion so helpful in making principles operative.....That the poetry chosen should have real beauties of expression and feeling, that these beauties should be such as the children's hearts and minds can lay hold of, and that a distinct point or centre of beauty and interest should occur within the limits of the passage learnt, – all these are conditions to be insisted on." ²

What Arnold does not say here, though he undoubtedly knew it to be the case, was that the teacher must have the power of focussing the hearts and minds of the children, most of whom would not be naturally geared in that direction, on the desired objective.

1. *Reports on Elementary Schools 1852-1882*, ed. F S Marvin, 1908, p 202

2 Ibid. pp 200-202

In point of fact very few of them possessed that power, and such children as did derive benefit from the literature provided tended to do so of their own volition rather than as the result of inspiring teaching:

"The reading lesson, which should have been pleasant, for the reading matter was good, was tedious in the extreme. Many of the children read so slowly and haltingly that Laura, who was impatient by nature, longed to take hold of their words and drag them out of their mouths, and it often seemed to her that her own turn to read would never come. As often as she could do so without being detected, she would turn over and peep between the pages of her own *Royal Reader*, and, studiously holding the book to her nose, pretend to be following the lesson while she was pages ahead.Interspersed between the prose readings were poems: 'The Slave's Dream'; 'Young Lochinvar'; 'The Parting of Douglas and Marmion'; Tennyson's 'Brook' and 'Ring out Wild Bells'; Byron's 'Shipwreck'; Hogg's 'Skylark', and many more. ...Long before their schooldays were over [Laura and Edmund] knew every piece in the books by heart and it was one of their greatest pleasures in life to recite them to each other.....The selection in the *Royal Readers*, then, was an education in itself for those who took to it kindly; but the majority of the children would have none of it; saying that the prose was 'dry old stuff' and that they hated 'portry'. Those children who read fluently, and there were several of them in every class, read in a monotonous sing-song, without expression, and apparently without interest. Yet there were very few really stupid children in the school, as is proved by the success of many of them in after life.....Their interest was not in books, but in life, and especially the life that lay immediately about them. At school they worked unwillingly, upon compulsion, and the life of the schoolmistress was a hard one.It was only the second generation to be forcibly fed with the fruit of the tree of knowledge: what wonder if it did not always agree with it." ¹

Within such a context, to cope effectively with the task, not merely of instilling knowledge but of making the process of assimilating it attractive, would have taxed better teachers than the emoluments were likely to attract, nor as yet was the philosophical concept that the two tasks needed to move in harmony as yet at all widespread. Dr Johnson's dictum "The rod produces an effect which terminates in itself. A child is afraid of being whipped, and gets his task, and there's an end on't" seemed acceptable logic even to those who were by no means among the notable floggers like Keate of Eton, and the idea that education was "improving", and needed to be forced down like an unpleasant-tasting medicine, died hard. The distinction between knowledge and understanding, upon which so much of the debate about standards inevitably depends, was hardly apparent to many of the teachers themselves in those early days – and the situation was further complicated by the impact of a class, almost a caste system, which decreed the nature of the knowledge required in accordance with the student's place in

¹ Flora Thompson, *Lark Rise to Candleford*, World's Classics edition, 1952, pp 193-195

society.

"..the poorer gentry, all in fact, who, having received a cultivated education themselves, are very anxious that their sons should not fall below them. Of this class it should rather be said that they wish to cheapen education than that they wish to widen it. They would, no doubt, in most instances be glad to secure something more than classics and mathematics. But they value these things highly for their own sake, and perhaps even more for the value assigned to them in English society. They have nothing to look to but education to keep their sons on a high social level. And they would not wish to have what might be more readily converted into money, if in any degree it tended to let their children sink in the social scale. The main evil of the present system, in their eyes, is its expense. The classical education of the highest order is every day to a greater degree quitting the small grammar schools for the great public schools, and others of the same kind. Those who want such education can no longer find it, as they could in the last century, close to their doors, all over the country. They are compelled to seek it in boarding schools, and generally in boarding schools of a very expensive kind." ¹

The reason for the decline of the small country grammar school as an appropriate place for the education of the children of country gentry in the course of the nineteenth century is beyond the scope of this thesis, but it may not be entirely unconnected with Protherough's findings as to the social status accorded to the teaching staff of such institutions, a valuation from which the staff at the great public schools seem to have been largely exempt. What does emerge quite clearly is that the education sought for these children had little to do with matters of the curriculum and was much more concerned with what is sometimes called character training. Squire Brown, in what is unquestionably the best known nineteenth-century treatment of school life, puts it succinctly:

"Shall I tell him to mind his work, and say he's sent to school to make himself a good scholar? Well, but he isn't sent to school for that – at any rate, not for that mainly. I don't care a straw for Greek particles, or the digamma, no more does his mother. What is he sent to school for?If he'll only turn out a brave, helpful, truth-telling Englishman, and a gentleman, and a Christian, that's all I want " ²

and his creator, intervening *in propria persona* earlier in the book, makes the attitude to the rôle of the classroom teacher even more patronisingly obvious:

"The object of all schools is not to ram Latin and Greek into boys, but to make them good English boys, good future citizens; but by far the most important part of that work must be done, or not done, out of school hours. To leave it, therefore, in the hands of inferior men is just giving up the highest and hardest part of the work of education. Were I a private schoolmaster, I should say, let who will hear the boys their lessons, but let me live with them when they are at play or rest." ³

¹ The Schools Inquiry Commission (The Taunton Report), 1868. In J S Maclure, Op.cit. p 93

² Thomas Hughes, *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, 1857, Chapter 4

³ Ibid. Chapter 3

The philosophy "Let who will hear the boys their lessons", and a curriculum premised upon the values assigned by the English class system, may well have assisted in the maintenance of social standards, but can hardly be said to contribute very effectively to an educational equivalent. Not that the achievement of the system for less elevated members of society was enormously better in this regard. True, the curriculum was far more utilitarian, and in so far as it must have made a considerable impact on the statistics for adult illiteracy, it ought not to be derided. Nevertheless, public education in the nineteenth century had glaring deficiencies which have been so widely publicised in these more enlightened times that substantial illustration would surely be redundant. It is customary to regard 1870 and the Forster Education Act as a watershed, and Forster's speech to House of Commons contained a passage that still echoes today:

"What is our purpose in this Bill? Briefly this, to bring elementary education within the reach of every home, aye, and within the reach of those children who have no homes. This is what we aim at in this Bill; and this is what I believe this Bill will do. I believe it will do it eventually, and not only eventually but speedily. To do it will require enormous labour on the part of the government; but if the House passes this Bill with the approbation of the country, no Government will be able to refuse that labour."¹

What Flora Thompson has referred to as "forcible feeding with fruit from the tree of knowledge" had become national policy, but the process had still a long way to go. It is a salutary reminder that a better remembered quotation than that from Forster was coined eight years earlier by Robert Lowe, on his introduction of the Revised Code in 1862: "If it is not cheap, it shall be efficient; if it is not efficient it shall be cheap."² This deserves to be held in remembrance partly because the second option which it offers seems to have been the guiding principle of successive governments for most of the intervening one hundred and thirty five years, and partly because the system of "Payment by Results" which it introduced, and which survived Forster and lasted almost to the end of the century, remained a vague threat in the 1990s with the reintroduction of "free trade" thinking and the apparently growing conviction that "market economics" is the proper solution to every problem. "Payment by Results" was an educational disaster, a fact immediately apparent to those whose concerns for education were more for its efficiency than for its cheapness.

Matthew Arnold, for example, attacked the principle as well as the practice:

¹ In J S Maclure, *Op.cit.* p.104

² *A Short History of English Education 1760-1944*, H C Barnard, 1947, p 130

"...the idea of payment by results was just the idea to be caught up by the ordinary public opinion of this country and to find favour with it. ...But the question is, not whether this idea, or this or that application of it suits ordinary public opinion and school managers, the question is whether it really suits the interests of schools and their instruction" ¹

"I said that our pupil teachers were.....'the sinews of English public instruction' and such they, with the ardent and animated body of schoolmasters who taught and trained them, undoubtedly were. These pupil teachers and that body of schoolmasters were called into existence by the school legislation of 1846; the school legislation of 1862 struck its heaviest possible blow at them; and the present slack and languid condition of our elementary schools is the inevitable consequence. In a country where everyone is prone to rely too much on mechanical process and too little on intelligence, a change in the Education Department's regulations which, by making two-thirds of the grant depend upon a mechanical examination, inevitably gives a mechanical turn to the school teaching and a mechanical turn to the inspection, is and must be trying to the intellectual life of a school.In the game of mechanical contrivances the teacher will in the end beat us; and as it is now found possible, by ingenious preparation, to get children through the Revised Code examination in reading, writing and ciphering, so it will with practice no doubt be found possible to get.....the children over six through the examination in grammar, geography and history without their really knowing any one of these three matters." ²

Writing three years before the 1870 Act, Arnold could clearly see that the universal imposition of a "slack and languid" system operated by schoolmasters who had lost their ardency and animation was going to confer no enormous benefit upon an eagerly waiting population, and forecast some of the indifference recorded by Flora Thompson in pupil reactions to conditions some thirty years later:

"I imagine that with the newly awakened sense of our shortcomings in popular education – a sense which is just, the statistics brought forward to dispel it being, as everyone acquainted with the subject knows, entirely fallacious – the difficult thing would be not to pass a law making education compulsory; the difficult thing would be to work such a law after we had got it. In Prussia, which is so often quoted, education is not flourishing because it is compulsory, it is compulsory because it is flourishing" ³

Setting aside the refreshing impact of a report from one of Her Majesty's Inspectors which is prepared to call government statistics "entirely fallacious", and with it the timely reminder of the advantages of an independent Inspectorate, one can immediately identify with a critic who recognises the threat posed by any requirement to reduce the function of the teacher to the mechanistic indoctrination of a predetermined syllabus, and perhaps understand why the government made the psychological blunder of calling their new law one to make education compulsory, rather than universally available. Even Arnold does not seem to have thought as far ahead as that, though he could clearly see why what was on offer

¹ *General Report for the Year 1867*. In J S Maclure, op.cit., p 82

² Ibid., p 81

³ Ibid., p 82

was so often rejected as unpalatable, both in terms of the material itself and in the way it was presented, particularly in aspects of the course that we would now think of as English:

"The grammar paper has too many of those questions which are answered by producing extracts of a grammar learnt by heart; questions about the classification of pronouns, for example, or about the nature of adverbs and conjunctions. We have no English grammar of such a standard value that it is worth learning by heart; to learn their actual grammars by heart does the candidates no real good, and tells nothing about their real proficiency." ¹

"The great thing is to give the power of reading. It may be doubted whether this is not given more seldom than the power of writing or casting accounts, although more children fail in these examinations than in the examination in reading. ...the power of reading, well trained and well guided, is perhaps best among the gifts which it is the business of our elementary schools to bestow; it is in their power to bestow it, yet it is bestowed in much fewer cases than we imagine." ²

"The great majority of my schools now take, I am glad to say, recitation as an extra subject. ...But the passages to be learnt are by no means chosen with sufficient care, and the learner is still very insufficiently taught the sense and allusions of what he recites. More and more the recitation should be turned into a literature lesson.The young in school ought to be as much as possible restricted to good models....is it so delightful to think that at a given moment all schoolboys may be reading different pieces of rubbish, out of innumerable and equally accepted collections of it?" ³

"Dry scientific disquisitions, and literary compositions of an inferior order, are indeed the worst possible instruments for teaching children to read well ...[and have] the graver fault of actually doing what they can to spoil his taste, when they are nearly his only means of forming it.To this defectiveness of our reading books I attribute much of that grave and discouraging deficiency in anything like literary taste and feeling, which even well instructed pupil-teachers of four or five years training, which even the ablest students in our training schools, still continue almost invariably to exhibit;I believe that nothing would so much contribute to remedy it as the diffusion in our elementary schools of reading-books of which the contents were really well selected and interesting." ⁴

Clearly by the time Flora Thompson's Laura attended her village school there had been some improvement in this respect, but the worrying factor in this last extract is not so much the effect the original material had upon the children, as that it had previously exercised on their teachers. This is another of the themes on which Arnold hammers away remorselessly in his annual reports, and which underlines so much of the almost unimaginable awfulness of nineteenth century education:

"Young men, whose knowledge of grammar, of the minutest details of geographical and historical facts, and above all of mathematics is surprising, often cannot paraphrase a plain passage of prose or poetry without totally mis-

¹ *Reports on Elementary Schools 1852-1882* ed. F S Marvin, 1908. pp 161-162

² *Ibid.* p 191

³ *Ibid.* p 163

⁴ *Ibid.* pp 82-83

apprehending it, or write half a page of composition on any subject without falling into gross blunders of taste and expression.I am sure that the study of the best English authors, and composition, might with advantage be made a part of their regular course of instruction to a much greater degree than it is at present. Such a training would tend to elevate and humanise a number of young men, who at present, notwithstanding the vast amount of raw information which they have amassed, are wholly uncultivated." ¹

Yet another of the errors of the administration of contemporary education which he never ceased to castigate was Payment by Results. His comments in his Report for 1867 are quoted above,² and two years later he added this, with what seems to constitute a particular warning for those who would seek to measure the standards of English achievement by testing:

"I have repeatedly said that it seems to me the great fault of the Revised Code, and of the famous plan of *payment by results*, that it fosters teaching by rote; I am of that opinion still. I think the great task for friends of education is, not to praise *payment by results*, which is just the sort of notion to catch of itself popular favour, but to devise remedies for the evils which are found to follow the applications of this popular notion.The circle of the children's reading has thus been narrowed and impoverished all the year for the sake of a *result* at the end of it, and the *result* is an illusion." ³

Nor was he persuaded, as some later critics seem to have been, that the 1870 Act was a panacea:

"The weakness [of the new Code] is in the unawakened and uninformed minds of the majority of our school children, even of those who can pass the examination in reading, writing and arithmetic and sometimes in an extra subject or two besides. This exceeds, so far as my observation goes, anything of the kind to be found in the schools of other countries." ⁴

and here again the teaching of English is shown as presenting a particular problem:

"The schedule itself cannot at present be regarded as furnishing more than an inchoate plan; it will require to have all its parts developed and co-ordered, and better text-books than those now in use will have to be created.If this is the case with branches of knowledge so distinctly marked off and so clearly conceived as the natural sciences, how much more is it the case with that immense indeterminate field called literature. Here, above all, neither plan nor order of study exists, nor any well-conceived choice of books; yet here, above all, these are necessary." ⁵

Although the campaign against Payment by Results was finally successful in 1897, there is less evidence that the rest of Arnold's hopes had really come to any sort of fruition; and while there does appear to come into being a plan or order of study for literature, I doubt if Arnold would have felt disposed to describe it as well conceived.

1 Op.cit. pp 16-17

4 Ibid. p 155

2 v.sup. p 25

5 Ibid. p 142

3 Op.cit. pp 125-126

David Shayer, in *The Teaching of English in Schools*, summarises this system for us in effective but rather disturbing fashion. For instance, he quotes from *Principles and Methods of Teaching*, James Welton, 1906, the assumption that the poems and stories read to young people should embody fine actions and that poetry in school is useless unless it produces ennobling sentiments. He then observes:

"One gathers from Arnold Smith's 1915 criticisms (*Aims and Methods in the Teaching of English*) that this use of literature for moral or patriotic purposes was quite common: 'The English curriculum in certain schools has an ethical basis so that a boy learns patriotism one year and some other civic virtue the next. Shakespeare's *Henry V* is supposed to inspire a love of the fatherland; we have anthologies of verse to inculcate the same feeling, literature being studied not merely for its own sake but for some didactic purpose.'"¹

The methods by which these improving texts were taught may be inferred from a further extract from Shayer, taken from an article in the *Journal of Education* for August 1908 entitled 'A model literature lesson' in which the author recommends the study of Tennyson's 'Break, break, break' and then:

"the following questions to search out the pupils' most sensitive responses:
 (i) Give derivation and etymology of the word 'break' as used in the poem
 (ii) Scan the line 'Break, break, break' and compare the metrical effect of 'Ding,dong,bell'.
 (iii) Discuss the influence of geological strata on poetry
 (iv) Express in good prose the thought that the poet would fain have uttered, and indicate the reason of his disability." "²

Finally, we are given a sample of the kind of examination paper that those who had come to the end of a sixth form course in literature so conceived might expect:

"The Examination Boards varied slightly among themselves, but until the early 1920s it was customary for a Higher Local (or Certificate) English course to include the study of a period of literary history, perhaps a century of literature, as well as of special authors and Old and Middle English. For example, the Cambridge Higher Local syllabus for 1905 included a study of *The Tempest*, Byron selections, Carlyle's *Past and Present*, and Tennyson's *Memoriam*; the period 1797–1858, and Old and Middle English. Sixth form English was clearly meant to involve spectacularly extensive reading, though one can only conclude that pupils merely learnt very little about a great deal – a suspicion which is strongly supported by the continued popularity of the potted literary textbook (each author getting half a page and three useful remarks) and by the often easy and generalised nature of many of the examination questions. The following question from the 1908 London Matriculation paper is typical: 'Round the dome of the reading room in the British Museum are inscribed the following names.....Addison, Bacon, Browning, Byron, Carlyle, Caxton, Chaucer, Gibbon, Locke, Macaulay, Milton, Pope, Scott, Shakespeare, Spenser, Swift, Tennyson, Tindale, Wordsworth. Write a couple of lines about each, taking the names in chronological order.' "³

¹ Op.cit. pp 17-18

² Ibid. p 34

³ Ibid p 58

At this stage in a very broadly sweeping survey of the teaching of English it is appropriate to call to mind that English is still in its infancy as a recognised academic subject in the sense of a discipline to be studied at university, a course to be read for a degree. People like William Croft who taught English Literature at public schools or Grammar Schools had, of course, taken their degrees in classics – those teaching elsewhere were almost certainly non-graduates. Stephen Potter reminds us that:

"Not without conscious pride, London was the first University to introduce English, and English Literature into [the] examination system" ¹

and quotes in an appendix "The first official English paper. London University Matriculation 1839. Question 5 of this paper reads in part :

" Of what verbs are *sodden* and *fraught* the participles? Mention Wallis's well-known rule for the use of *shall* and *will* in the different persons; and give a full explanation of the meanings of these verbs. Is it correct to say, 'He says he shall go', 'Do you suppose you shall go?' Do the phrases 'He thought he should go' and 'He thought he would go' mean the same thing? Does the line of Byron, 'I ought to do and did my best', appear to you to contain a solecism?" ²

and this gives a sufficient flavour of the standard of the rest of the paper. Potter juxtaposes with this an extract from the paper on Shakespeare "*From the first Honours English papers set at Oxford, Trinity Term, 1896*" and lists nine questions, three of which read:

"Describe the sources of the text of *Romeo and Juliet* and of *Richard II*."

"Write an essay on the character of Henry IV as represented by Shakespeare in different plays."

"Give some account of Shakespeare's representation of Roman politics in *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*."

To these Potter adds one fascinating bracket:

"F J Furnivall has added a MS note to the copy of these papers in the British Museum: 'All the candidates but one scratched before the Exam, and he *withdrew* during the Exam.'" ³

I feel driven to add that it is extremely difficult at this interval to imagine why the candidates should have been so overcome, unless we are to suppose that the circumstance provides evidence to support the contention, advanced by Professor Sanday two years earlier before the Congregation of the University of Oxford, in favour of the introduction of an English School on the grounds that

"the women should be considered and the second and third-rate men who were to become schoolmasters." ⁴

¹ *The Muse in Chains*, 1937, p 141

² *Ibid.* p 268

³ *Ibid.* pp 268-269

⁴ David Palmer, *The Rise in English Studies*, 1965, p 111

This remark also, of course, usefully endorses Protherough's findings as to the status of the schoolmaster in the common regard as well as explaining why there were so very few teachers before the beginning of the present century, capable by virtue of training and experience (or, indeed, by virtue of any cause save instinct) of taking up an attitude to the subject of English nearer to that (or those) which we would find appropriate today; and it was to take a few more years before the "Rise of English Studies" was to make any significant impact on the classroom.

An early observation in Robert Protherough's *The Teacher in Literature* is

"In 1917 a tangle of examinations had been replaced by an organised system of School Certificate and Higher School Certificate. Insofar as these developments signalled the coming of a more coherent, national system of education, they also mark the beginning of the modern age for teachers." ¹

This opinion is echoed by David Shayer:

"After 1915 there was an increasing dissatisfaction with the impracticable nature of sixth-form courses in literature, and a movement, albeit gradual, away from the generalised reproductive kind of examination question towards questions that required genuine appreciative response from the candidates". ²

Opinions will vary as to when this movement may be called complete and the modern age truly begun. What has, however, been established beyond any reasonable doubt is that, if there ever were a golden age of teaching and learning from which the standards of the last two decades have insidiously declined, it is certainly not to be found in the period before the end of the first world war.

Apart from the inception of the new, nationally recognised system of educational qualifications validated by an examination which was acceptable both for continuance in education beyond the age of sixteen, and for entry to a variety of professions and occupations which had previously conducted their own selection system (as in the Army Examination referred to in the Kipling short story *The Propagation of Knowledge*), perhaps the first significant incidents material to this thesis in the new age, were the setting up of the Secondary Schools Examination Council in 1917, and of the Newbolt Committee to report on The Teaching of English in England in 1920.

The Secondary Schools Examination Council published its first report, on the new School certificate, in 1919, and made a variety of recommendations:

¹ Op.cit. p 12

² Op.cit. p 60

For example, they thought that the essay topics set tended to be too abstract, and indicated that subjects should be included that would allow of *imaginative* treatment; also, that there should be no separate test of formal grammar, since skill in this would reveal itself in the candidates' general standard of English. A *précis*, they maintained, should be an essential feature, and reproduction exercises, though valuable, 'may possibly give undue advantage to merely verbal memory' and should be dropped. On the literature papers they indicate that set books should be further limited in number, and that intensive study of a few texts rather than a generalised skimming of several dozen should be the rule; 'The difficulty is to avoid questions that encourage the reading of manuals of literary history or the reproduction of lecture notes, instead of first-hand acquaintance of great authors.....'. In 1921 the Council reported on the Higher Examination.....and here criticised even more strongly the superficial knowledge shown by the candidates. Evidence of genuine close reading was a rarity."

It is an unfortunate fact that the teaching profession tends, despite the unquestionable occurrence every so often of notable exceptions, to dig itself determinedly into an accustomed rut and to resist reform, change and the unfamiliar. If reports from groups such as the SSEC showed signs of forward thinking, Shayer makes it clear that the implementation of their recommendations was to face an uphill struggle against determined resistance from those in the classroom:

"In 1932, for example, the Association of Assistant Mistresses issued its *Memorandum on the Teaching of English*, which is a most depressing document. The classical drums are still being vigorously beaten: 'Nothing has yet supplied the discipline given by Classical Studies.....The claim of the Panel is that for the majority today the study of English language and literature must meet this need.' Old English still haunts the upper forms: 'the English course in the sixth form is properly balanced only if it includes a thorough course of linguistic study with a background of Old English.' Good writing, the *Memorandum* stresses, is impossible without rigorous grammar study undertaken in and for itself. The reaction against grammar teaching had gone much too far, and the cult of 'self-expression' which had taken its place has proved to be a dangerous and irresponsible retreat from reality: 'to give children of ten no other exercise than freedom to cover many pages with the chatty and imitative outpourings which they call "stories" may result in a slovenliness that no later training can cure.' The climate of thought in the Association can be further estimated from the Spring Conference of 1933, where the view was expressed that undergraduates reading for English degrees were spending far too much time on 'literary criticism' and other fripperies when they should be reading the Greek and Latin classics as the indispensable basis for 'real' English work.For School Certificate Literature examinations the following are recommended by the *Memorandum* as being suitable for study: Bacon, Macaulay, Carlyle, Longfellow, Kinglake, Lamb and Hazlitt. For Higher Certificate: Burke, Sir Thomas Browne (*Urn Burial*), Arnold (*Essays in Criticism*), Bacon and Langland. In short, these authors and texts remain unchanged from 1910 and before, as do many of the basic attitudes which the Association seems to want its members to adopt. " 2

It is fascinating to note that this kind of response is characterised by Shayer as "a

1-David Shayer, *Op.cit.* pp 62-63

2 Ibid. pp 106-107

reaction against the decline in 'standards' "1 and while one cannot but agree with his use of the ironic inverted comma, the use of the phrase must remind us of how very often those who make this assertion are motivated very simply by the conviction that their own educational experience alone is valid, and that any modification to it can only be to introduce an inferior substitute. Shayer found such a one in H.E. Palmer, who published his *The Teaching of English* in 1930, and quotes him with some relish:

" 'Grammar must not be neglected; and this, of course, includes old-fashioned parsing and analysis. ...The newer 'Reform' methods (employed in the secondary schools as well as in the primary) tend to omit the hard grind and make instruction so pleasurable and easy that insufficient is acquired. Grammar should be taught and handled from the very *lowest forms* upwards.'Palmer is convinced that the ability to clause-analyse will cause children to write better than they would otherwise: 'As a result of copious reading and essay writing they may learn to express themselves tolerably well; but unless the elements of Grammar have been mastered they will hesitate too long at a difficulty, or write an obscure or ungainly sentence.' "2

Books like this may well have been written in express opposition to the findings of the Newbolt Report, which had emerged in 1921 with what was clearly a new and revitalising voice, and which devoted a whole section [Chapter IX *Some Particular Aspects of the Teaching of English : Section I The Problem of Grammar*] to dealing with attitudes of this kind. It quoted, for instance, the evidence given before the Committee by Dr. P B Ballard:

"I have convinced myself by an intensive enquiry that in the elementary school formal grammar (a) fails to provide a general mental training, (b) does not enable the teacher to eradicate solecisms, (c) does not aid in composition, (d) takes up time which could much more profitably be devoted to the study of literature." 3

and went on, with brevity and clarity, to propose a more sensible and useful approach:

"One of the curses of grammar in the past has been over-elaboration. A few lessons, followed by appropriate exercises in analysis and synthesis, should be enough to explain what language is and to show the young people how to break up a sentence into its component parts; and once the tools have been mastered, all that is necessary is to keep them bright by use. The over-elaboration has been partly due in the past to the setting aside of a special section of the time-table for grammar. In our view it is unnecessary to do this, since the topic is, or should be, too limited in scope, which does not mean that it is unimportant." 4

Finally, the Committee produced a summary of their findings, excerpts from which, it seems to me, could very nearly stand as guidance for English teachers of today:

1 Op.cit. p 107

2 Ibid.

3 Op.cit. §254

4 Ibid. §264

"Grammar has been badly taught in the past because (a) its nature has been misunderstood, (b) the formulation of its rules has followed the old Latin grammar-books far too closely.

The proper grammar to study in school is not English grammar, but pure or functional grammar, including the elements of phonetics, analysis, and a little parsing. This should be taught to all who are to learn foreign languages, while there seems no reason why it should not be introduced in the higher classes of the elementary school, provided those who teach it understand exactly what it is they are dealing with and above all keep it simple.

For the teaching of correct speech in school we should rely, first of all on the correction of mistakes when they arise; secondly, on the great power of imitation; and thirdly, at a later stage, though not in the earliest stage, on the teaching of the general rules to which our standard speech conforms."¹

Although the concerns of the Assistant Mistresses Association and of Mr Palmer provide clear evidence that the impact of the Newbolt Report took a very long time to penetrate into some corners of the teaching profession, its concerns were far more more wide-ranging than my extracts from it hitherto suggest, and its long-term effects were considerable.

The Report began with a clear statement of intention, expressed with quasi-religious fervour:

"The inadequate conception of the teaching of English in this country is not a separate defect which can be separately remedied. It is due to a more far-reaching failure – the failure to conceive the full meaning and possibilities of national education as a whole, and that failure again is due.....especially to an underestimate of the importance of the English language and literature.Our position may be compared to that of an architect called in to advise upon what can be done with a stone which the builders have hitherto rejected. We find that the stone is invaluable; but also that the arch is too faulty to admit it. We propose to meet not one but two imperative needs by rebuilding the arch and using our stone as keystone of the whole – the use for which it, and no other is available."²

and goes on to develop this theme both theoretically and practically:

"What we are looking for now is not merely a means of education, one chamber in the structure we are hoping to rebuild, but the true starting point and foundation from which all the rest must spring. For this special purpose there is but one material. We make no comparison, we state what appears to us to be an incontrovertible primary fact, that for English children no form of knowledge can take precedence of a knowledge of English, no form of literature can take precedence of English literature: and the two are so inextricably connected as to form the only basis possible for a national education."³

and

".....in the earlier stages of education it should be the principal function of all schools of whatever type to provide this basis. Of this provision the component parts will be, first, systematic training in the sounded speech

¹ Op.cit. §265

² Ibid. §1

³ Ibid. §9

of standard English, to secure correct pronunciation and clear articulation; second, systematic training in the use of standard English, to secure clearness and correctness both in oral expression and in writing; third, training in reading. Under this last head will be included reading aloud with feeling and expression, the use of books as sources of information and means of study, and finally, the use of literature as a possession and source of delight, a personal intimacy and the gaining of personal experience, an end in itself and, at the same time, an equipment for the understanding of life.It may be objected that while English is indeed a necessary condition of our education, it is one which may be taken for granted, like the air we breathe or the land on which we live. We do not need, it may be said, to be taught English.This view is, perhaps, not likely to be now so crudely stated, but it has long been acted upon by many who are engaged in education, and is acquiesced in by many who control it. We must, therefore, state clearly that in our judgement it is an entirely unpractical view." ¹

It is the inclusion of literature "as a possession and a source of delight, a personal intimacy and the gaining of personal experience" that marks out the Newbolt Report as having insights which can hardly be called characteristic of the educational publications of Her Majesty's Stationery Office: perhaps it was because the Committee was being chaired by a poet. Certainly the recommendations of the Report in this area show an enlightenment denied to whoever produced those appalling questions on "Break, break, break" ² :

"....the teaching of literature is beset with many dangers. It is fatal to make it a mere knowledge subject – to concentrate on the getting up of the actual subject matter or of elaborate annotations, and equally fatal to substitute for it a mere impression of literary history.Linguistic, historic and comparative methods of dealing with literature in schools have all failed in so far as they have not been tinged with emotion.The pupils must be aware of literature as 'the revelation of beauty and the expression of thought and emotion' " ³

The highlighting of 'mere' is my emphasis – the use of the word in this context was not far short of heresy in 1921, and the danger that a Governmental Inquisition might make it so again can never be totally dismissed, as recent events have reminded us.⁴ Yet the use here is not defiant or provocative, rather a completely natural and unselfconscious statement of priorities by a group whose collective insight and wisdom had a lot to offer the teachers of the day. It is particularly important, I think, to pay attention to the nature of the opposition to the emotions as the essential element in the teaching of literature:

"....in some cases at least, they feel that school hours are not the time, nor the classroom the place, for the study of English. The feeling for literature

¹ Op.cit. §13

² v.sup. p 28

³ Op.cit. §122

⁴ v.sup. p 12

they regard as a delicate plant which might not survive in the atmosphere of the classroom. ...Fear was expressed of the result of forcing the teaching of English literature and we were reminded that such a remark as 'the schoolmaster devitalises literature' was a commonplace today. Stress was laid on the dangers of purely linguistic methods reminiscent of the old teaching of Classics, and of the mental dishonesty associated with examinations. No doubt these are real dangers. But over and above the apprehension of risks arising from incompetent teaching was the sense of incompatibility between the associations of the classroom and the fostering of a love for English literature." ¹

As the Report goes on to say in its next paragraph, "such views could only be expressed by those who realised keenly what the teaching of literature should be", and it is at this stage that we realise just how comprehensive a rebuilding of the educational edifice the Committee had set itself. Confronted with opinions both that teachers had no business to be departing from the soulless peddling of dry facts on the one hand, and that they were incompetent to deal with the sensitivities of literature on the other, the Newbolt Committee decided to seek to recruit a new sort of teacher.

"What we wish to find in the English teacher of the future – and what we look to the universities to supply – is a combination of a sensitiveness to the aesthetic and emotional appeal of literature with a reverence for exact knowledge and an appreciation of the use of language as an instrument of exact thought. The teacher has to avoid the danger of investing literature with associations which will prevent its being a delight and a refreshment. On the other hand he must avoid the danger of using it to cultivate a shallow impressionism and an insincere fluency, in which case it simply feeds 'the lie in the soul' from which it is the aim of the best education to deliver us.The teachers who have made literature, whether English or Classical, both the best educational instrument and the most valuable possession for life for their pupils, have not been those who communicate the enthusiasms (and prejudices) of mere impressionism, but those who have made a scholar's 'infinite capacity for taking pains' attractive by the force of their personality, their sympathy and humour – a sympathy and humour which were doubtless natural to them but which they have enriched in great measure through their study of great writers." ²

This must have seemed at the time something of a tall order, and the philosophy behind it explains why Stephen Potter entitled two sections of his account of the development of English degree courses, particularly at Oxford, "In the Days of the Report" and "After the Report". The style of the Newbolt Committee's findings impressed him with its departure from the "flawless and perfectly flat Board [of Education] language"

"Not a touch of this. The ground covered is very wide, yet the whole is lightly and pregnantly written. Its recommendations, better than sensible, even have a strong hint of Principle behind them. The Report emphasises that changes are in the air." ³

¹ Op.cit. §126

² Ibid §131

³ *The Muse in Chains*, 1937, p 219

The Newbolt Committee saw the Universities, to which they devoted the whole of Chapter VII of their Report, as a central element in those changes:

"We have more than twice as many Universities as in 1870, and the University students have increased in much greater proportion. It seems certain that, unless the Universities entirely fail in the performance of their functions, this progress will be maintained and carried further.....This is not merely because a much larger proportion of the secondary school boys now go to Universities nor even because the best boys from elementary schools are beginning to go. It is also partly because the Universities no longer close their doors to women. Already there are some six thousand women students in the Universities of England and Wales. There will be many more in a few years. Especially in the last 20 or 30 years [Universities] have enormously increased their influence over the schools of the country by the system of examinations which they created and control. London University took the lead in this by the introduction of the idea of the external student as well as by school examinations.In the last 30 years a system of University Extension Lectures and Tutorial Classes has grown up and carried University teaching, given by University teachers, all over the country.For all these reasons, the University is now immensely more important in the education of the nation than it used to be." ¹

It was, therefore, of the utmost importance that the Universities should be in the forefront of the revitalised attitude to English studies that Newbolt was determined to bring about.

"It is not too much to say that, till quite lately, English had no position at all at the Universities. ...Habit, intellectual pride and loyalty to their schools and teachers would alike tend to make [dons] look down on the books which everybody could read, and regard them as unfit to take a place at the University side by side with the books that only scholars could read." ²

Members of the Newbolt Committee were well aware of movements towards reform in schools, and they were anxious to see the effects spreading ever wider:

"The last 30 years have witnessed great improvements in the teaching of English in the majority of Secondary Schools – improvements that are often ignored in current criticism. Writers in the press are apt to assume that school lessons in literature are confined to the study of elaborately annotated texts of Shakespeare, and that school essays chiefly revolve upon vague and abstract themes like Patriotism and Moral Courage, with occasional but doubtful relief in the form of an essay on Football. That this state of things can still be found here and there it would be rash to deny, but it is no longer general.Many interesting experiments, such as those described to us by Mr. Caldwell Cookhave been tried with a view to encouraging self-expression. These include debates, improvised dialogues and dramatic scenes, and ten minute lectures by pupils in class as well as in out-of-school hours.Yet the position of English in the Secondary Schools is still far from satisfactory in respect of actual time allotted, of methods, and of results. There is something pathetic about the acceptance by boys and masters in the great Public Schools of a low standard of English as if it were inevitable.English teaching, which, in fact, demands endless skill and resource, is too often thought a task which any teacher can perform. The chief and outstanding fault in the

¹ Op.cit. §190

² Ibid. §191

teaching at this stage is a lack of resource with a consequent adherence to some restricted method – which may be good in itself as one of many devices – until both teacher and class become stale and the work loses life." ¹

and only the Universities could bring about the necessary change of attitude, train the teachers that the desired expansion would require, and inspire them with the enthusiasm and the gift for passing it on to their pupils of which English teaching stood in such urgent need:

"There are some things which it appears to us to be within our province and part of our duty to say. First of all, the School or Schools of English Language and Literature should rank at every English University as at least the equal of any Arts School. By nothing less can a University recognise the importance of our language and the greatness of our literature..... A charge often brought against English at the Universities is that it is a "soft option". This is an accusation which affects the whole of our enquiry. If it were made good, it would go a long way toward providing a justification for denying English the place in our educational system which we demand for it.But it is a pure delusion to suppose that the fact that a boy or man knows enough English to talk to his brother, to take a railway ticket, or even to conduct a business, leaves him nothing hard or difficult to learn when he comes to study English Literature.The literature of England belongs to all England, not to the Universities or to any *coterie* of the literary or the learned: and all may enjoy it who will. But there is another delight besides this open and universal one. In this matter, as in others, the scholar has his own task and his own reward. The man who enters an English School hoping for an idle or an easy time should at once find that he has deceived himself. The University will ask much more of him than can as a rule be attempted by the ordinary reader. Besides, the sense in which Shakespeare is open to all the world, there is another in which the full knowledge of him is the last reward of prolonged and laborious study.Into this scholarly study of literature other elements besides exegesis, that is the drawing out of a book all that is in it, must, of course, enter. In the first place, literature, and in particular poetry, is the finest of the fine arts, and its principles and methods need at least as much study as those of the others." ²

To conclude that the Newbolt Report brought about an immediate reformation would be a mistaken assumption. As has already been shown, many teachers were uninfluenced ³, and the Universities certainly took their time about implementing some of its proposals and accepting its underlying philosophy, if indeed it can fairly be said to have had one. David Palmer agreed with Stephen Potter about its style, "Rarely has the Civil Service produced such a readable document", ⁴ but is less happy about its content:

"However, it is for the most part a rather uncritical acclaim of the prestige of English Literature as an educational instrument. Scattered through its 400 pages are reiterated generalizations about the 'glories' of the national literature, and the wide scope of the survey is somewhat flimsily grounded upon vague assumptions about the cultural influence of the subject. As an official Report it is disappointingly nebulous in its conclusions." ⁵

¹ Op.cit. §§ 108,109,117 *passim*

² Op.cit. §§193-195 *passim*

³ v.sup. pp 31-32

⁴ *The Rise of English Studies*, 1965, p 179

⁵ Ibid.

Palmer was, however, able to find some ameliorating factors:

"Nevertheless, the report voiced the general dissatisfaction with outworn methods of teaching which had lingered on in schools and universities since the previous century. It endorsed the criticism of the narrowness of old-fashioned philology in undergraduate courses, and recognized that the study of language should include syntax and semantics as well as phonology, particularly where it is combined with the critical and historical study of literature." ¹

Perhaps the fairest way of estimating the effect of the Newbolt Report is less by the importance of any particular achievement which may be ascribed to it, than in the fact that it prepared the way for a significant increase in the influence of those (like Caldwell Cook) who had hitherto been working in the background with an impact little wider than that of the school which happened to employ them; and those who had not as yet appeared on the scene, but who were able to thrive in the more liberal atmosphere which Newbolt heralded.

Foremost among these is Dr F R Leavis, who became a beacon in the world of university English studies, gave his name to a school of criticism, and was a powerful ingredient in the mental processes and methodology of a whole swathe of those engaged in literary studies long after his 'floreast' dates. Indeed, I can just personally remember what may well have been his last intervention in matters of literary controversy, which occurred during my probationer year in the teaching profession – an article contributing to the debate on whether C P Snow could properly be styled a novelist. As I recall it, over an interval of nearly forty years, he supported the right side, but with such clumsy and misdirected vehemence as to lend considerable advantage to the opposition; an interpretation which some would no doubt read as a paradigm of his overall contribution to the Cambridge English Faculty and to the world of English teaching in general.

David Palmer, for instance, says of him that "nobody has argued more cogently about the place of English studies in the university"², but fails to be convinced or impressed by his arguments. He refers to:

"Dr. Leavis's particular and uncompromising stress upon the traditional belief that we are somehow wiser and better for our reading of great literature, just as the confessed aim of all education has always been in one way or another to equip us for 'the important choices of actual life'" ³

¹ Op.cit. p 179

² *The Rise of English Studies*, 1965, p 158

³ Ibid. p 160

Palmer finds this stress too narrow:

".....there seems little reason why English studies should be peculiarly fitted to become the chief underprop of humane education, as Dr Leavis would have them to be. Since his proposals have never been implemented, we have still to discover whether the literary critics trained under these conditions would be markedly better equipped than other educated men, but the notion seems rather improbable. As a race, the great critics of the past have not been particularly distinguished from their fellow men for their adroitness in dealing with 'the important choices of actual life'." ¹

Shayer describes him as "one of the most outspoken advocates of the 'minority culture' theory", ² which he feels to have been a key point of tension in secondary education since 1945. This in turn developed as a result of the impact of the 'New Criticism' which Shayer believes to have been established within the school context by the mid-thirties, placing emphasis "on such things as tone, style, the writer's intention, artistic structure, the use of symbol or irony, and on the general imaginative qualities of the text"; putting texts "unequivocally at the centre of literary study with historical-biographical detail only just bringing up the rear"; and ensuring that "the superficial irrelevancies of 'allusion hunting', extensive biographical background.....and grammatical red herrings were discarded (in theory) in a single enlightened sweep."³ In real terms, it seems clear that the practice did not entirely live up to the theory, or that real life went on more outside the bracket than within it.

Nevertheless, Shayer is clearly entitled to say that "The New Criticism represented a major advance in literary studies on both sides of the Atlantic and is one of the principal agents of influence in English in this century"⁴ even if that advance was more apparent at University than at school level, and there is a greater degree of sober realism in the way in which he continues:

"One can at least say that if School Certificate set books changed little during the thirties, forties and fifties, at least in many schools the *method* of study changed in a 'New Critical' direction, though it would be rash to assume that the change was either rapid or universal". ⁵

The trouble is, perhaps, the effect that Leavis tended to have upon his disciples: "No one concerned with literature can fail to respond with excitement to this sort of thing"⁶ says Shayer a little later as he moves on (and back) to the 'Minority Culture' idea; rather as the students of Peter Abelard are said to have responded to his famous lecture

¹ Op.cit. p 160

⁴ Ibid.

² Op.cit. p 124

⁵ Ibid. pp 125-126

³ Ibid. p 125

⁶ Ibid. p 127

"I said 'Ye are Gods'!" Shayer quotes at length from Leavis' essay of 1930, *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture*, and then sums up a key passage as follows: "To be involved in teaching English is not just to be concerned with pupils' 'reading' or 'writing' or 'spelling' but to be responsible for the health of language, and consequently for civilised thinking and living, for the growth of emotional and even moral judgment, and for the quality of life itself."¹ Heady stuff indeed, and quite a heavy burden for the teacher of English, which perhaps the expectations of the intervening sixty-five years have somewhat mitigated.

It all comes out a little less intoxicating in Francis Mulhern's detailed study of the contribution to the intellectual life of England of Leavis, whom he describes as having had "one of the longest and most controversial ... careers ...this century", evoking "above all others in modern English cultural history.... asperity, dissension and bitter conflict"² Commenting on the essay *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture* Mulhern observes:

"Abused and alienated, the language of modern times was also uprooted....the substance of 'culture' was, to an ever greater extent, 'actually a matter of words', and that 'without the living subtlety of the finest idiom (which is dependent on use) the heritage dies'. Now, with the decay of the social life that it had articulated, that 'use', on which the entire super-structure of 'culture' ultimately rested, had ceased to be general or to command assent among writers. The major literary achievements of the pre-industrial age had derived their strength from the resources of a vital popular speech rooted in a stable and homogenous social life. The 'tremendous principle of life' that animated Dunbar's best poetry was....the gift of the peasantry of mediaeval Scotland; Shakespeare's language....was that of a 'community which forged it as a vital medium'; and there too, in 'the same people that created the English language for Shakespeare's use', was the source of the 'rich, poised and mature humanity' that Leavis cherished in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The contrasting situation of the modern writer – poet, journalist or critic – was one of rootlessness."

Shayer chooses a different and, within his chosen context, a more exciting emphasis:

"In any period it is upon a very small minority that the discerning appreciation of art and literature depends: it is..... only a few who are capable of unprompted, first-hand judgment. They are still a small minority, though a larger one, who are capable of endorsing such first-hand judgment by genuine personal response.....The minority capable not only of appreciating Dante, Shakespeare, Donne, Baudelaire, Conrad (to take major instances) but of recognising their latest successors constitute the conscious-ness of the race.....Upon this minority depends our power of profiting by the finest human experience of the past; they keep alive the subtlest and

¹ Op.cit. p 127

² *The Moment of Scrutiny*, 1979, Preface, p vii

³ Ibid.

most perishable parts of tradition. Upon them depend the implicit standards that order the finer living of an age."¹

As I said before, heady stuff; and one can readily understand how such material might have inspired a new generation of teachers and lecturers sitting at the feet of Leavis in his prime and watching him throw open a succession of charmed, magic casements.

Perhaps Fred Inglis sums up his impact most effectively when he says:

"Perhaps the only attempt at totality in a theory of education which has had visible effect upon English schools is that of F R Leavisand it would seem no accident that almost alone among schoolteachers in this country the teachers of English attempt to talk out with their pupils a moral position for the individual and a critique of the society he lives in. We do this.....often uncertainly and with a sense of riven responsibility, but we do it as best we can."²

This highlights effectively an essential point in the search for some firm ground to stand on in the examination of standards in the teaching of English. For just as I argued, in the Preface to this thesis³, that "standards" is not a word with a single, constant implication, so, too, with "values" – no matter how loudly we trumpet our values as traditional and eternal, the word remains another conveniently ambiguous label for an elusive concept, essentially transitory and inconstant. As individuals we tend to stick to those values that we learned or acquired in youth, and to change them only as the result of some fairly substantial shock to the system – but if the individual changes only slowly and reluctantly, and society as imperceptibly as the movement of the hour hand on a clock, that change is none the less continuous and inevitable. What we tend to call an "ethos" is in reality no more than a prevailing tendency, tempered by the conservatism of those who have not yet embraced it and the radicalism of those who are already moving on to some newer vision; but at any given time it is still possible to give that ethos a local habitation and a name, and this is never done more readily than by politicians and tabloid journalists, who crave for simplistic expressions of the problems of the age, so that they can peddle equally simplistic solutions.

When we talk of standards of education we are generally concerning ourselves with education as applied to society rather than to the individual – and those standards can only be assessed by the values that society seeks to apply to itself and its citizens at the time. The religious certainties which informed the opinions of Matthew Arnold, and

¹ Op.cit. p 127

² *The Englishness of English Teaching*, 1969, pp 2-3

³ v.sup. pp 10-15

the moral absolutes which underlined James Welton's demand for ennobling sentiments¹, can no longer be taken for granted – any more than it is possible to assume a common knowledge of the body of literary and specifically biblical reference which authors quite recent in the annals of English literature could take for granted. Take, for example, Kipling's short story *The Gardener*, almost certainly inspired by his work with the Imperial War Graves Commission. Essentially, this deals with a woman who, having given birth to an illegitimate son, devotes her life to convincing everybody, including the child, that she is in fact his aunt – and maintains the fiction even when searching unsuccessfully for his grave among the multitudinous dead of Ypres. Eventually she meets a man who says simply 'Come with me and I will show you where your son lies'. When Kipling wrote the next, and final, paragraph, it must have been incomprehensible to him that the concluding allusion would not remain indefinitely apparent to his readers:

"When Helen left the Cemetery she turned for a last look. In the distance she saw the man bending over his young plants; and she went away, supposing him to be the gardener."²

Yet what proportion of A level English students, or of undergraduates reading for an English honours degree, could be relied upon to make the necessary connection today? And just as familiarity with the cadences of the Authorized Version can no longer be assumed, what of the casual reliance on classical mythology which has been a staple in the metaphor, simile and reference of author after author throughout the history of English Literature ? How much of that can we legitimately expect the modern student to take in his stride ?

Yet it is important not to see this unquestionable deterioration in an area of knowledge, once taken for granted as part of the educated man's mental wardrobe, as necessarily evidence of a decline in educational standards. It is rather, as would be a comparison between the conventional wardrobes of members of two different generations, a change in taste, a change in the values of contemporary society. Perhaps, to offer a simplistic solution of my own, a century which produced the Somme, the Holocaust, Dresden, Hiroshima and the long drawn out fears of the cold war, produced in the process a

¹ v.sup. p 28

² In *Debits and Credits*, 1926, p 414

society which could no longer, in the main, be frightened by the thunderbolts of Zeus or comforted by promises of an afterlife. In short, a real and practical *Götterdämmerung*. What is unquestionable is that the two world wars of the twentieth century have provided two examples of the kind of event which change the values of both individuals and of society, and which provide not merely the opportunity but the necessity for English teachers to engage in the kind of dialogue with their pupils referred to by Fred Inglis. The point may perhaps be illustrated by extracts from the poetry inspired by these events, almost all of it readily available to schools in the anthologies progressively added to stock cupboards over the period.

Before the first world war, it was possible to believe that, as in Kipling's *Stalky & Co*, there was no higher calling than to go out and serve the glories of empire, and no better values on which to model the standards of education than those which produced the backbone of the British Raj. It is unfair to see Kipling as nothing more than a jingoist (as witness the incident of the jelly-bellied flag-flapper in the chapter *The Flag of their Country*) but it is in the light of *Stalky and Co* and contemporary thinking at the turn of the century that Newbolt could write

"The voice of the schoolboy rallies the ranks
Play up! Play up! and play the game!";

that Rupert Brooke could react, in *The Soldier*, to the prospect of death in action, with

"If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England" ;

and that Asquith similarly could evoke the influence of 'ennobling literature' and the stirring rhetoric of *Henry V* :

"...And falling thus he wants no recompence
Nor needs he any hearse to bear him hence
Who goes to join the men of Agincourt."

That spirit is epitomised in Newbolt's *Clifton Chapel*:

Qui procul hinc, the legend's writ
(The frontier grave is far away)
Qui ante diem periit,
Sed miles, sed pro patria

and it died in Flanders. While actually

concentrating on something entirely different, H E Bates reveals one of those memories that seems to be engraved ineradicably on the retina when he recalls his first meeting

with Edmund Kirby ¹

"a young infantry officer who had come home from France without several of his fingers and with his face atrociously mutilated and his arms and legs stiff from wounds."

This kind of encounter brought home quite clearly what it was your country needed you for – and it had ceased to be a romantic prospect. Kipling himself turned on the politicians:

"They shall not return to us, the resolute, the young,
The eager and whole-hearted whom we gave:
But the men who left them thriftily to lie in their own dung,
Shall they come with years and honour to the grave?" ²

and

"I could not dig: I dared not rob:
Therefore I lied to please the mob.
Now all my lies are proved untrue
And I must face the men I slew.
What tale shall serve me here among
Mine angry and defrauded young?" ³

Wilfred Owen mourned, not the lack of hearses for those 'who go to join the men of Agincourt', but of "passing bells for these who die as cattle"; and, in a new tone of realism, provided a bitter response to Newbolt's *Clifton Chapel*:

"If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, –
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
Pro Patria Mori" ⁴

Sassoon also attacked furiously those who tried to keep the old spirit alive:

"The House is crammed: tier beyond tier they grin
And cackle at the Show, while prancing ranks
Of harlots shrill the chorus, drunk with din;
'We're sure the Kaiser loves our dear old tanks!'

I'd like to see a Tank come down the stalls,
Lurching to rag-time tunes or 'Home, sweet Home',
And there'd be no more jokes in Music-halls
To mock the riddled corpses round Bapaume." ⁵

Even Newbolt changes his tone and loses his old certainties:

"O living pictures of the dead,
O songs without a sound
O fellowship whose phantom tread
Hallows a phantom ground –
How in a gleam have these revealed
The faith we had not found." ⁶

1 v.sup. p 18

2 In *Debts and Credits*, 1926, p 414

3 *A Dead Statesman*

4 *Dulce et Decorum Est*

5 'Blighters'

6 *The War Films*

It was possible for the poetic vision to retain echoes of the old romanticism, but only if they were mixed with the new realism, in a literary and linguistic realisation of that progressive change of values and reactions to which I referred earlier¹:

"Bosches back in Strip Trench – it's a monumental bollocks every time and but we avoid wisely there is but death. Lance-Corporal Bains, sweating on the top line, reckoned he'd clicked a cushy get away; but Captain Cadwaladr holds the westward ride, & that's torn it for the dodger. Captain Cadwaladr is come to the breach full of familiar blasphemies. He wants the senior private – the front is half-right and what whore's bastard gave the retire and: Through on the flank my arse.

Captain Cadwaladr restores
the Excellent Disciplines of the Wars.

And then he might see sometime the battle was driven a bow draught from the castle and sometime it was at the gates of the castle.

And so till midnight and into the ebb-time when the spirit slips lightly from sick men.....and all these here lying begin to die on both parties." ²

There is no longer a sense of a cause to die for so much as grim acceptance of fate – as in Alan Seeger's prophetic "I have a rendezvous with death at some disputed barricade"; and where *Sed miles, sed pro patria* used to be enough, there is now a growing revulsion at the thought of "The imminent deaths of twenty thousand men/that for a fantasy and trick of fame,/Go to their graves like beds." ³

By the time of the Second World War, there was less shock at the inevitable bloody carnage, but there was also a greater sense of counting the cost; deeds of heroism could be praised in verse, but they needed to reflect a decision that the sacrifice was worthwhile. Defending a position to the last man was no longer the automatic duty of the fighting man. Housman could still evoke the spirit of Thermopylae in his poem *The Oracles* to reinforce the concept of inevitability:

"The King with half the East at heel is marched from lands of morning;
Their fighters drink the rivers up, their shafts benight the air.
And he that stands will die for nought, and home there's no returning.
The Spartans on the sea-wet rock sat down and combed their hair." ⁴

but by the time Michael Thwaites uses the same image, in his very uneven poem *The Jervis Bay*, the sacrifice has to be the result of a calculation of relative values. The Royal Navy had not abandoned 'the Nelson touch', but before 'engaging the enemy more closely', and committing his armed merchantman convoy-escort to inevitable defeat in conflict with a German battleship, the captain weighs carefully the value of delaying the attack on the convoy against the loss of his own ship.

1 v. sup p 41 2 David Jones, *In Parenthesis*, p 181 3 *Hamlet*, IV.iv.60-62 4 *Last Poems* XXV

It is not just familiarity with classical reference that is starting on its long decline, but the automatic acceptance of classical values:

"Rarely it comes, and unforeseen.
In the life of a man, a community, a nation,
The moment that knits up struggling diversity
In one, the changing transverse lights
Focussed to pin-points burning intensity,
Rarely and unforeseen.
So Fegen stood, and time dissolved,
And Sturdee with his ships steamed out
From Coronel, and in the pass
Of Roncevalles a horn was sounding,
And Oates went stumbling out alone
Into that Antarctic night,
And Socrates the Hemlock drank
And paid his debts and laid him down,
And through the fifty-three *Revenge*
Ran on, as in Thermopylae
The cool-eyed Spartans looked about,
Child Roland, trembling, took and blew,
The *Jervis Bay* went hard-a-port."

Perhaps, in the last analysis, what emerges from the impact of two major conflicts and an uncertain peace in the first half of this century, is a new and wide-ranging cynicism. One finds it in the last line of a poem called *The Tail Gunner* - "And when he died, they washed him out of the turret with a hose" - and, with much wider implication, in Henry Reed's *Lessons of the War* :

" like the bolt,
And the breech, and the cocking-piece, and the point of balance
Which in our case we have not got; "

and it symbolises, even more certainly than the challenge to gender stereotyping and to an automatic acceptance of a 'two nations' division of British society which began to emerge after 1918, a growing unwillingness to accept any code of authority that depended upon automatic assumptions of its own validity.

It was this spirit that made it necessary for English to be taught in the way which Fred Inglis describes;¹ which is illustrated by one of the teachers with whom he worked, who describes reading Binyon's *For the Fallen* with a class and then discussing whether Remembrance Sunday should continue to be observed;² and which was to require a new approach to the whole structure of education in this country. While possibly delaying the implementation of the new approaches that Leavis and his

¹ v.sup. p 41

² v.inf. p 76

followers had been developing in the thirties, the war, when it ended, had made almost inevitable the establishment of the kind of environment in which new ideas could flourish, and in which the weight of the dead hand of tradition was being seen increasingly as an irrelevance – and it is significant that the country did not wait for the final conclusion to hostilities before embarking upon the preparations for a more significant legislative onslaught on the deficiencies of the education system than had ever been contemplated before. Whatever else may be said about the Education Act of 1944, it undoubtedly constituted a natural watershed in educational practice, just as the recent Education Reform Act of 1988 undoubtedly constituted another.

PART TWO – Norwood and After

We would assert our belief that premature external examination of pupils at school in English Literature is not only beset with every difficulty but is productive of much harm in its influence on the teaching of English Literature and eventually upon English as a whole; and for that reason we would advise against any such form of examination.

The Norwood Report p 96

In the interest of the individual child and of the increased freedom and responsibility of the teaching profession change in the School Certificate examination should be in the direction of making the examination entirely internal, that is to say, conducted by the teachers at the school on syllabuses and papers framed by themselves.

The Norwood Report : Summary of Main Recommendations (9)

The first public manifestation of the intended new deal was in the White Paper of July 1943 entitled *Educational Reconstruction*, which seems to have been unanimously well received:

"*The Times* not unjustly called it a landmark in English education, and said that it promised 'the greatest and grandest educational advance since 1870.'In a two days' debate....the House of Commons 'showed itself of one mind to a degree rare in Parliamentary annals.'" ¹

This effectively cleared the way for the Norwood Report of 1943, from which the Education Act of 1944 draws its source and origin, and which was an account of the proceedings of "the Committee of the Secondary School Examination Council appointed by the President of the Board of Education in 1941" to look into Curriculum and Examinations in Secondary Schools.

Many, but not all, of its recommendations were accepted, and it is an interesting, if somewhat pointless, speculation to consider what might have been the resultant picture of education, fifty years later, if all of them had been. Certainly, it is not a speculation which would have delayed the Committee. Their report concludes with the words:

"we have reached a common mind as to the developments which we deem to be desirable in our educational system during the next few years. Our readers will, perhaps, count it to our credit that in a period of rapid evolutionary changes we do not think it wise to read too closely and too confidently the possibilities of the distant future."

In view of this becoming modesty, it would be futile to spend time regretting the fact that hardly a single one of nineteen major recommendations and six expressions of hope has survived into contemporary practice; and hopelessly anachronistic to lament the circumstance that some of them were never enacted at all.

¹ H C Barnard, *A Short History of English Education 1760-1944*, 1947, pp 344-345

¹ Op.cit. p 127

Nevertheless, there are passages in the Norwood Report that underline not merely the inescapable rightness of refusing to read "too confidently the possibilities of the distant future"; but also that the 'common mind' which, even in the dark days of the second world war could concentrate so effectively upon the desirable developments of the educational system over the next few years, was capable of a more rational, more humane and more understanding approach than that of the singular minds which have held sway over education in those recent times into which the Norwood Committee was wise enough to refuse to peer. Let me cite just one example of a position taken by that committee which, in my opinion, demonstrates clearly the deterioration in political thinking over half a century, and this, please note, is not to become a specific recommendation, but just a thought *en passant*.

"Some Local Authorities grant loans to students of merit who wish to go on to advanced education at a university or elsewhere. Many of us feel that, if a student is really of merit high enough to justify assistance, it should be given without the obligation of repayment, which in many cases is bound to be a burden in the first years of earning, and that encouragement should not be given to a young man or woman to borrow for any purpose." ¹

It is the contrast between the mental attitudes, rather than the mere fact of change, which should inform our examination of the detailed history of educational development between the Education Act of 1944 and the Educational Reform Act of 1988, and should, at the same time, maintain a moral dimension among the coldly rational elements of cost-effectiveness and formative assessment which are likely to move to the forefront of our consciousness as we reach the end of the journey.

At the beginning of it, we can see the revolution which the 1944 Act was determined to bring about, and it is instructive to look back at the first twelve of the Norwood Committee's 'main recommendations' which were intended to assist in creating it. On pages 139 to 141 of the Report these recommendations are conveniently summarised: the first twelve are in four sections, of which the first contains seven recommendations, the second and last only one each, and the third three. The first section must be by far the best known. It set down for the first time the principle that "the definition of secondary education should be enlarged so as to embrace three broad types of education" ² and having thus sown the seeds of the tripartite system which still contrives

¹ Op.cit. p 41

² Ibid. p 139

to bedevil the thinking of many in national and local government, went on to create a series of checks and balances against the worst excesses of a rigid application of a division into Grammar, Technical and Modern. It is, I think, instructive to note the thought that went into these qualificatory recommendations and then to note the amount of time and effort spent in implementing them. Almost without exception they have been totally forgotten, and it is questionable whether any of them received more than lip-service attention from the beginning. Recommendation 2(a) tells us that "these three types of secondary education.....should be accorded all the parity which amenities and conditions can bestow"; 2(b) that "In suitable circumstances secondary schools of different types should be combined" which sounds remarkably like an endorsement of comprehensive education, for which credit is *not* normally given to the 1944 Act. It is, of course, true that the members of the Norwood Committee may well have been thinking more of the sort of institution to which the label 'trilateral' might be attached than of the conventional comprehensive, but the evidence of the Report is by no means entirely supportive of that interpretation. Number 3 among the recommendations states simply "Each type of school should be so organised, particularly in the lower forms, as to make transfer from one to another as easy as possible" and this point is elaborated in Recommendations 6 and 7, which read respectively:

"In each secondary school of whatever kind pupils of the ages 11+ to 13+ should form a 'Lower School'. The curriculum of the Lower School should be roughly common to all schools. During his progress through this Lower School the pupil should be under the supervision of a Master or Mistress charged with the special responsibility of recommending, after skilled observation, the type of secondary education most appropriate in each case at the age of 13+"
 and
 "During the years 11+ to 13+ transfer should take place as desirable; but at 13+ the pupils in each Lower School should be reviewed and be recommended to the school giving the most appropriate kind of secondary education. Promotion from the Lower School into the higher forms of the same school should not be made as a matter of course."¹

If these recommendations had been enacted in 1944 in such a way as to give them teeth – rather than what did happen, which was to allow them to float in the background as pious but impracticable aspirations – much good might have resulted and the tripartite system been vindicated as a result: as things in fact were, it would be hard to think of

¹ All quotations on this page are from the Norwood Report, p 139

a better instance of legislation more honoured in the breach than the observance. Recommendation 4 merely gives us the label 11+, "as a convenient administrative term", but again it is important to understand that, to the Norwood Committee, the convenience of the term in question was for labelling pupils of an age appropriate for transfer to secondary education, including "children of 10+ and 12+ in whose interest transfer to secondary education should be accelerated or delayed", and emphatically not as shorthand for the method of discrimination or selection. On the contrary, the one remaining recommendation of this group, number 5, makes this absolutely plain; and gives at the same time the first hint as to a key strand of thought among the Committee which was never to be given full play, and which could hardly be more diametrically opposed to contemporary political thinking if the members of that Committee had actually read confidently and accurately into the distant future and consciously determined to defy it! Recommendation 5 proposes that:

"Differentiation of pupils for the kind of secondary education appropriate to them should be made upon the basis of (a) the judgment of the teachers of the primary school, supplemented if desired by (b) 'intelligence' and 'performance' and other tests. Due consideration should be given to the choice of the parent and the pupil." ¹

It is this desire to place responsibility firmly and foremost upon the shoulders of the teaching profession,— not merely in the task of determining initial aptitude but later through the Master or Mistress charged with the special responsibility of recommending, *after skilled observation*, the most appropriate type of education from the age of 13+ — which most clearly differentiates the Norwood Committee from its many successors as government appointed enquirers into the educational process, and justifies (insofar as anything can) the plaintive cries of 'might-have-been' from those who have blown the dust off its long-forgotten pages. For it was not in terms of secondary school selection alone that the Norwood Committee saw teachers as the proper repositories of genuine responsibility, but in the wider world of public examinations; which must now occupy a larger place in this thesis than implementation of that vision would probably have warranted. The third group of recommendations, numbers 9 to 11, concerns itself with the School Certificate Examination, and the key sentence is the opening one:

¹ Op.cit. p 139

"In the interest of the individual child and of the increased freedom and responsibility of the teaching profession change in the School Certificate Examination should be in the direction of making the examination entirely internal, that is to say, conducted by the teachers at the school on syllabuses and papers framed by themselves."

and the committee goes on to suggest a seven year transitional period during which the University Examining Bodies should continue to operate the examination, but through the agency of Sub-Committees containing strong teacher representation, and that, at the end of this period a decision should be taken as to whether the change to a wholly internal system is possible or whether there should be a "further transitional period in which the teachers would take still greater control of the examination and the Universities still less". What is not envisaged is that the drive to have the teacher in charge of the assessment and testing of what his pupils have learned should be abandoned, or that examinations should continue to lead and dominate the syllabus rather than reflect and appraise it.

In this respect, the Norwood Committee was well ahead of its time: not until the advent of CSE Modes 2 and 3 could this concept be said to have been given a legitimate opportunity to prove itself – and while it is an easy task to find educationists prepared to insist that CSE was in almost all respects a more appropriate test as well as better founded and administered than its GCE parallel, this was clearly not the view which politicians were prepared to hear.

In the middle of this major but doomed reform it is easy to overlook recommendation number 10 (b) which was, in the main, put into practice and taken thereafter so much for granted that the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1988 was seen by scarcely anyone as the reimposition of earlier arbitrary barriers and limitations which it in fact was. The wording of the Committee, in seeking to dispose of the idea that examination "success" consists of the collective negotiation of several disparate hoops during the same period, reads:

"(the examination should) become a "subject" examination, pupils taking whatever subjects they wish to take. A certificate stating the performance of the pupil should be given to each candidate; to this statement should be added by the school authorities an account of the pupil's school record."

To be fair, it must, I suppose, be conceded that this premature invention of the Records of Achievement concept had to wait for its introduction to the 1988 Act which swept away just about everything else of the Norwood Report which was still left.

Of the two remaining, single paragraph, recommendations of the Committee, one was so avant garde that its implementation is not yet seriously under consideration, while the other will seem so familiar that one is surprised to find that it needed to be put forward.

The first of these, number 8, reads:

"Up to the age of 18+ all pupils should receive full-time education or be brought under the influence of part-time education, and full consideration should be given to the educational and social advantages of the performance of public service for a period of six months falling between school and University or other courses of higher education."¹

while the second, number 12, effectively creates the 'A' level examination with the same emphasis on individual subjects as was emphasised in the proposed reforms of the School Certificate.

"To meet the requirements of University Entrance, of entry into the professions and other needs, a School Leaving Examination should be conducted twice each year for pupils of 18+. Pupils should take in this examination the subjects required for their particular purpose in view. Its purpose should not be to provide evidence of a 'general' or 'all-round' education."²

The remaining recommendations devote themselves to the financing of university careers, in effect creating the framework for the establishment of State and County Major Scholarships and declaring the winning of an Oxbridge College or provincial University scholarship to constitute a claim on public funds; and conclude with three general proposals: to increase the Inspectorate, to improve school record-keeping, and to establish machinery for encouraging and publishing educational research. It is also interesting to note that even in the section dealing with the examination for State Scholarships a refreshingly unfamiliar sense of liberalism appears, coupled yet again with the desire to place trust in the discriminatory powers of the schools. It was proposed to issue two lists of candidates for Scholarship examinations:

"Part A would contain those of high intellectual distinction, that is to say, capable of obtaining a first class or a good second class; part B would contain those of good intellectual attainment whose claims might be considered if there were other outstanding merits disclosed by the school record, but undiscoverable by written examination".³

¹ Op.cit. p 140

² Ibid.

³ Ibid. p 139

I find this particular consideration an interesting contrast with the arid concentration on competition which seems to bedevil so much reformist zeal at both earlier and later periods of educational change. In his magisterial survey of the English examination system, *Examinations – An account of their evolution as administrative devices in England*, R J Montgomery refers to Lord Powis who, in the 1860s,

"Objected to men being examined in different papers. He wished to have men pitted against each other in one common classical examination for the purpose of assessing their rank order, as in an athletic competition."

Montgomery was writing in 1965 and could confidently begin the paragraph which introduces the antediluvian peer with the words "There would be few nowadays who would agree..." One cannot help but wonder whether he could have been quite so confident thirty years later, in the exciting and challenging atmosphere of SATs and League Tables. But it is from precisely such a standpoint that we must now look back upon the thinking of the Norwood Committee, though without allowing academic objectivity to be distorted. Even with that proviso, however, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that the Norwood Report, considered all in all, represents a wide-ranging and far-reaching survey of educational needs which, through its impact on the 1944 Act, was to have enormous influence for forty years; and demonstrates a confidence in the professionalism, integrity and ability of those charged with ensuring the success of educational provision which, had it lasted longer, might have achieved even more.

It is, as I have suggested above, at least arguably a pity that what will unquestionably be remembered as the main plank of the 1944 Act should have been a simplistic and divisive interpretation of one of the principal thrusts of the Norwood Committee – the introduction of the tripartite system of secondary education. As Professor H C Barnard, writing shortly after the enactment of the necessary legislation, observes:

"The history of English education is full of examples of theoretical arguments advanced to justify an already existing state of affairs. The *a priori* classification outlined by the Norwood Committee fitted in excellently with the scheme of post-primary education laid down in the Spens Report; and that in turn had been modelled largely on a system which had grown up in this country and had been determined mainly by historical, political and economic positions. For the 'academic' child of the Norwood report there would be the secondary grammar school; for the mechanically minded there would be the secondary technical school; while for the pupil with an 'essentially practical bent' there remained the secondary modern school.The division of

children into three types, with three corresponding kinds of secondary school into which they can be drafted at the age of eleven plus.....is implicit in the recommendations of the Hadow Report; and this scheme has merely been applied and elaborated by the Spens and Norwood committees." ¹

This, I believe, while true of the position which the 1944 Act undoubtedly took, is less than just to what the Norwood Committee actually intended. My own interpretation of their text is less as a bland continuation from Hadow through Spens than as a serious attempt to avoid too rigid an insistence on a 'three nations' educational philosophy. As I have already observed, the weight of the appropriate group of recommendations seems to me to be placed upon the creation of a series of checks and balances designed to prevent what actually occurred; a permanent and absolute division at the age of 11+, dependent exclusively upon an *ad hoc* examination. Had the actual practice of the 1950s incorporated some of the specific recommendations of Norwood, things must, I think, have been rather different. For instance, the insistence that "at 13+ the pupils in each Lower School should be reviewed and be recommended to the school giving the most appropriate kind of secondary education" reinforced by the two further observations that "the curriculum of the Lower School should be roughly common to all schools" and that "promotion from the Lower School into the higher forms of the same school should not be made as a matter of course." In practice, of course, this last clause was occasionally used in grammar schools as a threat or deterrent to the badly-behaved or otherwise undesirable pupil in his first two years, but had no other significance. The disparities of syllabus between Grammar and Secondary Modern in the first two years were so vast as to make promotion from the latter to the former almost impossible, however blatantly unfair subsequent developments might show the original selection process to have been, and the idea of a serious and significant review of aptitude after two years was never given serious credence. This last shortcoming is, I believe, symbolic of the failure of the 1944 Act to recognise the real strength and revolutionary zeal of the Norwood Report – its trust and belief in the ability and integrity of the teaching profession.

It will be remembered that the Committee's recommendation for the selection process was to be dependent firstly upon the judgement of primary school teachers, *supplemented* by tests, and that the 13+ review was to be in the hands of a Master or Mistress of

¹ *A Short History of English Education 1760-1944*, 1947, pp 310-311

Lower School charged with the special responsibility, *after skilled observation*, of making the necessary determination. It is not difficult to see snags in the operation of such a system, and the pressures on those so charged would have been considerable, but I for one would have preferred to have seen the scheme tried and fail rather than simply ignored; and it may be that in side-stepping this emphasis in the Norwood Report, the legislators of the 1944 Act missed a larger and more important opportunity than has been widely recognised.

What has, of course, been duly noted, is the related failure to act to the full extent of the opportunity on offer in respect of the reform of the examination system. In the sequel to his 1965 work, *Examinations*, R J Montgomery makes a particular point of this:

"The influential 1943 Norwood Report.....recommended that examinations should be available on a single subject basis. The child was to become the centre of the educational scene while the schools and their teachers were to be encouraged to develop a greater sense of responsibility for what they were teaching. Initially they were to offer their own syllabuses; ultimately they were to become responsible for their own examining which was to become internal to each school at the sixteen-year-old level."

He goes on to observe that, while the internalisation of examinations did not take place, the GCE examination introduced in 1951:

"was offered on a subject basis. Maintenance of balance in the curriculum was thus left to the secondary schools themselves, open as they were to inspection by the Ministry of Education."

In terms of maintaining a "child-centred" approach, this may be described as making the best of a bad job, and Montgomery immediately goes on to emphasise the point:

"Change became more rapid after the SSEC was superseded by the Schools Council for the Curriculum and Examinations in 1964. In 1965 the new CSE examinations were introduced for the abler pupils in secondary modern schools and, with their emphasis on teacher control at every level, reinforced an opinion that examinations at secondary schools would be freed from the conservative influences that had kept them unchanged for so long."

This last opinion seems to me to be apparent among the members of the Norwood Committee, or rather there seems to be a clear inference that such a desire was shared by eleven of the twelve signatories to the Norwood Report, since among them only Terry Thomas has caused an asterisk to be affixed to his name, which is glossed in the footnote that constitutes, apart from the date 23rd June 1943, the final words of the published document: "* Reserves his position on the internal examination."

1 *A New Examination of Examinations*, 1978, p 20

2 *Ibid.* p 21

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Op.cit.* p 142

Not, of course, that such an attitude is to be ascribed to the Norwood Committee as a creation, so much as a vocalisation of a weight of professional opinion that had been seeking official backing for some time. As Montgomery puts it:

"It had been the ambition of many people since long before the Norwood Committee that teachers should control their own examining operations not merely in the interests of their own professionalism nor of scientific accuracy, but because examinations should follow the curriculum and the curriculum should be the lively concern of every teacher."¹

This final point – whether examiners test what teachers are teaching or whether, in truth, teachers are constrained to teach what examiners have determined to examine, is a fundamental one in the debate on standards in English, and will be scrutinized in some detail in the second chapter of this thesis. Here it is appropriate to say that, if the brave new world of the Norwood Committee appeared as a more conventional and mundane establishment when translated into the legislation of the Butler Education Act, there was still a sense of a new deal, a fairer and brighter educational future, and wider opportunities for teachers to experiment with materials and styles of presentation appropriate to the pupils with whom they were dealing. It was, perhaps, the first era in which the philosophy might reasonably be expressed that the function of teachers was to help pupils to learn rather than to teach, and certainly the first era in which the concept of education as child-centred could be widely voiced.

I do not, of course, wish to imply that there was any sudden change in the style or content of English teaching, apparent across the newly established secondary schools of England. As Fred Inglis puts it:

"The ideologies of educational research have, like every other social science, been widely in conflict for most of this century, and if few practitioners appear to have noticed the disputes, it is generally because they have gone placidly forward, or roundabout, or somewhere else, with the procedures they have learned, and they have hoped for the best."²

Teachers who, having learned sufficient of the tricks of their trade to survive in the classroom, rely for their entire careers on one dog-eared file of notes as the basis for their lessons to class after class of pupils are referred to in Robert Protherough's coverage of the teacher in literature before 1918, and they are by no means a fiction, nor a threatened species. But in Protherough's assessment there is an element of inevitability about it³ –

¹ *A New Examination of Examinations*, 1978, p 53

² *The Englishness of English Teaching*, 1969, p 1

³ v.sup. p 20

– a sense that this is the conventional and accepted mode. After the Butler Act, for those who resented the treadmill, and sought to bring sunlight and a fresh breeze into "an atmosphere of chalk and dust, where stale reiteration clogs the air", there was a growing sense that their efforts would be welcome and appropriate. Perhaps, coincidentally, *The Englishness of English Teaching* makes the same point in talking about the architecture of a new town:

"The buildings are an unsurprising mixture of 1945 glum council battledress and the varieties of postwar ambitiousness in other directions radiating in a series of more or less random crescents and avenues grouped about a large, blank, treeless common and topped off with a few High-rise blocks of flats. The mixed school, now (1968) part of a comprehensive scheme, is a product of the same hapless recipes. Dreary glass and metal framework to begin with and something gayer and more hopeful as clip-on appendages subsequently."¹

Inside the classrooms, too, the gayer and more hopeful teacher may have been all too frequently a clip-on appendage to the daily routine, but at least the atmosphere was welcoming rather than threatening: or, if we may change to a botanical rather than mechanical image, the new teacher with new and different ideas was more likely than at an earlier stage in the history of education to be seen as an exotic plant to be cherished rather than as a weed to be extirpated before it corrupted the whole border; though the latter attitude was, and doubtless is, still to be found.

As early as 1939, P B Ballard was rejoicing in the defeat of what he called "Discredited Methods":

"Fifty years ago one of the main resources of the examiner in English was parsing and analysis.It figured in every English examination from the elementary school to the university. It was the *pièce de résistance* – a crucial test of the candidate's knowledge of his own language.Gone too is the vogue of the paraphrase. A sonnet was the favourite quarry.....To change its form was necessarily to degrade its meaning.That so fruitless an exercise should have gone out of fashion is neither a matter of surprise nor a matter of regret."²

His observations were principally intended as part of an attack on the examination system, and I shall return to this aspect of his contribution to the development of English teaching in the chapter on 'O' Level English Language, but they are also a direct continuation from his evidence before the Newbolt Committee,³ and, as such, of obvious relevance here:

"[grammar] is found by young people to be insufferably dull, it has no appreciable influence on either oral or written composition and it tends to kill all interest in the subject matter. It is the last of the three which is the head and

¹ Op.cit. p 39

² *Teaching and Testing English* pp 133-134

³ v.sup. p 32

front of the offending. For it revises the sovereignty of sense over words. If the sense or substance has an emotional appeal, and especially if it includes a large aesthetic element, the loss of interest is deplorable in the extreme. Which indeed accounts for the attack on the set book. For the study of the set book in English has become a mere echo of the study of the set book in Latin or Greek, which had all too often been an examination of dead words in a dead language. What ought to be the observation of a living organism had become the dissection of a dead body. And a post-mortem examination is no proper occupation for the young." ¹

It was to be twenty years before those responsible for the General Certificate of Education syllabuses in English Language finally acknowledged that their methods were discredited, and abandoned the triumvirate of objectionable techniques on which Dr Ballard had focused his attack, and I suspect that many of my contemporaries, starting their secondary education in the immediately postwar years, would have been surprised to find parsing, analysis and paraphrase listed as defunct, when they were still alive and kicking in a very large number of classrooms. What this proves, however, is the innate conservatism of the teaching profession, and the constant gap between advanced theory and standard practice. What Ballard was celebrating was the demise of the theory that "grammar is not only a desirable but an essential part of the English course" ², not the departure from the profession of those who had been brought up to believe it. This, naturally, took some time, and in the intervening period an increasing number of English specialists were chafing at the bit. In the course of the year in which the Butler Act's new subject-based GCE finally replaced School and Higher Cert., for instance, Harry Blamires was not merely echoing Ballard, but taking some of his propositions a good deal further:

"In the teaching of English, more than in the teaching of any other subject, we need a new start. We might begin by attacking a fallacious practice which is being perpetuated by the work of training colleges and university departments of education. This fallacious practice is supported by an erroneous theory and an unhealthy tradition. It is the theory of a lesson as an instructional unit; the theory of the lesson as a pre-planned campaign of informativeness against the jungle world of ignorance. The whole thing smacks too much of the battlefield – and too little of a common adventure in which teachers combine in friendly alliance. ...It also explains in part why English is so badly taught. For there are certain kinds of lesson to which this pattern ought never to belong: one is a lesson in aesthetic appreciation; another is a lesson designed to give practice in an art such as writing." ³

Clearly in the course of the thirty years since the Newbolt Report found "a sense of incompatibility between the associations of the classroom and the fostering of a love for English literature" ⁴ there has been a considerable advance in thinking about what teaching

¹ Op.cit. pp 140-141

² Ibid.

³ *English in Education*, 1951, pp 15 & 17

⁴ v.sup. p 35

English should involve. That thinking was based on a very simple premise – that traditional methods simply did not work:

"There are challenging accusations against us from outside the educational world: that for all our schooling we do not produce citizens who are clear, correct and coherent in thought, speech and writing; that we do not endow our pupils with real taste; that we do not train them to a proper sense of values."¹

The language has not changed enormously from that of the nineteenth century: the emphasis on *correct* thought, speech and writing and on a *proper* sense of values to which pupils can be trained, is evidence enough that Blamires is no revolutionary freethinker, and he goes on to demonstrate conclusively that, in many respects, his attitude remains traditional:

"There must be English lessons during which the atmosphere of the classroom is what it is during a good mathematics lesson: technicalities of grammar, sentence-structure, scansion and verse form are being explained and grappled with. These lessons are pervaded by an atmosphere of calculated efficiency."²

It is in what follows that the new approach is unmistakable:

"But there must also be English lessons of an utterly different kind, during which the atmosphere in the classroom is what it is during a good lesson in musical appreciation. That is the atmosphere in the concert-hall and the theatre. The pupils are engaged in an aesthetic experience: the lesson will be a performance rather than an investigation or a progress in instruction."³

The clear divorce advocated here between English Language and English Literature may sound oddly in the ears of those accustomed to the prevailing desire to reunite them and to tear down the artificial boundary between them; but it is important to remember how language was conceived of fifty years ago, and how experience of literature was seen as subordinate to the main task of inculcating correct usages of the spoken and written word – and not merely subordinate but sometimes literally supportive:

"Many English text-books unfortunately encourage the attempt to kill two birds with one stone – to teach comprehension, grammar and literary analysis whilst at the same time providing material which is supposed to be 'appreciated'. Such books can be very damaging to the work of education. It is apparently a lucrative business to collect together passages of prose or verse which are torn from their context and to print them interspersed with instructions to summarise and to paraphrase, and with questions about grammar, sentence-structure and figures of speech. Lucrative or not, this is certainly a hobby which attracts all too many teachers of English who ought to know better."⁴

The division of literature from language was essential while language remained the domain of the grammarian and the philologist – essential because the concept of literature was being significantly damaged in the minds of too many children by the association, and

¹ Op.cit. p 7

² Ibid. p 11

³ Ibid. pp 11-12

⁴ Ibid p 13

Blamires was determined to ram this particular fault home:

"Too many educationalists try to dismiss as anti-pedagogical prejudice this widespread accusation that teachers *spoil* English literature, but the charge is too soundly substantiated to be waived. Let us note that comparable charges in relation to other subjects are very rare." ¹

The fault which Blamires was seeking to eradicate was, though different in form as applied to language and literature, essentially a single misunderstanding of what English was about – and the consequent false belief that it could be divided up into components of knowledge, which could be taught, learned, and tested. Since the subject is, in fact, about feeling, emotion, experience and communication, all of which require a very different sort of involvement on the part of both pupil and teacher from those required in the study of, say, physics, it is in no way surprising that English teaching was attracting "accusationsfrom outside the educational world."

It may well be argued, though this thesis is not the place to do it, that the lesson has still not been driven home; that the absolutes of National Curriculum and Year 9 SATs will inevitably shipwreck on the same old rocks; and that you simply cannot inculcate the practice of good writing by instruction in the five functions of the adjective, or a love of literature by the compulsory study of *Romeo & Juliet* at thirteen. Blamires failed to see the logic of his own argument, or perhaps he thought it inexpedient at that stage to point it out, and armoured himself against the slings and arrows of outraged traditionalists by observing "to claim that grammar should play no part in the teaching of English.... is just as sensible as claiming that harmony should play no part in the teaching of music" ². Yet his argument remains powerful and an effective precursor of the new approach which was slowly gathering head in the ranks of English teachers.

"Many are the painful lessons I have witnessed in which classes have been taught all about conjunctions, or subjects and complements, or about subordinate adverbial clauses. My complaint about these lessons is, not that they teach nothing, but that what they teach seems not to belong to anything, least of all to the composition work to which they are often theoretically attached.You can only help them to *learn* to write. You can only give them the opportunity for constant practice, and strive by every means in your power so to stimulate their minds and imaginations that they actually make use of the opportunity offered. Once you have got the writing, the battle is half won. Then it is your duty, firstly, to keep them writing by needful encouragement and imaginative stimulation, and secondly, to improve their writing by judicious correction of error." ³

¹ Op.cit. p 10

² Ibid. p 22

³ Ibid. pp 31 & 37

It is difficult to imagine how this observation could be much improved upon, so far as it goes, as advice to an English teacher in training – and Blamires has similar wisdom for literature classes:

"I have always believed that one important aim for the guidance of the teacher in his daily work is a negative one: to strive not to make the name of a single great author hateful to his pupils.....Our first object in the teaching of English literature is to ensure that our pupils enjoy what they read. They must, of course, understand what they read to a certain extent, or they will not be able to enjoy it. But enjoyment takes precedence of understanding in this sense – that you fail as a teacher if literature is not experienced through the glad submission of the pupil's will to the material put before him; whereas temporary failures in understanding are inevitable. We may be doing lots of other things successfully and efficiently – improving our pupils' powers of comprehension and expression, developing their understanding of language and meaning – but in the absence of this nourishment of delight in books, we are failing to teach literature. The ways by which, day after day, well-meaning teachers manage to fail of teaching literature are so diverse and so well-established.Too many teachers refuse to allow poetry to speak for itself. There is something to be said for introducing a poem by words of explanation, and something to be said for commenting on a poem which you have just read; but generally speaking there is nothing at all to be said in favour of interrupting the reading of a poem for the purpose of asking questions or interposing comments." ¹

Seen like this, the task of the English teacher reaches out far beyond the criticisms of those who conventionally find fault with the attainment of his pupils in respect of their 'correctness and coherence in thought, speech and writing' and takes on a quality not far short of sublime. Blamires himself defined it thus:

"It is the educational function of English literature to enrich our understanding of human life through the contemplation of imaginative visions which reproduce the emotional, intellectual and spiritual tensions of man against the background of Nature, human relationships, social organisation and eternal destiny." ²

If that may legitimately be regarded as the educational function of English literature, then few practitioners will claim to achieve it on a regular basis – but failure in such a cause remains meritorious. The definition is clearly overblown as a guide to lesson planning on a thirty-four periods a week basis – but as an ideal, a challenge, it stands as a reminder of what we may occasionally achieve, and what, therefore, we should never forget to attempt. A good English lesson – and I use the adjective as Blamires does in his comparisons with maths and music to indicate something far above the merely competent or effective – will leave the teacher with a sense of fulfilment and of success in

¹ Op.cit. pp 55,67,71

² Ibid. p 152

the transmission of shared understanding which cannot effectively be described to anyone outside the profession, and cannot possibly be reduced to the level of an attainment task ticklist. As with pupils' understanding of a text, failures are inevitable, but so long as the target remains definable in those or similar terms, English teachers will have an aim and the possibilities of achievement beyond anything generally contemplated before the 1944 Act; and what is most important about the books on teaching written after that date is that so many of them rejoiced in those opportunities and sought to codify them into some sort of practical guide for teachers and would-be teachers who had not yet been vouchsafed the necessary vision.

At its simplest, the advice could be expressed as here, by an HMI :

"I believe that the *ability to find out* and the desire to do so matter rather than any limited load of information a child can carry, remember and repeat.I believe that the function of the teacher should be to provide opportunities for the exercise of the life force latent in every child and to facilitate such exercise in every possible way, and *never to withhold opportunities*".¹

It can also be put negatively:

"If a girl sets out to make a living (or even a living until marriage) teaching history, and really cares nothing whatever for politics, for biography, for reconstructing the manners and mentalities of other ages, and for the different interpretations that can be put upon such important events as the Crusades or the Versailles Treaty, it is useless for her to go on. She will teach it badly to begin with, and worse as she goes on, for she will come to hate it more and more. Eventually she will become like the horse harnessed to the millstone, plodding around the same circle, without help, day after day."²

I include this somewhat grim passage because, while we have all met teachers to whom this description might be applied, this is a salutary reminder that, in the course of the period which has elapsed since the date at which Robert Protherough ended his study of the teacher in literature, it has been firmly established that this is not how things should be.³ Teachers such as those Highet describes are no longer typical, but presented as objects of pity, since they have clearly missed the whole point as well as the joy of their profession: a joy which Highet illustrates perhaps more clearly than Blamires:

"To teach a boy the difference between truth and lies in print, to start him thinking about the meaning of poetry or patriotism, to hear him hammering back at you with the facts and arguments you helped him to find, sharpened by himself and fitted to his own powers, gives the kind of satisfaction that an artist has when he makes a picture out of blank canvas and chemical

¹ Gerard Holmes, *The Idiot Teacher*, 1952, p 167

² Gilbert Highet, *The Art of Teaching*, 1951, p 18

³ v.sup. (and cf.) pp 18-19

colourings, or a doctor when he hears a sick pulse pick up and carry the energies of new life under his hands." ¹

The suggestion that "To hear a pupil hammering back at you" is one of the real rewards of the teacher, is symptomatic of the new theme – the theme of education as a co-operative venture rather than an exercise in force-feeding; or, as I have summarized it earlier, as the role of the teacher being transformed from teaching into helping pupils to learn. ² It is the progressive discarding of the image of the teacher as an all-knowing sage with an apparently divine right to demand conformity, which best characterises the development of education in the period between the Education Acts of 1944 and 1988: a period which saw teachers required to emerge from behind the protective shield of an academic gown and a lectern-desk mounted on a platform in front of the class; and to rely instead upon their knowledge of, and enthusiasm for the subjects and the sincerity with which they set about the task of sharing these satisfactions with their pupils. To quote Hight again, from much later in *The Art of Teaching* :

"A good teacher with a good class will hardly need to plan how to complete his teaching by fixing the impression.....He need only be sure of the importance of applying the fixative. Then, if he explains briefly what he is doing, he and his students can go together over the ground, growing familiar with the features they now recognise together, asking and answering questions as they travel, and pointing out the peaks still to be scaled, the valleys unexplored. this is the best kind of teaching. On this level it stops being the mere transmission of information and becomes the joint enterprise of a group of friendly humans who like using their brains." ³

One can hardly improve upon that final sentence as a description of the pleasure which awaits a successful teacher, and it depends substantially, as in my earlier comment ⁴ on the Newbolt Report, upon the use of "mere" to qualify the transmission of information. When the Norwood Committee recommended that "in the interest of the individual child and of the the increased freedom and responsibility of the teaching profession" schools should assume responsibility for syllabus and examination, ⁵ they were placing their faith firmly in the teacher who "taught as one having authority and not as the scribes." This is a faith which no government has ever shared, and which, since 1988, has become virtually impossible to voice: the scribes, in the form of the National Curriculum, are very firmly back in control, and the transmission of information, together with careful

¹ Op.cit. p 10

⁴ v.sup. p 34

² v.sup. p 57

⁵ v.sup. p 52

³ Op.cit. p 152

measurement of the efficacy of that transmission, has become the guiding star of educational standards – at least as these are conceived by the Department for Education and Employment, and by the Director of OFSTED. It may, unhappily, be true that the quality of the profession has declined so far in the intervening period that such externally imposed management of the curriculum throughout the 5–16 age range had become a necessity. This is a proposition which I am not competent to assess. I do, however, feel that it cannot possibly be the way to improve educational standards in the way in which they have been defined and regarded in this thesis so far, and that the re-imposition of the concept of a body of knowledge to be learned at carefully defined stages of the child's development is a retrograde step premised upon an altogether false assumption. Possible reasons why this false assumption should have come to the fore will be examined in my final chapter. At this point it is sufficient to make clear that I determined to end my study of educational standards in 1988 because it is from that date that the movement towards education as a co-operative venture between pupils and teacher was put into reverse; and it ceased to be readily practicable for what Hight calls "a good teacher with a good class" to co-operate in devising and exploring a curriculum tailored to the needs of the individual members of that class.

I would not wish to pretend, of course, that such co-operation was widespread: far too many teachers enter the profession without vocation or appropriate motivation, and fail to acquire either during their service, for that happy circumstance to be the case.

But the fact that the majority of teachers were unable, unwilling, or frightened to embrace the new opportunities to work co-operatively and creatively with their classes cannot and must not disguise the fact that the opportunity was there, and that Hight's vision was increasingly widely shared. It is developed, for instance, by Frank Whitehead, not least in his title *The Disappearing Dais*, in 1966:

"English is central to the child's all round growth towards maturity and its true objectives can be achieved only when his whole personality is involved, on a more than superficial level, in the activities of the English lesson. In English, therefore, even more than in any other subject, it is a *sine qua non* for the teacher that he should understand his pupils in depth, sympathise with their needs and aspirations, and be perceptively aware of their individual rhythms of growth and development."¹

¹ Op.cit. p 16

"We value not so much the easily-assessed fragments of knowledge and skill which are common to thousands, but, rather, those qualities of observation, imagination, perception and judgement which are individual, which are rooted in the particular boy or girl's experience and environment, and which relate to the concerns which really matter to him." ¹

Whitehead is also able to take advantage of the interval of some fifteen years to advance from the position of Harry Blamires on the subject of teaching grammar. It is now possible not merely to argue its pointlessness, but to cite scientific evidence to demonstrate the futility of the practice:

"I contend that no attempt should be made to teach children about the grammar of their own language until they reach the age of at least fifteen and preferably sixteen. I write this with full awareness that, if this advice were acted upon, some four-fifths of our children would receive no teaching about grammar at any stage in their education.Conscious knowledge *about* grammatical structures is a different matter from knowing *how to use* those structures; those of us who have been taught the grammar of our native language knew how to operate this grammar long before we learnt any grammatical terms.Nor is there any reason to think knowledge about grammar is necessary for the highest level of achievement as a writer; as Ballard once put it, 'Plato never saw a Greek grammar and Shakespeare never an English one.'If we are honest with ourselves we shall have to admit that most grammar teaching is patently ineffectual....We teach it (often to the tune of one forty minute period a week for four or five years), but our pupils do not learn it." ²

Whitehead goes on to cite the research by Macauley into the Scottish educational system which showed that, after a five year grammar syllabus, only the best students in the 14-16 age range could get better than 50% in a test to identify the five major parts of speech; suggested that this is because grammatical reasoning requires abstract thinking, a capacity which children develop much more slowly than that for concrete thinking; and concluded that, even if grammar could be learned it would be of little practical use, since there is no basis for the assumption that grammatical thinking aids logic, no practical validity in the assumption that learning English grammar helps in acquiring a foreign language, and demonstrably no carry-over from theoretic grammatical knowledge to improved speech or writing. On this basis, Whitehead observes:

"There is today an enormous gulf between the linguistic equipment and knowledge of the average English teacher and the up-to-date findings of linguistic study. I suggest in all seriousness that every teacher of English should impose a moratorium upon his own teaching of grammar until he has made a thorough study of modern grammatical theory. When he has done so, I suspect that in most cases his professional conscience will forbid him to resume the practice." ³

¹ Op.cit. p 235

² Ibid. p 219

³ Ibid. p 224

Whitehead shows a similar enthusiasm for shaking loose the dead hand of tradition when he comes to deal with the influence of public examinations:

"I believe that for English the educational need can only be met by adopting a system of internal examinations with external moderation. What we stand to gain here is the liberation of good teachers from externally imposed shackles, and an immense impetus to all teachers to accept a fully professional responsibility for their own pupils." ¹

I shall return to the specifically examination-based element of this argument in my next chapter²; here I draw attention to the fact that it is not only in reminding us of their actual recommendations for replacing the School and Higher Certificate examinations, but also in his reliance, in two of the passages I have cited, on the professional responsibility of teachers, that Whitehead is a good deal nearer to the optimism of the Norwood Committee than to the pragmatism of the 1944 Education Act.

To look back upon the 1960s is, unhappily, to encounter a large area of might-have-beens, but hindsight must not obscure from us that, in theory and principle, what Whitehead has to say remains an illustration of the new approach, and with the underlying voice of reason rather than what might earlier have seemed impractical romanticism behind it.

It is a voice with a number of echoes: A D Winterburn, for example, relies upon satire to deal with the question of formal grammar, and more specifically, the evils of the standard English Language course-book, in the article *I Write a Text Book* :

"Here is another chapter. This chapter is about complex sentences. Here is another chapter which is about complex sentences. The boy will combine short sentences. He will form complex sentences. He will form these when he combines the short sentences. The boy will combine short sentences which, when he has combined them, will form complex sentences. That he should have to do this is perhaps surprising. He has to do this in order that he may learn more grammar. When he has done this he will have learnt more grammar. If he had not done this, he would have been little the worse." ³

Patrick Creber underlines the failure of the professionals to administer the *coup de grâce* to an area of the syllabus where the futility of the exercise is increasingly acknowledged, but extends this attack to the whole concept of detailed deductive marking, both as inherently damaging to pupil confidence, and as undermining the proper co-operative relationship between teacher and class:

¹ Op.cit. pp 237-238

² v.inf. p 130-132

³ *The Use of English*, Summer 1962, Vol XIII No. 4

"The attitudes of many teachers to grammar are interestingly ambivalent. At the root of this ambivalence – and existing parallel with a conscious enlightened rejection of formal grammar work – is the subconscious, almost guilt complex that is part of our inheritance from a more austere and puritanical age. In order to justify itself as part of the English Programme, however, grammar must be more than a sop to some vestigial puritan conscience. The insidious effect of the bad textbook upon the marking methods of teachers would be hard to exaggerate. So far from viewing matter as more important than manner, the teacher frequently accepts the textbook's assumptions and devotes most of his time to the underlining, or ringing, or crossing out of errors. The aim of this exercise is presumably to encourage improvement, and yet how rarely is this aim achieved;The effect of negative marking of this type, endured for a period of years, is almost entirely depressive. This is particularly true with the less able children in grammar schools, who frequently end up with a failure complex at least as intense as that frequently ascribed to those unfortunate enough to fail their eleven-plus examination.¹The teacher who invites his pupils to share with him the task of evaluation will almost inevitably find that his teaching becomes tauter and more clearly focused as a result, and that his understanding of the children's difficulties, and hence his ability to help them, are notably increased."²

By the late 1960s, the new philosophy of English teaching had become so established – at least among those who wrote and read books and articles on education – that it was possible for a newcomer to the profession to blame pupils for their lack of participatory zeal:

"The children I teach actually *like* dull, repetitive, habit-forming work. Anything original or unusual is too much for them and they cannot cope with it. They simply do not understand. Although at college I learnt how to plan work for teaching on a constructive basis which would make the work interesting for the children, I never learnt how to plan on the sort of basis which I have inherited in the classes I now teach. One is up against almost all their previous experience."³

David Holbrook, who records this particular observation, cannot have been unduly surprised, since his reaction to the generality of teacher training courses is that they are inadequate for the latter day classroom and primarily dominated by the demands of an outmoded examination system:

"Many teachers have not been trained in the essential disciplines. The teacher going out into the world often cannot read well enough. He finds it hard to take poetic meaning. Students often do not know children well enough, and they do not know literature well enough at first hand. They find the discussion of children's own poems, or simple poems from adult poetry, extremely difficult – if, that is, they are asked to discuss it in their own terms, in relation to their own experience, and not talk the nonsense they have been trained to prepare for 'appreciations' in examinations. Their capacity to refer to the body of literature, with any sense of direction and from personal 'possession', and to relate works to children's needs as they arise in the classroom, is not developed."⁴

1 v.inf. p 508

2 *Sense and Sensitivity*, 1965, pp 115-116, 220, 221, 236

3 David Holbrook, *The Exploring Word*, 1967, p 55

4 Ibid. p 28

Much of what Holbrook has to say in *The Exploring Word* has to do with his antipathy for the examination system in general and as applied to English in particular, a theme which was much to the fore in the 1960s, attracting both analysis and acknowledged polemic, and which will be examined in the next chapter. Here I am more concerned with concrete proposals for improving the quality of English teaching and establishing focal points at which it should be directed. Holbrook's own suggestions along these lines can be found both grouped and scattered in the course of the book. For instance:

"....perhaps we should enumerate briefly what the aims of a training in English are in detailed 'schematic' and practical termsTo make a rough list, our aims are:

1. The development of a free, rich fluency, and the capacity to read well
2. The capacity to explore experience in an organised way by using words – to see connections in all aspects of living, and to seek order in life by verbal symbolism.
3. The capacity to select material from experience and from books, including the deductions and opinions of others, and to organise them into expressions of one's own.
4. The development of the sensibility, by drawing upon creative sources of insight and satisfaction.
5. The capacity to discuss creative works explicitly, with clarity; in one's own terms; to discriminate, and to relate the content of imaginative work to the experience of living, by criticism.
6. The gaining of a sense of perspective in English Literature and its place in civilisation, and a related acquaintance with critical writing.
7. The capacity to teach literature – to be able to bring the excellent things in literature (and related forms of culture) to the notice of others, and to foster their possession of creative works.
8. The capacity to apply one's sharpest powers of reading and discrimination to children's work (which will, of course, require some knowledge of children.)
9. Some acquaintance with the social and political 'background' of English literature, of ideas and trends.
10. Some acquaintance with popular culture, including folksong, and the development of a discriminating attitude to modern popular culture."¹

and also

"The essential process of teaching English is that of a concern with whole meaning.The English teacher teaches by stimulating, and answering a question – and following that answer with a great many others. But he starts from the words on a page, of a poem, which is a work of art. And his teaching of that poem will be controlled by his awareness of the need to bring to the children to their best possible awareness of these words, in all their flavour and complexity."²

One is reminded of Robert Protherough's analysis of Kipling's description of William Croft teaching Horace.³ This is clearly a description of a very effective literature

¹ Op.cit. pp 63-64

² Ibid. p 145

³ v.sup. p 19

lesson, likely, at the end of it, to have the teacher feeling that 'virtue had gone out of him.' One wonders, however, whether, even for the most gifted classroom performer, it is possible to teach at this level of intensity on a more or less continuous basis as class succeeds class throughout the day – and one wonders, too, as one does with Holbrook's earlier ten aims, how meaningful such a description would be to a teacher in training, as opposed to one with some successful and profitable years behind him.

Holbrook's conclusion:

"This process is going on all the time in the classroom, because teaching is, inevitably, a creative process, unless it is turned into a destructive or dead mechanical one. It must be one or the other.The essential process..... is a matter of responding to words.....to allow words to work between us and experience, to foster change and growth in our personalities, to enlarge our capacities to explore and take hold of reality, and to deal with it effectively. " ¹

I would hesitate to dissent from any element of this, except perhaps the absolutism of "It must be one thing or the other", for there seem to me to be quite a number of possible outcomes between the creative and the destructive, by no means all of them undesirable. But if it really must, then it has to be acknowledged that a good deal of what goes on in classrooms is certainly mechanical and, by Holbrook's definition at least, dead. And this, I suspect, is not only an unprofitable, but a counter-productive way to conclude an argument. To hold up excellence as the only permissible standard is to return to the principles of exclusion which the 1944 Act sought to overturn – as though in modern GCSE terms the highly arbitrary line "equivalent to a CCE 'O' level pass" were to be drawn ruthlessly below the grade A*. And for this reason, I would also hesitate to confront teachers in training with Holbrook's ten aims, and with his conclusions. The ideal, like any other kind of holy grail, has to be the object of a search, very possibly life-long. To expect to acquire the necessary skills in a teacher's training course could easily be a destructive experience. Assessments at this level of demand, like any other kind of deductive marking, as Patrick Creber pointed out, have the effect of demoralising the practitioner. Holbrook is part of a growing tide of educational critics who had come to see the function of education as no longer to prepare students for some terminal examination, or qualification, at the age of 15, or

¹ Op.cit. pp 148-149

16, or 18, or 21; but as a vital contribution to their ability to live worthwhile, fulfilling and creative lives. And so, of course, it should be – but the counterweight of such a theory must be that education (at least in the sense represented by schools, colleges, universities, local authorities and government departments) is essentially an unfinished product.

One vital ingredient of any educational process is the practical as distinct from the theory, and in the 'education for life' system the practical section lasts a good deal longer than the theoretic. It is, I believe, about an Abbot of Downside that the story is related that he once told the Headmaster's Conference "we educate our boys for death"; but in a practical sense it is the only logical conclusion to the wholelife education ideal, and with the added advantage that the results of the entrance examination are known only to the individual candidate. The former Pre-school Playgroup Association had the slogan "Playing is learning for living" but they did not make the mistake of expecting too much progress by the age of five – and the compulsory part of the education process with a similar intention cannot justly expect more than a proportionally expanded achievement by the age of 16. Sylvia Plath began a poem to a baby in the womb with the words "Love set you going like a fat gold watch" – and perhaps at its personal level education can do no more than that – what remains vital is that what is done must be done with love. The point that must never be overlooked is that there is a fundamental distinction between education as a training for life and education as a training for earning a living, and that the former is not only ethically and philosophically more important than the latter, but, in the long term, probably economically and practically more important too. In the short term, however, the latter seems to be more important to the vast majority of pupils, of their parents, and of the politicians who are responsible for organising the finance of a state education system. This is hardly a new dichotomy: in 1921, George Samson wrote:

"Education is initiation not apprenticeship. It has nothing to do with trade, business or livelihood; it has no connection with rate of wages or increase of pay. Its scale is not the material scale of the market. Education is a preparation for life, not merely for a livelihood, for living, not for a living. Its aim is to make men and women, not 'hands'." ¹

¹ *English for the English*, 1921 (new edition 1952) p 4

In the Introduction to the 1952 edition of Samson's work, the Master of Pembroke College, Cambridge, says of the author:

"He propounds two fundamental theses: first that elementary education must not be vocational.....(it is the purpose of education not to prepare children *for* their occupations but to prepare children *against* their occupations) and second, that the basis of elementary education should be the speaking and writing and reading of good English" ¹

We have not advanced beyond those two theses in the course of this survey of thinking and writing about English in the classroom, but in the 1960s there certainly seems to have been a tendency to forget, or to ignore, what Samson also said:

"We have tried to educate the children: we have scarcely even tried to educate the public. Before educational progress is possible the public must be taught the meaning of education; and to this work our official leaders and spokesmen should turn their strongest efforts. The national mind must be got to see that education is a spirit and not a substance." ²

The efforts were never forthcoming – and progress in the sense that Samson intended is as improbable as ever: perhaps we have even regressed a little in the last few years. The essential conflict between principle and expedient goes on – and if education cannot fulfil the short term demands of economic expediency it will not be allowed even to attempt to inculcate some awareness of a higher principle.

And this is the point that the grand theorists seem not always to contend with. It is instructive to compare Holbrook's aims and observations with those of the Newsom Report *Half Our Future* : published four years earlier.

On the subject of examinations, members of the Newsom Committee were as dubious as to their influence on education as Holbrook and most of the other writers of the period, but they were also realistic:

"Since, however, examinations are undoubtedly here to stay, and as time goes on the tendency is always for more rather than fewer people to be involved, we must seek means to minimise the more adverse effects." ³

A similar down-to-earth quality informs their approach to the teaching of English:

"English, as a subject primarily concerned with care for words, clearly has a distinctive contribution to make, yet it is doubtful if that contribution is as effective as it might be. Of the general sincerity and frequent skill of the teaching there can be no question; real illiteracy in the formal sense is comparatively rare. But there seems a very general feeling that the ordinary boy and girl should leave school with a better command of English that they in fact appear to possess." ⁴

¹ Op.cit. p viii

² Ibid p 4

³ Op.cit. §246

⁴ Ibid §461

Like almost every other writer on the subject of the period, the authors of the Newsom Report had lost their faith in the kind of exercise sustained by English course books, both as a practical aid to improved literacy and as what English teaching should really be about:

"....teachers of English tend to think of their subject from three different but related points of view: as a medium of communication, as a means of creative expression, and as a literature embodying the vision of greatness. They are trying to offer all pupils the freedom of all three.....but in practice many of the weaker pupils never seem to reach the point at which real English begins.Much use is made of text books providing endless exercise in comprehension, composition and the like. There are rough books and best books.....commas are inserted, spelling corrected.Poetry is 'done'....."

When handled with competence and conviction, the traditional teaching pattern can enlist interest and encourage progress. But it is too seldom about anything of much potential importance to the pupil.....What is learned today tends to be forgotten tomorrow; it is not applied to other subjects." ¹

"There are rough books and best books....." Strange how that short statement seems to encapsulate some of the inevitable failure of the educational process, to distil the essence of that dead, mechanical approach of which Holbrook complains. If nothing else, it provides proof positive that the Newsom Committee knew about schools. And on the basis of that knowledge, they had some positive contributions to make:

"The overriding aim of English teaching must be the personal development and social competence of the pupil.Personal and social adequacy depend upon being articulate, that is, upon having the words and language structures with which to think, to communicate what is thought, and to understand what is heard or read.Side by side with speech comes its partner, listening; conversation presupposes both, but too few pupils ever learn to listen carefully, to the teacher or to each other. Here the teacher's example is all-important; when he teaches is it all a monologue or a reasonably balanced dialogue in which the pupils get a fair chance; is he interested in what they have to say?" ²

They were also fully aware of the limitations and of the true values of the schooling process and, far more importantly, prepared to voice them:

"A wide and generous course of English should do much to prepare the pupils for life in an adult society; it is vocational in the best possible way.the employer who wants his employees to be proficient in the written word will probably have to provide specialised linguistic practice as part of the training given to new entrants, however well the school does its work. But these are not the only, or even the most important vocational skills of English. In whatever job, and at whatever level of skill, the pupils may subsequently be working, they will all need to enter into effective relations with other people, if they are to work efficiently and happily. What they take with them from school in improved powers of speech, and in

¹ Op.cit. §§462-463

² Ibid. §467

sympathetic insight into human relationships gained through literature will be of great value to them here. To those objectors who say in effect 'Cut out the frills. You haven't the time, and the pupils haven't the capacity, for more than the three Rs; this is the only way to deal with illiteracy', we repeat.....that such a restricted programme defeats its own ends. " ¹

In a remarkably little space the Newsom Committee has distanced the teaching of English from the purely vocational function to which so many outside critics would condemn it; reminded the spokesmen for industry and commerce that the specific training of entrants to the various employments of the business world is the responsibility of employers, not of the schools; emphasised that the monotonous gradgrinding of grammatical rules, correct usages, spelling tests and punctuation exercises are ineffectual; reinforced the concept of the reformers that education is not about the acquisition of knowledge so much as about personal development; – and still retained the balance to point out that English teachers are not, by and large, doing a particularly good job. Teachers could hardly have expected a better and more honest endorsement, particularly since, at this stage, nobody is talking about declining standards. What is at issue here is the failure of standards to rise as far and as fast as the architects of the 1944 Act had hoped, and the Newsom Committee has some practical advice to offer in this area:

"Given a basic literacy,work may be increasingly concerned with the use of literacy: having learned, in some degree, how to handle words, the pupils have to be helped to learn how not to be handled by them. They need not merely to read, but to read with increasing sensitivity.

All pupils, including those of very limited attainments, need the civilising experience of great literature, and can respond to its universality, although they will depend heavily on the skill of the teacher as an interpreter. Sympathetically presented, literature can stretch the minds and imaginations of the pupils, and help to illumine for them, in wider human terms, their own problems of living.

Heart is involved as well as head. It is of course within poetry and drama that the use of language goes deepest. Nobody should have to teach poetry against his will, but without it English will never be complete; poetry is not a minor amenity but a major channel of experience.

Children only learn writing by writing, and they are best prepared to write about their own experiences. These free outpourings have much of the character of free verse: they are shapeless often, and lack control over words, grammar, spelling and punctuation. Gradually, improved writing develops. With some of our pupils it may never become completely mature or adult, but it can be encouraged by understanding teachers. Teachers whose sole standard is correctness can dry up the the flow of language and shackle creative and imaginative writing....Punctuation is best learned when there are ideas to express and points to make; full stops and commas should be friends, not enemies, if one has something to communicate" ²

¹ Op.cit. §483

² Ibid. From §§471, 472, 477, 481, 482

In general terms, then, the Newsom Report would seem to be giving an encouraging push in the right direction to a system that was fundamentally sound but somewhat slower on the uptake than the external powers-that-be would have liked. There was, however, also a warning sting in the tail – an admission that found strangely few echoes despite its obvious truth. It was, for some reason, perfectly proper to draw attention to a shortage of maths teachers; and then of science teachers, particularly of specialists in physics; and finally, of modern linguists. It was not, and until very recently, has not been appropriate for any official body involved with the recruitment and training of teachers, to draw attention to the shortage of specialist English teachers. Probably this is due, at least to some extent, to an official unwillingness to recognise that specialist English teachers are actually necessary, a sort of professional parallel to the difficulty which the subject had in getting itself recognised as an appropriate subject for the award of an honours degree, complicated by a total misunderstanding of the old axiom 'Every teacher is a teacher of English'. But, whatever the reason, *Half Our Future* remains unusual among government publications in drawing attention to this problem and to the difficulties which would attend it.

"To many good judges our suggestions will probably seem not so much unreasonable as Utopian.Not many teachers without knowledge or training can teach the subject in the way we have tried to suggest, however great their devotion and natural skill. And the supply of real specialists capable of making good heads of department or deputy heads, who would give a lead in the right direction, is drying up. Many schools have made great strides in English as in other subjects during the past decade, but today some of the best are full of misgiving. The quality of English teaching threatens to become worse; if it does, the weakest will suffer most because the dominant pattern of teaching is always likely to be, for the non-specialist working without help, that which is set by the ablest groups and is inappropriate for those with which we are concerned. We face, then, a crisis which is even now not sufficiently recognised, because it is a crisis of quality as much as of quantity. " 1

It is, perhaps, with this warning in mind that we should study the responses that Fred Inglis collected from serving English teachers in his survey *The Englishness of English Teaching* some six years later. In the third chapter, 'Rites of Passage: the teachers in their schools', Inglis gives pen-portraits of twelve teachers of English, seven of whom are Heads of Department, and of the schools in which they teach, together with an indication of the sociological nature of the various catchment areas; then provides

1 Op.cit. §487

quotations from their reactions to their work, interspersed with observations of his own. He is at considerable pains at the beginning of the chapter to prevent readers from coming to false conclusions about the import of these passages:

"I am not setting out case studies, however much my method may predispose readers to suppose that I am. If I were to look out for an adjective to describe my report, I would certainly discard 'anthropological' or 'sociological'; I might propose 'political' " ¹

I am taking them simply as verbatim quotations from serving teachers made to a friend at various stages in the academic year – and therefore as typical of the responses of serving English teachers in the state education system in the late 1960s. Much of what is said and implied is only coincidentally of that date: the territory described by the teachers selected by Inglis would be more or less familiar for a period on either side of 1969. But there remains something about the prevailing atmosphere which is unfamiliar. Partly this is because all of the twelve schools featured here are selective (five grammar, seven secondary modern) and half of them are single sex, as opposed to the coeducational comprehensive school which is the norm today. Partly it is because the school leaving age was not raised until 1973, so that most of the fourth year pupils in the Secondary Modern schools described here would have been in their final year, and unconcerned about public examinations or preparation for them. But mostly it is because over the last thirty years there have been changes in society reflected in schools, and in particular in the relations between teachers and taught which make this journey back in time seem to be to a remoter world than is, in fact, the case. To begin with examples from the Secondary Modern sector:

"They come to school with some of what we wish to teach them already learned and much of it partly learned, and much of what we wish them to avoid well and truly learned. What they lack is a cultural background of any sort.I try to bring personal problems in – to make contact with them. They need formal discussion – say discussion of ambition in terms of *Brother to the Ox*. Or it was Remembrance Sunday last week. We read Binyon's 'For the Fallen' and then discussed whether we should still have the services and so on. A lot of them were very strongly against the day. I suppose I agree with them. I don't know for sure.

Writing can sometimes spring from other work in English, topics can be taken from current news or forms of entertainment, school events can provide ideas, or a class choice can be agreed upon. The tackling of the task must vary too: private, unprepared work; class preparation and planning; reading and discussing a story or passage as a model; group work; using reference books and so on. An important point to remember is that

¹ Op.cit. pp 38-39

nothing good can be written unless the author has something to say, and though originality is valuable, it is more rare in children than many teachers suppose. It is far better to suggest ideas and have them developed than to leave many children struggling to write about nothing. The more inventive will usually add to what is given, or even ignore it and produce original work in any case." ¹

The opening note of this is familiar enough, and, one might say, traditional – the voice of superior reason, faintly patronising. But what follows is heavily influenced by the new approach – perhaps most notably in the admission that it is perfectly legitimate to engage in discussions where the teacher does not know the "right" answer from the beginning, and may be influenced in his opinions by the pupils. As to the varieties of stimulus for writing, this is some distance removed from the traditional text book on composition, and, at the same time, a useful reminder of the skills of "the more inventive" even with a secondary modern framework. It is interesting that Inglis notes of this final observation:

"It suggests (this is a guess) a preference for writing before speech, which which may also signify an intellectual relegation of speech below writing.But you cannot write well until you can speak well." ²

This distinction and order of precedence is another mark of the new approach, and is of course, illustrated by the Newsom Committee's concern that lessons should not be monologues. The problem of oral work, of course, is that it is extremely difficult to fit into the scheme of things as visualised in the tidy minds of those concerned with comparative assessment. The compulsory oral part of public examinations in Modern languages, though established from the earliest days of 'O' and 'A' level has never actually been worth much as a proportion of the total possible mark for the examination as a whole, and only CSE has ever required it in English examinations:– a wise requirement, like so much of the CSE apparatus, swept away after amalgamation into GCSE after 1988. "You cannot write well until you can speak well" – a simple and obvious truth, but not one widely acknowledged in the voluminous course books on English skills, nor in the thinking of successive governments when their thoughts turn to education (whether singly or in threes). It seems to me significant (and depressing) that a recent edition of the *Times Educational Supplement* ³ should have carried an article alleging that a document prepared for the School Curriculum and Assessment

¹ Op.cit. p 40-41

² Ibid. p 40

³ No. 4232, Aug. 8th 1997, p 6

Authority by a team of officers including a former chair of the National Association for the Teaching of English, and entitled *Planning and Progression in English at Key Stages 1 & 2* should have been suppressed by two successive governments because its emphasis on speaking and listening conflicts with a government-inspired National Literacy Project, "an initiative to boost reading and writing skills in primary schools, which centred around a highly structured 'literacy hour' each day". The article concludes:

"The speaking and listening element is considered crucial by many primary teachers, but is frowned upon by some traditionalists who want greater concentration on reading and writing. Marie Stacey, general inspector for English and drama in the Wirral said: 'Speaking and listening are the prime language skills. If you can't talk and communicate verbally, you can't function in society at all as a human being at any level, as a parent, lover or worker. It's impossible. The fact that the National Literacy Project has published a framework without speaking or listening is appalling."

A moment's unworthy consideration of the probable response from the traditionals, on the lines of how appalling they found it that an advisor should be concerning herself with the capacity as lovers of pupils at Key Stages 1 and 2, illustrates how difficult it seems to have become for those who work in education to communicate effectively or even at all with national politicians and civil servants. It should not, however, distract from the news at the beginning of the article that 'underground copies' of the document have been circulating among teachers ever since the government decided to shelve it. The idea of booklets on the effective teaching of English at Key Stages 1 and 2 requiring the services of the *colporteur* may well say something about the struggle for standards in education today, but not much for those of the National Curriculum. The order of priorities advocated here is clearly expressed in a written statement by the second of Inglis's Secondary Modern teachers:

- "I am trying to help my pupils to develop:
- 1a. An intelligent and sensitive understanding of the spoken and written word in order to appreciate and understand other people's communications.
- 1b. Parallel to 1a – The ability to express their own ideas and views, orally and in writing, in a lucidand personal way.
- 2 The ability to write accurately.
- 3 An interest in literature." ¹

¹ Op.cit. p 50

One aspect which emerges from this study of professional credos within the secondary modern sector illuminates rather effectively the difficulty which teachers have in living up to their own expectations of themselves, rather than down to the externally imposed expectations of others; teachers who feel driven to make the wrong choice, to support educational methods which they know to be less appropriate but more esteemed, to sacrifice the true principles of a child-centred education for the softer option of an exam-based system. Inglis observes, of one of his contributors who falls into this category:

"She talks with a more genuine sense of anguish than most about the split between exam teaching and what she sees as good teaching. 'I feel a tremendous pressure to *know* texts for exams. The girls *need* wider discussions. I don't like bashing away at texts, but the questions are so awful, that....I feel so badly about this exam. English is for training people of sixteen. In any case, I would advise them, if there's a book they feel very strongly about, to make a stand as people, even in the exam. But then; the exam itself is such a disappointment to them.' The last remark makes the point. Is *this*, the children must unconsciously ask with incredulity, is this what we are to be so excited about? Is this all you can hold out to us, to justify what we have been doing? Indeed, it is a betrayal." ¹

The teacher concerned knows what her priorities should be, and the mundane demands of an ageing examination system do not figure notably among them:

"I'm trying to encourage an understanding of character through the chosen texts....You see, they do question things, think about things, they will absolutely stand up for what they feel really strongly about. Of course they must feel involved. You simply can't say what is the feeling in a poem without saying what is *your* feeling about the subject. There's a crying need for much more time for creative writing, which I feel very strongly about because then they intensify their contact with things and power of words. It's very important for them to use words now, because they may never use them again. This sense of achievement is vital. Then they've written something which matters to them. creative writing, even if never maintained after leaving, contributes to the capacity to feel strongly." ²

The concerns of the Newsom Committee for the less able – in academic terms, the bottom half of our future – have here been taken to heart. Efforts are being pointed in the right direction, so far as extraneous circumstances permit. What emerges, over and over again, from these quotations (and it would have been possible to add many more) is a genuine concern for educating individuals for life, coupled with a desire to encourage them to possess themselves of the powers which control of language can bring; to help them in acquiring a practical articulacy and fluency; and to guide them

¹ Op.cit. p 60

² Ibid.

towards the necessary skills which will protect them from the insidious manipulation which will surround them for the rest of their lives. In other words, there is an obvious concern from the teachers in these schools to uphold and improve the standards of life. The central thrust of the Newsom Report lies in the sentence I have quoted already: "The overriding aim of English teaching must be the personal development and social competence of the pupil"¹ and while it would be clearly an exaggeration to claim that this was being achieved, the evidence from the secondary modern schools presented here – the typical stuff of the Newsom Committee's concern – makes it clear that it was being conscientiously attempted. As with the whole tone of Newsom² there is no sense of declining standards, but a clear awareness that they could be rising faster if teachers were allowed to follow their own instincts with regard to the curriculum. The frustrations arise from the national commitment to – one might legitimately say obsession with – examinations, tests and orders of merit.

The 11+ examination, responsible for the segregation of all the pupils so far indirectly referred to into a clearly labelled second class, had already created an enormous problem for their teachers; a problem of indifference to the attempts of the teaching profession to rectify what was obviously in many cases a blatant injustice, in that there was, in fact, no discernible distinction in academic ability between the lowest group of those who 'passed' the 11+ and the highest group of those who were deemed to have 'failed'; and it only makes matters worse if I substitute the mealy-mouthed 'correct' version of this procedure and say instead that there was no perceptible distinction in terms of academic potential between the upper end of those selected for secondary modern education and the lower end of those selected as suitable for the grammar school. One of the quotations from Inglis which I have not used hitherto is the simple "I am sure that there is great value in being in the top stream in a secondary modern school rather than the bottom stream in a grammar school",³ and so there almost certainly was – except, of course, in the all-important matter of status.

It was not to be long before an end to these arbitrary proceedings was found in a tidal wave of comprehensive re-organisation which covered by far the greater part of the

¹ v.sup. p 73

² v.sup. p.74

³ Op.cit. pp 61-62

country. In the meantime, however, justice to those secondary modern top sets had made it inevitable that those public examination opportunities, which would have been *de rigueur*, however inappropriate, for those who had cleared the 11+ hurdle, had to be made available for them. And if for them, then where was the discrimination to begin? Examination passes had become the recognised passport to success and rather than risk introducing an enhanced sense of failure among those who would be denied a GCE opportunity, the cry went up for another examination suited to a lower academic echelon. There was little chance of a hearing for those who knew perfectly well that the preparation for those examinations, in a great many cases, was to introduce a teaching methodology and an approach to English Language and Literature that was

"Faultily faultless, icily regular, splendidly null,/ Dead perfection, no more".²

Hence the frustration and what Inglis quite legitimately calls the anguish at "the split between exam teaching and good teaching".

To add to the general sense of *lacrimae rerum*, the comprehensive reorganisation came too late to have any hope of reversing the trend and found itself more or less committed to the inevitable trend towards examinations for everybody.

And the real irony of the situation lies in the fact that, in so far as the Inglis survey may be regarded as typical, – and the material which I advance in my final chapter proves conclusively, I believe, that it was – the reaction from the Grammar School teachers is less heartening than that of their valiantly struggling colleagues in the secondary modern sector. Here, too, the examination system is exercising a stranglehold on what might have been inventive and imaginative teaching, as well as providing a necessary stepping-stone on the route to university for which it was, of course, primarily created. *The Englishness of English Teaching* begins with a low stream in a boys' grammar school, taught by the Head of Department. The boys are, we are told, of about the same ability as a secondary modern top set, but appear to Fred Inglis as much less mature because so obviously still junior members of a school with a large sixth form: : "They were gayer, more open and mischievous – more obviously little boys." ¹ Their teacher says of them:

¹ Op.cit. p 43

² Tennyson, *Maud*, II.6-7

"I do a fair bit of reading to them. Of course they do very little reading and they've no cultural background. But they're good orally. They love acting and reading aloud.I like general discussion of newspapers, advertising, perhaps even television. Show how English expands into so much else. Use literature for 'comprehension'. That brings it alive. Get rid of dreary textbooks. With a group like this I'm quite unable to set up clear directions." ¹

My own hackles rise instinctively, and perhaps unfairly, at the suggestion that using literature for comprehension brings it alive, and Inglis is alert to the reality of the desire to get rid of dreary textbooks, pointing out that the syllabus includes Ridout's 'English Today', Hewson's 'The Use of Words' and Scott's 'English Composition' as well as specifying such edifying topics as

"all parts of speech. sentence construction. clauses: adjective first, then adverb all kinds, and noun clauses. direct and reported speech. prefixes and suffixes. synonyms and antonyms. simile, metaphor, personification, hyperbole, litotes, puns, antithesis, Euphemism" ²

Inglis's own comment on this is:

".....almost unconsciously he falls back on the system which is what the children best recollect as meaning 'English' and the essential aridity and waylessness of which is slowly being replaced." ³

This teacher concludes by estimating that roughly 40% of teaching time was devoted to producing clear, accurate and correct English; 20% to grammar "pure and simple" and the remainder to literature – perhaps 20% to reading plays and discussion of the texts, 10% to encouragement of private reading "which is also encouraged out of classroom hours though the response is not very great." The account finishes with the odd observation:

"We get through at least one book of poems a year. I regarded this as very important but always tried to present it as a pleasant relief rather than a task." ⁴

It is perhaps no great wonder that Inglis responds:

"The closing sentence makes clear how boys *and* teachers feel themselves dominated by some phantom authority. Many mythic spectres still walk the school corridors." ⁵

It might be recalled at this point that it was the ambition of the Norwood Committee in the Report which served as a forerunner to the 1944 Act that teachers should progressively take on full responsibility for their own syllabuses. Their inability to shake off these "mythic spectres" and their obedience to a "phantom authority" could, of

¹ Op.cit. p 43

² Ibid. p 44

³ Ibid. p 43

⁴ Ibid. p 45

⁵ Ibid.

course, be offered as an explanation of why the optimism of Norwood was misplaced and had necessarily to be ignored; or by those of a grimmer turn of mind as an explanation of why school corridors are now walked by a more physical kind of authority in the shape of the OFSTED Inspectorate. Either way, teachers cannot rid themselves of all responsibility for the way in which shades of the prison house have closed not merely about the growing boy (and girl), but also about those whose task it is to prepare them for life outside the cage.

A second grammar school Head of Department is described as feeling overshadowed by a new headmaster who happens to be an English specialist with progressive ideas:

"He's going to read them *Bagpipe Music* in a lunchtime poetry reading. Well a poetry reading's a good idea. I'd never have done it. But they'll like it just because of 'a bit of skirt in a taxi' and that's not the point. They've got to know about beauty. I teach them *Ode to a Nightingale* because it's beautiful. They don't know about beauty. Anybody can teach them *Billy Liar*. I won't teach them *Billy Liar*. I want to preserve these children's virginity. Selected literature is *bad*. We turn out ignorance. They sit language, they sit selected literature and get 50% on three books. Damn it, *what* do they know? I want to provide for the sixteen year old school leaver but I don't think I succeed. It's my deficiencies make me talk like this. They've got to feel the excitement of words. 'Blood-bolter'd Banquo', good heavens! A few keep up with culture, very few. I want to prevent them being taken for a ride emotionally: it's teaching the power of discriminating between the true and the bogus, being able to recognise the difference between the death of little Nell and Wilfred Owen. *Sohrab and Rustum* now, I'm teaching that, it's false. I do honestly try to teach children to look at words. And look here, it *is* important to teach *facts* about English literature to the best children. X wrote that then. Spenser wrote *The Faerie Queene* in 1578. Facts about English Literature as a part of knowledge; children collect information. It settles their world. Then they must be mechanically efficient, you know, write a letter, spell, punctuate, paragraph, fill in forms, work in a bank, take an interest in politics, read a newspaper critically." ¹

It is, I think, important to stress that Fred Inglis is not including these observations as the object of mockery, though he does say at one point that "the torrent of language lays bare a great deal of cant"². Nor do I select my quotations to deride them. It may well be that the confusion of this tirade is a paradigm for the mental state of the typical English teacher, asked to accomplish so much, to so many ends. Perhaps an inchoate jumble of ideas vaguely related by little more than a common language is all that one can reasonably expect to emerge from a syllabus which tries to set down what shall be covered in the English classroom in the course of some three hours spread over

¹ Op.cit. pp 46,48,49

² Ibid. p 46

a week. Yet within the confusion are obvious nuggets of common sense – what really is the point of a year's concentration on three set texts, on which the student obtains 50% and promptly gives up reading literature altogether? And a wider question emerges: what, precisely, was the point of segregating some 25% of eleven year olds from the rest in order that they might receive an education such as is described here? What standards are being upheld by this Head of Department that need to be maintained and safeguarded? No great help comes from the next contribution, a young woman fairly new to teaching with a similar fourth year bottom set in a coeducational grammar school of whom Inglis reports:

"She said of her class 'they have a bottom-stream outlook':.....'I'm rather afraid that one or two of the form may give rather dishonest answers – in that they may firmly deny any response to the poetry, and deliberately choose the Mickey Spillane type prose. Some may genuinely feel this, but I think I told you that two of the boys had got to the stage with me that they will give the opposite to what they think my opinion might be.' It seems clear that some of this class had set itself up a programme for philistinism."¹

Any teacher will recognise the behaviour and attitude described, and the circumstance that we are here dealing with the reactions of adolescent males to a young female placed in charge of them, adds to the complexity of the educational implications. Nevertheless, what we have here, assuming that the 11+ examination system in the area Inglis has chosen for his survey is not atypically generous with its grammar school places, is a class which, bottom stream notwithstanding, should still be of better than average intelligence. That its attitude (or at least that of some of its members) should be not just anti-literature but anti-education is further indication of the adverse effects of selection, even on those who have allegedly "passed" the test.² Again it appears that the English syllabus has a lot to answer for as the teacher continues:

"GCE work has to be pegged along with, and précis work is pretty dead; grammar is only relevant to GCE.I'm afraid I'm rather a coward about imposing things on them that they are going to hate and I'll have to flog. There's such a big block in their minds against anything called a classic.So often they are just inclined to agree. There's such orthodoxy and no discussion at all. Instead of my having to control discussion with lots of opinions and lots being said, I have to lead them to a conclusion and quite often giving it to them and expect them to remember it afterwards."³

In other words, a class reduced to more or less total apathy. Inglis put words into the

¹ Op.cit. p 51

² v.inf. p 508

³ Op.cit. p 52

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esteem with 'O' level, and although many teachers privately (and even publicly) regarded it as more imaginative and providing better teaching and learning opportunities, it continued in the public regard as the 'Sec.Mod.' examination – even after 'sec.mods.' had very largely ceased to exist. The decision that a CSE Grade 1 should be accepted as equivalent to a GCE 'O' level pass was, very carefully, not tied specifically to any one of the three grades A, B and C which were conventionally accepted as passes rather than as indications of superior levels of performance: this meant that for all practical purposes it was regarded as the equivalent of a grade C or borderline 'O' level pass. This attempt at correlation was no part of the original scheme for the CSE, and was initially regarded by the GCE Boards with some considerable scepticism. George Bruce, Secretary to the University Entrance and School Examination Council of the University of London, is fairly explicit on this matter:

"As Beloe conceived the new examination it appeared more important to bring out its regional character than establish comparability of standards; in fact equivalence, it seemed, was to be deliberately sacrificed for what were thought to be more important considerations. Who could ever have seriously believed that it would be possible to equate the standards of twenty boards with three different modes of entry? However, by the time the C.S.E was launched its sponsors wished it to be recognised as a national standard and they sought to persuade universities, professional bodies and others to recognise a Grade 1 in the C.S.E. as equivalent to an Ordinary Level pass and this could only be done by convincing users that the standards of the fourteen C.S.E. boards were reasonably equivalent to one another and to the Ordinary Level pass standard. This presented a formidable problem; to demonstrate convincingly that fourteen groups of teachers, without the central authority exercising its right of access to syllabuses, question papers, marking schemes or marked scripts, could produce examination results of a reasonably comparable standard. This assumes that the boards can be expected to behave in much the same way when awarding grades, but can they? The eight G.C.E. examining bodies with far less freedom to stray have never been trusted to do so...." ¹

The resentment in that last sentence is almost palpable, and reflects the undoubted conviction of the G.C.E. authorities that the newcomer was being given privileges that had long been denied to them:

"From the start the C.S.E was given advantages withheld from the G.C.E. and the main irritants to which the GCE bodies had been subjected were avoided.the S.S.E.C. declared.... that they proposed to discharge their responsibilities for maintaining reasonable comparability of standards by means other than the regular inspection of syllabuses and scripts." ²

It is possible that the central authority was initially less concerned about the

¹ Op.cit., p 48

² Ibid. p 46

qualifications to be awarded by the new examination because they were not then seen as providing a mode of entry to the corridors of power guarded by the Universities. So long as the selective system prevailed, the eleven plus examination provided an effective screening process to determine those pupils entitled to serious consideration for academic preferment; and the prospect of giving encouragement in the form of a lesser qualification to those excluded from this group could be reasonably regarded as of no great significance. Once the movement towards the comprehensive system was well under way, however, the case was altered; and it became necessary for the new system to be given a clearly defined place in the hierarchy of the qualifications system. It had long been acknowledged by almost everybody, and illustrated by the researches of Fred Inglis and others, that there was, in fact, a substantial overlap between the top sets of secondary modern schools and the bottom sets of grammar schools: and in order that this might be recognised but not precisely quantified, it became necessary that qualifications originally conceived as appropriate for the two types of school should also overlap vaguely rather than under a system of absolute parities.

To Bruce, the situation was clear cut. Ordinary Level was 'the appropriate leaving certificate' for sixteen year-olds from the top twenty per cent of the academic ability spectrum with no ambition for further study, whereas C.S.E. provided appropriately for the next 40%; and on this basis the two could happily co-exist:

"The argument between the respective merits of the two examinations has been artificially inflamed. The interests of C.S.E. and G.C.E. are not inimical to each other."¹

For schools, however, the situation was far more complex. Their own desire for publicly recognised success, reinforced by intense parental pressure, ensured that they were required to engage in complicated and expensive dual entry schemes so that 'borderline' pupils who failed to obtain the coveted C grade might at least get a CSE 1; and 'teaching for examinations' rather than for subject content became the exception rather than the rule. In consequence, it became inevitable that CSE and 'O' level would merge sooner or later, and it is probably fair to say that only a conflict of vested interests ensured that the dual system actually survived until 1988, when one change

¹ Op.cit. pp 46-47

among so many was comparatively little marked. The drawback of the delay was that by the time the new single examination actually appeared, the then prevailing political opinion virtually ensured that it would be modelled more closely upon the traditional G.C.E than upon the innovative C.S.E.; and teacher control, course-work and the oral component in English examinations would recede into the background. The delay also meant that by the time a unitary examination system was matched to a virtually unitary system of education, the comprehensive school itself was under increasing political attack. To some extent it must be acknowledged that the comprehensive ideal had been damaged by its own most vigorous supporters, who confused the end of selection with the end of differentiation. As a result many schools trumpeted the advantages of "mixed ability" without actually offering the more demanding and individual-based mixed ability teaching that should have accompanied the mixed ability classes. In consequence, both politicians and the public at large were eventually persuaded to see the comprehensive system as providing a kind of lowest common denominator education, remorselessly pitched at average ability levels, and totally incapable of inspiring the most able. Had the emphasis of the proponents of the comprehensive school been fixed firmly upon the unfairness of the much-hated 11+ examination and upon the injustice done to pupils in both halves of the border-zone overlap, and had it stressed the contrast with the genuinely comprehensive ideal – that each school should provide an appropriate education for each separate category of student within its walls, including the most gifted – and had this emphasis been properly implemented from the start, I suspect that the current state of the English educational system would have been quite different: another of the significant post-1944 might-have-beens.

In the course of the transition from selective to comprehensive schooling, English teaching went on with its continued struggle to define a practical purpose for itself and then to devise a syllabus that might effectively realise it. Linguists provided scientific explanations for what everybody had known all along, that confronting children with formal grammar teaching had little or no effect in modifying their actual usage. Predictably, however, the explanations tended to be couched in technical jargon – impenetrable to the popular journalist and the populist politician..

Occasionally, explanations are clear-cut and carry not only immediate conviction but also an implicit suggestion for improving the technique:

"For many children the function of the English which they use out of school is mainly to create a sense of group solidarity,Therefore, much of the English used in class, whichindicates distinctions that have not previously been perceived – and so tends to stress the difference between people rather than the similarity – seem pointless to the pupil, mere empty words. ...A few pupils express attitudes prevalent in the district; the rest sit in silent agreement feeling there is no more to be said. The teacher, in an effort to provoke argument, gives a different point of view. But the meaning of this to the pupil is not that it gives him information to make him rethink.....it simply brands the teacher as an outsider. No discussion develops. The teacher goes away from the lesson convinced his pupils cannot think; the pupils leave thinking English is a waste of time." ¹

More usually, however, *The Practice of English Teaching* confines itself to the condemnation of bad practice rather than the provision of readily accessible remedies:

"the most popular dramatist of all time and the most popular novelist of his day are often remembered only with loathing because they are associated not with life but with a classroom exercise." ²

There is a message there, of course; keep the familiar human emotions aspect of the book to the forefront and never allow it to be swamped by the unfamiliarity of the language; but this may not seem to all those with classes in front of them to be a readily accessible remedy – still less the advice on the matter of teaching language:

"The dismal history of the study of language in our schools and the anachronistic persistence of useless 'learning' *about* language does not lead us to believe that no language study should occur in school. The students of linguistics have effectively demolished the ramshackle structure 'English language' as we have known it, and have replaced it with careful scientific work.To permeate all this English work with a modern attitude to language, teachers will need to acquire a basic understanding of the implications of modern linguistics." ³

Frank Whitehead said more or less the same thing a few years earlier in *The Disappearing Dais*.⁴ The trouble is, of course, that serving teachers are not the group most likely to read books such as *The Practice of English Teaching*; and the influence upon actual practice is both very slow and very small. And all the time, in the background, there is the vision of The Employer, or The General Public, banging his fist on a convenient hard surface and saying "All we want is for kids to be able to write grammatical sentences, with punctuation marks in the right places and the words properly spelt. It can't be as complicated as that!"

¹ *The Practice of English Teaching*, ed. Owens and Marland, 1970, pp.81-82

² Ibid. pp 166-167

³ Ibid.

⁴ v.sup. p 66

Yet the day of this long-awaited breakthrough had not yet dawned, at least so far as a significant proportion of school leavers was concerned. Owens and Marland, in the collection of papers by various hands which constitutes *The Practice of English Teaching*, make no attempt to fudge the issue:

".....there is a widespread feeling that the state of English teaching is far from healthy. And there is a measure of truth in this. Thousands of boys and girls leave secondary school convinced that they are 'bad at English' and certainly they are not able to use their mother tongue with confidence outside the limited purposes of their immediate social group. They have no access to the resources of the language as a whole; in a sense they are maimed or disqualified, linguistically unfit to play a full part in the life of their society and effectively barred from undertaking further education." ¹

This is, quite deliberately, a shocking indictment. The image of pupils whose education has left them "maimed or disqualified" allows no room for complacency; and the proffered counterweight 'flies up and kicks the beam':

"More books on the teaching of English have appeared in the last three years than in the previous thirty. Ideas which would have seemed outrageous a decade ago have now won wider acceptance. There is genuine innovation in an area of the curriculum where it had long been easier to find fossils than living specimens. Some schools and teachers, often working in isolation, are producing remarkable results." ²

But, one might ask, "Is anyone *reading* these books, or do they spend their time on the shelves of the education section of university libraries? And Caldwell Cook, working in isolation, was producing results remarkable enough to impress the Newbolt Committee half a century ago!" Yet it is easy to scoff, and these points are by no means without merit. Teacher training was getting better, understanding of the basic mechanics of the learning process was improving, the aims of education were being slowly expanded to the ultimate betterment of the pupil population. Perhaps the best explanation of the Janus image so far presented is by analogy with the economic picture of recent years: the greatest benefit of new educational theory went to those who had always done reasonably well out of schooling; and if those who had never really profited from the state educational system were not in fact any worse off than they had been, they seemed to be by comparison with the strides being made elsewhere. The number of places available at university rose steadily and the number of students taking up those places came from an ever widening sector of British society. More and more

¹ Op.cit. p 3

² Ibid.

pupils were staying on into sixth forms, and an 'A' level course had ceased to be the prerogative of a privileged few. That the quality of sixteen year old school leavers seemed to have declined was, at least in part, attributable to the fact that the best of those who were formerly in that category were no longer seeking employment but rather the opportunities which came with an extended education and higher qualifications. It was at the bottom end – the half of our future which rightly concerned the Newsom Committee – that little light seemed to be shed.

It was in a valiant attempt to assist with the improving of this situation that the various writers contributed to the Owens and Marland anthology their thoughts and proposals for various aspects of English. The editors themselves provide this extract from the introduction to a paper on 'The Habit of Reading':

"An underlying aim of all English teaching is to establish the habit of keen, wide and careful reading for imaginative pleasure and practical understanding. Extensive and frequent reading involves the pupil's mind with a wide vocabulary in contexts that will illumine the unknown word and sharpen the focus on the half-known word; it familiarizes the pupil with a variety of sentence structures that will provide unconscious reminders when the pupil comes to read and write; it provides experience and understanding of aspects of life and people that are outside the individual's own observation; it gives significant pleasure to all but the most resolutely unbookish. The majority of our pupils, despite the encouragement in some junior schools, come to us with little experience and small encouragement out of school. To meet the need it is not sufficient to present the class with a number of books during the year for 'intensive' study, important though the shared reading of a book is. Our first duty is to prepare for casual reading."¹

Just so – but with small encouragement out of school and the ability to disregard that offered by the primary schools, how do you convince the merely but not resolutely unbookish of the significant pleasures in store? This passage reminded me immediately of a pupil (in the second 'band' of a newly created comprehensive school) who explained to me that, while reading a magazine or newspaper was acceptable as relaxation, reading a book implied that you had nothing better to do for hours and was invariably taken as provocation by her hard-working parents. To be caught doing so was immediately to be set about some household chore. Her only chance of getting away with it was to have an exercise book open alongside it and a pen in one hand so that she could pretend to be writing an essay on it. Needless to say, this pupil

¹ Op.cit. p 161

needed my sympathy, not my encouragement. Had she not been a determined bookworm sharing her vice with another addict (I was in charge of the school library at the time), she would doubtless never have confided in me at all. What proportion of pupils, I wonder, not in the first academic rank, would have shown her determination ?

A similar question on practicabilities arises from another editorial extract:

"One of our first tasks is to abandon the study of 'skills' in isolation.Comprehension will be an essential part of the study of the study of worthwhile texts. Reported speech will arise out of a study of newspapers and magazines.....'Figures of speech' will come up in the pupils' reading and writing. 'Grammatical errors' can be dealt with systematically when they arise out of the text under discussion....." ¹

With a skilled teacher and a reasonably able and co-operative class, yes, they will and can. With a gifted teacher and a notably bright class there are no obvious limits to what might be achieved in terms of linguistic and literary experience. But how much help is this to the harmless drudge with a class of bored clockwatchers? Is it not inevitable that he will turn back to the coursebook as a "safe automatic pilot" even if this does mean that "the whole dynamic of living experience is sacrificed to a ready-made system?" ²

It is, however, in the closing chapter, 'What the Future Requires' that this book most disappoints. The writer calls, reasonably enough, for a reappraisal "of ideas about the aims of teaching English and about the processes of its acquisition" ³ and goes on:

"In the past, when fewer children were taught, and so far as secondary schools were concerned, taught in smaller classes at a more leisurely pace, the opportunities available to a gifted teacher to develop his individual approach, and to bring his personality to bear upon an individual child, justified the conception of teaching as an art. Let us make no mistake, it would be an incalculable loss if the gifted teacher's personality no longer created the environment for sound learning: nevertheless we must face the consequences of mass education, larger classes, the drain upon the teacher's resources of energy because of other demands and the vertiginousness of the age. Furthermore, teaching cannot remain uninfluenced by those tendencies of our times which are favourable to technical and scientific attitudes with the emphasis on the value of the objective and precise, rather than personal and subjective, methods. What was previously tentative, unconscious and spontaneous in teaching tends now to be planned, consciously formulated, clear and precise. This is not a recent development: it is part of the scientific revolution and of the influence of a democratic philosophy. The greater the number of teachers, the greater the need to ensure a fairly uniform standard of excellence, though this unfortunately may frustrate the most original. And the greater the need for uniformity of standards the more important the place of techniques." ⁴

¹ Op.cit. p 243

² Ibid. p 241

³ Ibid p 299

⁴ Ibid.

Setting aside concerns about "a fairly uniform standard of excellence" being a contradiction in terms, and writing nearly thirty years later, one might say that this was a reasonably accurate forecast of intervenient events: certainly the task of fitting the developments of recent years into that forecast offers no great difficulty. But what follows is neither a policy for the unpleasantnesses to come nor a strategy for avoiding them.

"How can we know what literature to teach and what aspects of literature to emphasise at various stages of development unless we know something firm about the development of personality and what contributes to it? Up to the present our understanding has been intuitive rather than conscious, a matter of views and opinions rather than of the accumulation of fact on which we can construct tenable hypotheses to guide teaching practice. What do we know that is not simply anecdotal about the attitude of pupils, parents and teachers to the teaching of poetry, and to the range of literary experience to which pupils are exposed, or to the different kinds of writing which children of various ages are encouraged to undertake? If motivation is fundamental to learning, surely knowledge of the factors which govern it is necessary to improve learning. More important than any of the aspects to which I have referred is the understanding of what contemporary society is actually demanding of the child in the process of gaining greater control over his mother tongue and using it to communicate and to participate in the tradition or culture to which it is the most important key. What response to the changed circumstances of society does the teaching of English need to offer? Should we not consider what adjustment we need to make first in the concept of literacy, second in our understanding of the means and of the purposes of communication in the changed society, and third, how to effect the adjustment to the advantage of society and of the individual and growing child? Of course, teachers are well aware of these issues....but even they have only their intuitions to guide them. The investigation we need and no doubt will get must combine the experience and skill of the psychologist, the sociologist, the linguist and the practising teacher." ¹

Instead, we are confronted with the conviction that what the future requires to deal with larger classes and a more precisely formulated objective, and to meet the changing demands of a vertiginous society, is an ever more scientific and precise diagnosis of the developmental needs of the individual. For this the intuition on which teachers have relied for generations, and which provided intermittent startling successes as well as an apparently irreducible substratum of failure, has been outmoded by the scientific revolution, and is to be superseded by newly-honed diagnostic techniques for which the teacher will need additional knowledge, not merely of linguistics as already acknowledged, but of sociology and psychology as well.

¹ Op.cit. pp 302-304

Familiarly, this solution calls by implication for massively improved resources: for research, for in-service training, for a radical change in the training methodology for newcomers to the profession, and for the implementation of the new techniques on an enormous scale.

Looking back, what is surprising about this forecast is the second half of the confident "the investigation we need and no doubt will get": there was never a hope of finance adequate to cope with existing perceptions of resource need, still less for a serious investigation into adaptations in line with sociological prediction. Within four years of this book's publication, teachers' salaries were liable to monthly adjustment in accordance with inflation levels, and never since has the education service been free of the burden of severe financial limitations. With politicians unwilling or unable to accept the implications of research, or even the findings of their own Committees of Enquiry, where these conflicted with political dogma on the one hand, or would have involved considerable expense on the other, teachers have been left to struggle on with their intuition. Unfortunately, but perhaps predictably, this led to division and factionalism, as bitter in its way as the party political division over the comprehensive system. Books on teaching English continued to appear in considerable numbers¹, but their emphasis tended to be increasingly polemic and restricted in appeal to those engaged most energetically in the battle to define what really were The Aims and Purposes of Teaching English in Britain, as one conference in 1965 put it; a battle which, I suspect, left the considerable majority of English teachers more or less unmoved. *Every English Teacher*, the authors of which describe it as "designed for those engaged in teaching English but baffled by conflicting ideologies and in need of practical guidance" begins by observing:

"English teachers, within their own specialism, have become notorious for the length and acrimony of their arguments about aims and methods" ²

The acrimony in question seems to have had its origins, at least in part, in the Dartmouth Seminar. Thirty years later it is possible to argue that a great deal too much was made of this: even ten years later it was possible, despite the fact that James Britton, a leading figure from Dartmouth, was a member of the Bullock Committee,

¹ v.sup. p 90

² Adams & Pearce, 1974, p 3

for the Bullock report to afford it no more than a passing reference in dealing with the teaching of literature:

".....there is a difference in emphasis between the two countries in this as in other aspects of English teaching. This was apparent at the Dartmouth Seminar of 1966, when British and American teachers of English met to discuss the subject in depth" ¹

At the time, however, there was a distinct rift between those who felt that the traditional presentation of literature got in the way of the essential task of getting children to use language effectively; and those who, in the words of the Bullock Report, found literature:

"the most rewarding form of the child's encounter with language." ²

This rift led to the taking up of some extreme positions which, in turn, undoubtedly contributed to the development of that lack of confidence in the judgement of professionals which distinguished so clearly the legislation of 1988 from that of 1944 – or, to put it another way, to the political and journalistic convention of the use of the word 'trendy' to characterise dismissively the professional explanation of any piece of methodology which did not conform to lay expectations.

David Allen's highly personal account of teaching in the sixties and seventies includes both the initial sense that Dartmouth, and John Dixon's account of it in *Growth through English*, "transformed the scene and acted as the watershed of change"; and also a subsequent disillusionment. Allen began, rather in the mould of English teachers referred to above in the Bullock Report, with a conviction that literature was the main element in the English teacher's approach to his subject, with enthusiasm and commitment, and with that degree of impatience with tradition which customarily goes hand in hand with the former qualities.

"It was an exhilarating, buoyant time of high hopes, of great ferment.There was a confidence that we English teachers were doing a vital job.There was...a rejection of the kind of writing demanded by examinations – an essay on 'Ambition', for example, which was not felt to involve the pupil in any meaningful use of words. A good deal of such criticism came, as it still does, from teachers who had been grammar school pupils, had succeeded in the exam system, but who were aware of the shortcomings of their own education.³ The new CSE examination was a focus for the critical reform but we felt trammelled also by aspects of 'O' level GCE, (both Language and Literature) and 'A' Level English Literature..... but the value of literature and its 'centrality' were not doubted. There was no

¹ Op.cit. §9.1

² Ibid.

³ v.inf. p 515

discussion of this axiom – rather we spent our time in developing new ways of using literature. Our assumption of its value for pupils was based on a strong sense of its value for us. We were critical of insensitive teaching of literature, for what we were after was a genuine felt response from the pupil." ¹

By the time he wrote *English Teaching since 1965 – How Much Growth?* his approach to his rôle had progressed very much in the way indicated by a quotation which he employs from an article in *English in Education*:

"Twenty years ago a teacher of English might have confidently asserted that his main concern was to introduce his pupils to literature. Today he might less confidently assert that his main concern is with the process of helping his pupils to develop their abilities in using language for a variety of needs and purposes." ²

The intervening period had not been comfortable: he quotes an article by Frank Whitehead in *Use of English* entitled, laconically, "What's the use, indeed?" in which:

"...he described a change in English teaching so profound that 'the beginning English teacher today moves into a scene which is riven by factions, uncertain, confused, lacking a clear sense of direction, often dispirited, sometimes betraying signs of a malaise which comes perilously close to demoralization'." ³

The source of this malaise may be explained, in what must inevitably be over-simplified terms, as a progressively developing over-reaction to doubts about the function of literature in the teaching of English as expressed originally by American contributors to the Dartford Seminar. As the Bullock Report puts it:

"In recent years it has been questioned whether literature does in fact make the reader a better and more sensitive human being.One American educationist has said bluntly thatthere is no evidence that the reading of literature in schools produces in any way the social or emotional effects claimed for it: Another has argued that the teacher of English is not the custodian of ethics and character, and that in these matters he has no more and no less responsibility than his colleagues in other subjects." ⁴

This attack on the *value* of literature, combined with the already existing dissatisfaction with the restricting (or, as Allen would have it, trammelling) effect of examinations in the subject led the most enthusiastic supporters of 'child-centred' education to the conviction that traditional methods of teaching literature imposed the teacher's values on the pupil and thus directly conflicted with the doctrine of the primacy of the child's own tastes, reactions and opinions, which it was the function of the English teacher to encourage and to provide with effective expression by improving language skills. There

¹ *English Teaching since 1965 – How Much Growth?*, 1980, pp 1,2,3 passim

² Ibid. p 60

³ Ibid. p 90

⁴ Op.cit. §9.1

were no canons of taste, no absolute values, no basis of correctness of reaction, no concept of responsible criticism for a teacher to convey. At its most extreme, there were protagonists of this doctrine who held that to correct the spelling, grammar or punctuation of a child's written work was to inhibit his freedom of expression; and at any level it was an attack on the Leavisite idea of providing a defence of cultural tradition from the attacks of a philistine environment. The 'Preachers of Culture' were being denied a pulpit, and the religious analogy is not inapposite – certainly the bitterness engendered, and referred to by Adams and Pearce¹, was of a quality most frequently associated with religious controversy. Allen, whose initial enthusiasm was doubtless encouraged by the prospect of being able to discard for ever some of the fossilized accretions attached to literature by the Grammar School and School Certificate tradition to which he has referred above, to which H E Bates reacted so strongly², and to which we must return in the final chapter of this thesis³, was to find himself increasingly at odds with the company he had found so exciting at the start of his career, and by no means so certain that English teachers 'were doing a vital job':

"What are we to make of the Head of English who gleefully relates how other departments in his school looked askance at him, because they believed talk should have a purpose, while he thought any talk at all was bound to be valuable, however apparently pointless or even destructive of some other enterprise, such as reading or writing?"⁴

It is this kind of negation of responsibility which has led to the imposition of the National Curriculum and to the determination of government to take into its own hands the decisions which, for the whole of David Allen's career up to the time at which he wrote his book, and for a few years thereafter, were regarded as belonging inalienably to the profession. It would be an enormous exaggeration to suppose that this head of department was typical of his time, but he is, nevertheless, an extreme example of a malaise that was unquestionably spreading; a malaise that involves the abandonment of any real concept of values. As Allen puts it:

"What are we to do in response to the deep involvement of the majority of children in pop-star cults. These are matters which impinge directly on the child's growth to adulthood and are concerned all the time with evaluation and perspective. They directly influence the ability of the child to explore the unfamiliar, to sustain interest over a long period, to savour quiet pleasures. Pop cults involve admiration for a rootless, aimless sort

1 v.sup. p 95

2 v.sup. p 18

3 v.inf. pp 507-516

4 Op.cit. p 99

of life, of cynicism and self-destruction.

English teachers need to define an attitude which cannot be indifferent or compliant. The 'growth' model does not relate English work to these issues and so does not help towards that definition. By its omission it has allowed English teachers to believe indifference or compliance are possible. Indeed, it seems now that pop-music is the music of many teachers; universities are on the circuit for pop-groups; the words of pop-songs are regarded by many as literature." ¹

I have no doubt that many teachers who have read David Allen's book ridiculed this last sentence for preciousness or pretentiousness – it would not particularly surprise him:

"Recently, at a course for teachers, I was attacked by a group for daring to suggest that the teacher has any right to select the kind of books that were available in the library or classroom library.The interesting thing about the argument with the other teachers was that they all in the end accepted that they *do* select, but usually on the basis of personal liking. Ironically, they saw no manipulation in that approach, in which the child is at the mercy of one person's taste, but saw undue arrogance at work in the attempt to determine what kind of books we *ought to* make available to children, which books we *ought to* share with them." ²

Just how prevalent such attitudes may have become in the profession by the mid-seventies, I would not pretend to estimate. Certainly not to the extent to which it was perceived as being by the outside world; but then, I have served all my teaching career in the provinces, where new trends tend to be much slower to take root, and there are far fewer opportunities for their more rabid exponents to spread the infection, than is the case in the metropolis, which is the source most readily available to politicians and the media.

Equally certainly, concomitant changes in the economic situation of the country were creating a gradually escalating problem which meant that such concerns had come to the forefront of government attention. Adams and Pearce put this combination of influences and their combined demand for official action succinctly:

"Employers of graduates are drawing upon some 20% of the population going through the system, whereas twenty-five years ago the figure was about 5%. The proportion of school population expected by society to have a high degree of literacy is in reality immeasurably greater than at any previous time in our history. It is against this background of steady and, in recent years very rapid expansion, that the history of English teaching, its attitudes and theoretical positions, should be understood." ³

It was, therefore, against this background that the Bullock Committee was appointed with a remit:

¹ Op.cit. p 92

² Ibid. p 112

³ *Every English Teacher*, 1974, p 119

"To consider in relation to schools:

- (a) all aspects of teaching the use of English, including reading, writing and speech;
- (b) how present practice might be improved and the rôle that initial and in-service training might play;
- (c) to what extent arrangements for monitoring the general level of attainment in these skills can be introduced or improved; and to make recommendations. " ¹

Unlike subsequent bodies charged with investigation into the problems of the educational system, the Bullock Committee did not give the impression of having been recruited to voice an opinion which government had already reached, but was a fully professional and relevantly informed group. The chairman was Master of St Catherine's, Oxford, and, at the time of his appointment, vice-chancellor of the university. Of his nineteen colleagues, only three were not members of one or another branch of the education service – the Chairman of the Schools Council, the editor of *The Economist*, and the managing director of the publishing house A C Black. The remaining sixteen represented the primary sector (4), middle schools (1), secondary schools (1), LEAs (3) and University Education Faculties (7), including, as aforementioned, James Britton of the London Institute. As a group they knew a good deal about the subject they were investigating, and they were at pains to find out a great deal more, and to report upon what they found both readably and in considerable detail.

Not surprisingly, they began by dealing with complaints about falling standards, made the obvious comparison with the findings of the Newbolt Report, and took into consideration the explanation offered above by Adams and Pearce.

"Many allegations about lower standards today come from employers, who maintain that young people joining them from school cannot write grammatically, are poor spellers, and generally express themselves badly.there is a strong implication that at one time levels of performance were superior. It is therefore interesting to find in the Newbolt Report of 1921 observations of a very similar kind.... [eg "the teaching of English in the present day schools produces a very limited command of the English language" (§77)]...It is evident that employers of fifty years ago were no less dissatisfied; but in any case we must ask with whom today's young employees are being compared. The situation is very different from that before the war or for some time after it.The changing pattern of employment is making widespread demands on reading and writing skills and therefore exposing deficiencies that may have escaped observation in the past." ²

What seems much more difficult evidence to explain away follows almost immediately:

¹ *A Language for Life* (The Bullock Report), 1975, Introduction, p xxxi

² Ibid. §1.1

".....it is not only employers who express dissatisfaction. Further and higher education institutions often remark upon the inability of their entrants to write correct and coherent English.¹ The Committee was furnished with examples of essays by college of education students.....These essays contained numerous errors of spelling, punctuation, and construction, and were a disturbing indication that the students who wrote them were ill-equipped to cope with the language demands they would meet in schools. Observations to the same effect have been made to us by heads, who have complained of the poor standard of written expression of some of the young teachers who have joined their schools." ²

The Report does not go on here to make a parallel point to that quoted above about the nature of comparison, and a change in circumstances – and I think it legitimate to point out that it might quite properly, though with some political unwisdom, have done so. Very recently, an article in *The Guardian* ³, headlined "Why most bright kids don't want to teach", observed:

"the A level hurdles to a teaching degree (according to the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) are the lowest for any major subject group. You need one Grade C and two Grade Ds to get a place."

At the time at which the Bullock Report was being compiled, the situation was, if anything, rather worse. Places in Colleges of Education were being taken up on two Grade Es, and pay scales had become something of a national scandal. I have already drawn attention to the fact that teacher' salaries had to be pegged to inflation thresholds to prevent industrial action.⁴ Until the Houghton award was implemented, (it was phased in between the January and April of 1975, followed by an additional pay award in September backdated to April, and yet another from the April of 1976), there was a chronic shortage of recruits to the profession and a substantial wastage rate among those already employed. For years after Houghton the prevalence of cars with N-suffix registrations in school car parks was a stock joke.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the quality of students admitted to training and subsequently appointed to schools was notably lower than was either desirable or good for the long term health and reputation of the teaching profession. Nor is it surprising that there was some resentment among teachers, and perhaps a greater predisposition to look for excuses to ease the burden of professional responsibility. Even so, the Bullock Committee did not find evidence of a wholesale decline in English teaching:

¹ For comments on the 'Use of English' exam., designed to deal with this problem, v.inf. pp 144-150

² Op. cit. §1.3

³ August 11th., 1997

⁴ v.sup. p 94

"It is extremely difficult to say whether or not standards of written and spoken English have fallen. There is no convincing evidence available, and most opinions depend very largely upon subjective impressions.a good deal of time is given to formal practice in English. The answers we received certainly did not reveal a picture of the decay of such work in the midst of a climate of unchecked creativity. Our survey gives no evidence of a large body of teachers committed to the rejection of basic skills and not caring who knows it. It is facile to assume that all manner of weakness can be ascribed to the wholesale spread of a permissive philosophy." ¹

In other words, the vast majority of English teachers, who had not deserved the automatic abuse of anything that politician or journalist could sneer at as 'trendy', were plodding on with methods that had been known to be ineffectual for half a century. Not that the Bullock Committee was in any way guilty of blind adherence to tradition:

"...we are not suggesting that the answer to improved standards is to be found in some such simple formula as : more grammar exercises, more formal speech training, more comprehension extracts. We believe that language competence grows incrementally, through an interaction of writing, talk, reading and experience, the body of resulting work forming an organic whole". ²

The paragraph continues:

"The teacher's first concern should be to create the conditions necessary for fluency.The child should be brought up to see technical control not as an abstraction imposed from without but as the means of communicating with his audience in the most satisfying and appropriate manner.....Considered in these terms, the handling of language is a complex ability, and one that will not be developed simply by working through a series of text-book exercises." ³

The following paragraph introduced the phrase by which the Report came to be best remembered, "language across the curriculum", a policy which the Bullock Committee wished to be adopted in all schools because:

"if standards of achievement are to be improved all teachers will have to be helped to acquire a deeper understanding of language in education. This includes teachers of other subjects than English.....no fewer than one third of all secondary teachers of English have no qualification in the subject.large numbers of pupils are taught English in circumstances which would be considered unacceptable in many other subjects. The attitude still prevails that most teachers can turn their hands to it without appropriate initial qualifications or additional training. In our view such an attitude is based upon an ignorance of the demands of English teaching and the knowledge required of its practitioners.....only if they are fully recognised can an advance in the standards of English be achieved." ⁴

As in the case of *Half Our Future*,⁵ there is recognition here of a real shortage of genuine English teachers, and once again this was to find no acknowledgement or

1 Op.cit. §1.8

2 Ibid. §1.10

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid §1.11

5 v.sup 75

recognition from authority in terms of recruitment, or an attempt to change the attitude of schools and governing bodies that the odd English class was an acceptable way of filling up the timetables of those principally devoted to teaching something else.

There was also much here in line with modern educational thinking and with the less extreme books on English teaching; and little if anything to disturb the vast majority of those currently working in the field. But neither was there anything positive to ensure that the good intentions were translated into practice. In so many schools the 'policy' for language across the curriculum amounted to little more than a uniform marking policy which demanded that the same technique be used for correcting spelling errors whether they occurred in English, Geography or Physics, and little was done to help teachers to "create the conditions necessary for fluency" when they were required to work in an environment and atmosphere designed, so far as the majority of pupils was concerned, to inhibit it. We are confronted, yet again, with might-have-beens, for had there been the national will and the resources to put the proposals of the Bullock report into practice, much good might have resulted: possibly even an obviation of the grounds for the debate to which this thesis is a contribution, for much of it was well informed, well intentioned and well put – notably its highly disturbing findings on the teaching of literature.

"We strongly recommend that there should be a major effort to increase voluntary reading, which should be recognised as a powerful instrument for the improvement of standards. And in making this recommendation we recall a particularly telling remark from the evidence: pupils admitted to an adult literacy scheme had been asked to say why, in their opinion, they failed to learn to read at school. Only one common factor emerges: they did not learn from the process of learning to read that it was something that other people did for *pleasure*." ¹

There are direct echoes here of recent publications on English teaching² and there are more to come as the Bullock Committee explore what tends to be substituted:

"There is no doubt that many secondary school pupils develop unsympathetic attitudes to literature as the result of their experiences in preparing for an examination. We saw lessons in which a novel was treated as a hoard of factual information, with the pupils scoring marks for the facts they had remembered.We saw pupils encountering poems as little more than comprehension passages, on which the teacher's information and interpretations were recorded as marginal notes. Yet in the same breath it must be said that the right relationship between teacher, text and pupil can and does have a strikingly positive effect on attitudes to literature. In one

¹ Op.cit. §9.11

² v.sup. p 91

fairly recent study.....a substantial majority of a large sample of 'O' level candidates of both sexes said they had no intention of reading poetry after leaving school. But a study of the boys' responses showed that the small minority taking the opposite view came from just six of the twenty-nine classes in ten different schools. It is likely that the positive effect of the teachers of those six classes had been very strong." ¹

We are back somewhere very near where we started, with H E Bates, "knocked, mentally, all of a heap" by the insights and teaching skills of Edmund Kirby ², who was to have a very similar effect, some years later, on A H Halsey.³ An instinctive teacher, obeying the call of a true vocation, will make an impact on the most unpromising pupils, despite the shortcomings of the environment or of his colleagues, and despite the handicap of an externally imposed syllabus or unsympathetic examination system. A lesser teacher may be able to overcome some of these hurdles, but not all of them at once; and the kind of teacher who might be described as 'adequate at best' is likely to be brought down by any one of them. And English is perhaps both the easiest of subjects for the gifted teacher and the most demanding for the untalented. The Bullock Report recognised the special nature of the subject:

"In a very real sense a pupil is himself being judged each time he responds in class to a piece of literature, particularly a poem.In no other area of classroom operations is there quite the same degree of vulnerability, with poetry the most exposing element of all. Every skilled teacher has his own means of reducing this vulnerability.....His curiosity has remained alive and has not been extinguished by layers of acquired judgement. These are the most favourable conditions for any work of literature: when teacher and taught approach it in a common spirit of exploration." ⁴

That last quotation might have come – indeed, could, in a sense, be said to have come – from half a dozen of the books I have quoted in the course of this chapter. As I have tried to show, there was, throughout the period between the 1944 and 1988 Acts, a constant supply of keen perceptions among both private authors and state appointed committees into the shortcomings of English in the classroom and the ways to improve it. But there was little coherent and systematic help for teachers who were in need of it; instead there was a slowly developing decline of morale in the profession which reached its nadir in the troubles of 1986; and a refusal, which continues today, on the part of government after government and local authority after local authority to do anything about the twin major causes of defective educational outcome – a fossilised

¹ Op.cit. §9.14

² v.sup p 18

³ v.inf. pp 510-514

⁴ Op.cit. §9.15

examination system and inadequate resources. The Bullock Report echoed the objections to literature examinations to which I have glancingly referred several times and to which the next chapter will give detailed attention; and it quoted at some length the damning report of 1964 by the Secondary Schools Examination Council on "The Examining of English Language" including the assertion:

"We have considered most seriously whether we should advise the cessation of these examinations for educational reasons, as well as for the reasons related to the changing demand for qualifications in English Language. We have come very near that conclusion."¹

The Bullock Committee itself does not come near that conclusion. Instead it echoes, not for the first time, the wisdom of the Newbolt Report ("For good or ill, the examination system is with us" §276) and observes brusquely:

"As long as the right of entry to succeeding stages of education or to particular kinds of employment is geared to the testing system, it is impossible for teachers to brush aside the particular demands of the English Language paper."²

It is interesting, but not in the least surprising, that there is no suggestion of re-animating the Norwood idea of giving schools control over their own syllabuses and testing systems. Public outcry, albeit carefully manipulated, over the post-Dartmouth excesses had firmly put paid to that possibility. Nevertheless, there were positive and supportive things among the Bullock Committee recommendations that deserved a good deal more attention than they got. Perhaps there were simply too many of them: the *Summary of Conclusions and Recommendations* runs to more than twenty pages. Perhaps the refusal of the Committee to jump on popular bandwagons, and to insist instead on a genuinely scholarly approach to the areas it was asked to research may have discouraged government support:

"There is little empirical evidence to show whether television has had any adverse effects upon standards of reading. There is no firm statistical base for comparison of present-day standards of reading with those of before the war; and in terms of today's problems it is questionable whether there is anything to be gained from attempting it. There is no evidence of a decline in attainment over the years in the lowest achievers among fifteen year olds. Since national surveys were instituted in 1948 the standards of the poorest readers have risen, and the gap between the most able and the least able has narrowed. This reflects upon the capacity of existing tests to measure the achievement of the most able readers."³

^{1,2} Op.cit. §11.31

³ Ibid. pp 516-517

The principal recommendations were sound and well argued, and it is yet another example of lost opportunity that they were honoured in the breach rather than observed – presumably, once again, the problem of financing the solution made it much easier to ignore it. I have chosen six of these proposals, numbers 7, 8, 10, 11, 14 and 17, as an illustration of what might have been, had all of them been put into practice across the country and then monitored:

- English in the secondary school should have improved resources in terms of staffing accommodation and ancillary help.

- Every L.E.A. should appoint a specialist English adviser and should establish an advisory team with the specific responsibility of supporting schools in all aspects of language in education.

- Additional assistance should be given to children retarded in reading, and where it is the school's policy to withdraw pupils from their classes for special help they should continue to receive support at the appropriate level on their return.

- There should be a reading clinic or remedial centre in every L.E.A., giving access to a comprehensive diagnostic service and expert medical, psychological and teaching help. In addition to its provision for children with severe reading difficulties the centre should offer an advisory service to schools in association with the L.E.A.s specialist adviser.

- A standing working party should be formed, made up of representatives of the D.E.S. and L.E.A.s, to consider capitation allowances and resources of schools, and a satisfactory level of book provision should be its first subject of enquiry.

- There should be a national centre for language in education, concerned with the teaching of English in all its aspects, from language and reading in the early years to advanced studies with sixth forms. ¹

What actually happened in practical terms was very little – save in isolated instances, nothing was done about any of these proposals, many English teachers remained unaware of what they actually were, and the situation in the classroom did not change to any significant extent.

Over the course of the ensuing years the effects of the Houghton award were overtaken by inflation and pay freezes, and a sense of demoralisation returned to the profession, culminating in the strikes and withdrawals of good will of 1986 which spelt the final breakdown of relations between the government and the teaching profession – a breakdown that, even after an intervening period of more than ten years, is still far from being fully healed. Apart from ensuring the popularisation of the phrase "English across the curriculum" the government of the day did almost nothing – and it is a sad reflection on the enormous amount of time and effort which went into the

¹ Op.cit. pp 514-515

Bullock Report that the most positive immediate response to the state of affairs in 1986 was the setting up of another Committee of Enquiry into the Teaching of English Language, which produced the Kingman Report of 1988, a document far more amenable to government thinking, which concerned itself with attainment targets and the national curriculum, and made recommendations which required things of teachers and of teacher trainers rather than those which required government expenditure. In fairness to Kingman, however, it should be pointed out that in one important respect the Committee aligned itself with the professional conviction which had been steadily hardening since Dr. Ballard's contribution to the Newbolt Report,¹ and not with conventional lay opinion:

"Nor do we see it as part of our task to plead for a return to old-fashioned grammar teaching and learning by rote. We have been impressed by the evidence we have received that this gave an inadequate account of the English language by treating it virtually as a branch of Latin, and constructing a rigid prescriptive code rather than a dynamic description of language in use. It was also ineffective as a means of developing a command of English in all its manifestations." ²

The Report was, in any case, for better or worse, promptly eclipsed by the Education Reform Act, and for the first time teachers found themselves confronted by a rigid prescriptive code which laid down what they were to teach and in what sequence – and proposed tests to ensure that they had done so.

So far from handing external examinations over to the teachers who created the syllabus, the teachers were required to hand over the syllabus to the people who effectively controlled the examinations, who immediately brought to an end the long debate over the twin system of GCE and CSE by combining them into the GCSE as evidence of their determination to exercise the new external control.

It can legitimately be claimed that, in the course of the forty-four year period between the 1944 Act and the Great Reform Act of 1988, the theory of education became progressively more humane, more understanding and more potentially effective; the number and proportion of pupils qualified by their schooling to go on to further or higher education continued to rise consistently; and the level of functional illiteracy was steadily reduced. But, equally, it cannot be denied that, throughout that period, a

¹ v.sup. pp 32-33

² Op.cit. p 3

significant number of the school population seem to have set their faces pretty firmly against being influenced by the educational process; to have rebelled passively or actively against the values which society wished them to acquire or espouse; and to have left, as soon as the law would allow them to do so, very little improved by their experience of school – even, some would say, positively damaged by it.

To some extent, of course, this must be acknowledged as a failure of teachers, who encountered and recognised members of this group, year after year, and shrugged their shoulders, as if faced by an Act of God. And perhaps also there was a slow decline in the quality of recruits to the profession, which resulted in some pupils being identified as members of this awkward squad who might, in other hands, have been rescued from it.

But the failure of the schools to reach this "bottom layer", this apparently irreducible minimum of educational rejection had not been ignored, – on the contrary various writers explained convincingly why certain pupils are switched off more or less permanently by the way in which schools operate; and, for the most part, their theories were supported by the various official bodies set up to investigate perceived shortcomings in the educational process. In some cases proposed solutions were unacceptable to the financial limits imposed by the treasury; in other cases, as Professor Roger Murphy recently put it:

"If we have had a problem with educational research, it has been with policy-makers disregarding findings because they prefer to apply their own prejudices and political ideologies rather than to pay attention to the evidence."¹

In either case, blaming the teachers may have been a convenient expedient, but it did nothing to solve the problem, because that problem was not susceptible to internal solution.

Far more responsibility rests with a society which has known of this persistent failure because writers on educational theory have constantly reported it, and yet has never willed the means to implement any widespread measures to counteract it. What has changed in recent years is the concern that society claims to feel about this failure, because the economic and sociological changes of the twentieth century have

¹ *Education Guardian*, Sept. 16th 1997

progressively diminished the number of niches into which the school leavers affected by it could quite happily fit; and replaced them with alternative opportunities demanding at least a minimal degree of educational response which they are obtrusively unable to provide.

In this survey of English in the classroom I have tried, though necessarily superficially, to give some impression of the changing attitudes which influenced both the way in which teachers of English saw their task, and that in which successive generations of politicians saw their responsibilities for state education. More or less chronologically I have tried to give an account of those key developments in practice and thinking up to the end of the second world war which led to the 1944 Act; and of the subsequent events which led to the determination to replace it forty-four years later.

In none of these can I find any evidence of a fall or decline in standards. Indeed, by most appropriate standards of measurement I find an improvement affecting the majority of schools, teachers and pupils. That there should be a minority unaffected by the general improvement, and in consequence seeming yet more remote from the generally prevailing conditions, is unacceptable, and I am far from wishing to minimise it; but a continuing circumstance cannot be described as a decline in standards. What it can, and should, be called, is a failure to raise standards to that level which the proponents of the 1944 Act fondly believed they were going to bring about; and the fact that this failure had finally become a public nuisance was a major reason for the Reform Act of 1988.

CHAPTER TWO

Teaching and Examining

"...that impoverishment of instruction which was due to the mechanical routine brought in by the Revised Code examination. It attempts to lay down, to the very letter, the requirements which shall be satisfied in order to earn grants. The teacher, in consequence is led to think, not about teaching his subject but about managing to hit those requirements." Matthew Arnold, 1869

"No one will dispute the ascendancy of the examination system in education today. We accept it as a fact, confronting the teacher of English, as of every other subject. It is there, and if English is to receive its due share of recognition English must make terms with it." Newbolt Report, 1921

"At every point, from primary school to university, examinations through their side effects threaten the most precious and vulnerable parts of English teaching." Brian Jackson 1965

"Teaching and examining should be considered together, the knowledge required to understand assessment techniques is not great, and teachers are quite capable of handling the techniques required.
Professor Jack Wrigley, 1975.

Much of the remainder of this thesis will be concerned with examinations and what they can tell us about the standards of English teaching before and during the period I have chosen to study, and about the levels of competence and understanding in the handling of language, and in reaction to literature, achieved by students over that period.

It is difficult to think of any source other than examinations to which one might turn for evidence of teaching performance rather than teaching theory, which was the topic of the previous chapter, yet it must be acknowledged firstly that, almost from the beginning, there has been a vociferous group which has claimed not only that examinations are unreliable as evidence, but that they actually distort the very qualities that they set out to examine; and secondly, that while this claim has been generally applied to all subjects, it is to English examinations that the charge is most frequently and bitterly attached. In consequence, it has seemed to me appropriate to attempt to establish at this stage the grounds for my convictions that, despite acknowledged limitations, the examination system, as it has developed over the years, does have things to tell us which are material to a discussion of standards.

The basic argument against examinations is a simple one, and can be simply put:

"All examinations in English purport to be testing devices. All experience shows that their techniques immediately become teaching devices." ¹

or "In subject after subject it is said, with increasing clarity, that what teachers want to teach is not what examinations test." ²

both of which echo the observation from Matthew Arnold which stands at the beginning

¹ Brian Jackson, *English versus Examinations*, 1965, p 13

² John Pearce, *School Examinations*, 1972, p 14

of this chapter. On a slightly different wavelength is A N Whitehead, foreshadowing one of the unfulfilled intentions of the Norwood Committee:

".....no system of external tests which aims primarily at examining individual scholars can result in anything but educational waste.each school should grant its own leaving certificates, based on its own curriculum. The standards of these schools should be sampled and corrected. But the first requisite for educational reform is the school as a unit, with its approved curriculum based on its own needs, and evolved by its own staff. If we fail to secure that, we simply fall fromone dunghill of inert ideas into another." ¹

Alfred North Whitehead O.M., LL.D, Sc.D, F.R.S. was a formidable intellect, and co-author with Bertrand Russell of *Principia Mathematica*, which has been described as "the greatest single contribution to logic since Aristotle"; but apart from eleven of the twelve members of the Norwood Committee who proposed to reform the School Certificate and Higher School Certificate along these lines, this idea has never been developed. It is probably not a coincidence that the Essay in which Whitehead first propounded it dates from 1917, the year in which the School Certificate first came into being. When his Essays were reprinted in 1950, the writer of the Foreword, Lord Lindsay of Birker, sometime Master of Balliol, singled out this passage for special mention, and adding:

"I have never heard it discussed seriously as a practicable reform in educational administration.Now that we achieved some sort of system it is time we devoted all our energies to the encouragement of experiment and elasticity. Education is a thing of the spirit. But we cannot educate children without giving the spirit a body and the body a skeleton." ²

The concept of education as 'a thing of the spirit' will come up again and again in the variety of attacks on examinations, particularly English examinations, generally and specifically, but very few attempts at introducing experiment and elasticity have broken away from the idea that the essential skeleton is a system of public examinations providing an essential basic standard of requirement, conformity to which is the essential measure of competence of the individual scholar. CSE Mode 3 may be said to have done so, but because of the inferior status of that examination vis-a-vis GCE in the public mind very few really able candidates were ever entered for it, and the possibilities which might have been realised had there been a lobby of powerful schools endorsing it never received the necessary impetus. The hand-crafted GCE examination

¹ *The Aims of Education and other essays*, 1932 (2nd ed. 1950) p 7

² *Ibid.* p vi

for an individual school was also possible in theory, but this fact was surprisingly little publicised and very little used.¹ We are left, then, with national reliance upon an expedient which, from the beginning, was known to be defective, and subsequently not infrequently indicted as positively detrimental to the educational process, yet for which no viable alternative has been seriously advanced for nearly a century.

The danger that teaching for examinations will produce rote-learning rather than knowledge, an ability to jump through an examiner's hoop rather than to understand the subject, was graphically pointed out by Matthew Arnold² – who added to this the further, and worse, danger that teachers might well be encouraged to teach specifically for examination passes rather than understanding, if too much faith and emphasis were to be placed upon results – and it was as early as 1911 that the government set up a Consultative Committee on Examinations in Secondary Schools. The resultant Report contained, at the beginning of Chapter IV, a surprisingly lengthy and detailed summary of the pros and cons of examining; and while the content may well seem to the modern reader to be both dated and banal, it sufficiently impressed the Newbolt Committee ten years later to persuade them to reprint the whole as Appendix I of *The Teaching of English in England*; and is, I think, worth reproducing in its entirety now.

"It will be convenient if we summarise what we believe to be the more important effects of examinations (1) on the pupil, (2) on the teacher.

(1) The good effects of examinations on the pupil are (a) that they make him work up to time by requiring him to reach a stated degree of knowledge by a fixed date; (b) that they incite him to get his knowledge into reproducible form and to lessen the risk of vagueness; (c) that they make him work at parts of a study which, though important, may be uninteresting or repugnant to him personally; (d) that they train the power of getting up a subject for a definite purpose, even though it may not appear necessary to remember it afterwards – a training which is useful for parts of the professional duty of the lawyer, the administrator, the journalist, and the man of business; (e) that in some cases they encourage a certain steadiness of work over a long period of time; and (f) that they enable the pupil to measure his real attainment (i) by the standard required by outside examiners, (ii) by comparison with the attainments of his fellow pupils; and (iii) by comparison with the attainments of his contemporaries in other schools.

On the other hand, examinations may have a bad effect upon the pupil's mind (a) by setting a premium on the power of merely reproducing other people's ideas and other people's methods of presentment, thus diverting energy from the creative process; (b) by rewarding evanescent forms of knowledge; (c) by favouring a somewhat passive type of mind; (d) by giving an undue advantage to those who, in answering questions on

- paper, can cleverly make the best use of perhaps slender attainments; (e) by inducing the pupil, in his preparation for an examination, to aim rather at absorbing information imparted to him by the teacher than at forming an independent judgment upon the subjects in which he receives instruction; and (f) by stimulating the competitive (and, at its worst, a mercenary) spirit in the acquisition of knowledge.
- (2) The good effects of well conducted examinations upon the teacher are (a) that they induce him to treat his subject thoroughly; (b) that they make him so arrange his lessons as to cover with intellectual thoroughness a prescribed course of study within appointed limits of time; (c) that they impel him to pay attention not only to his best pupils, but also to the backward and the slower amongst those who are being prepared for the examination; and (d) that they make him acquainted with the standard which other teachers and their pupils are able to reach in the same subject in other places of education. On the other hand, the effects of examinations on the teacher are bad (a) in so far as they constrain him to watch the examiner's foibles and to note his idiosyncracies (or the tradition of the examination) in order that he may arm his pupils with the kind of knowledge required for dealing successfully with the questions that will probably be put to them; (b) in so far as they limit the freedom of the teacher in choosing the way in which he shall treat his subject; (c) in so far as they encourage him to take upon himself work which had better be left to the largely unaided efforts of his pupils, causing him to impart information to them in too digested a form or to select for them groups of facts or aspects of the subject which each pupil should properly discover for himself; (d) in so far as they predispose the teacher to overvalue among his pupils that type of mental development which secures success in examinations; (e) in so far as they make it the teacher's interest to excel in the purely examinable side of his professional work and divert his attention from those parts of education which cannot be tested by the process of examination.

It will be seen that the dangers of examinations, and especially of external examinations, are considerable in their possible effect both on pupil and on teacher. We have no hesitation, however, in stating our conviction that external examinations are not only necessary but desirable in Secondary Schools. But we are equally convinced that if the admitted advantages of external examinations are to be secured and the dangers of them minimised, such examinations should be subjected to most stringent regulations as to their number, the age at which they are taken, and their general character." ¹

There are, I think, two general observations on the logic of this piece of even-handed analysis, so far as examinations in English are concerned. The first is that the hackles of English teachers in particular, though not exclusively, are likely to be aroused by the inclusion of 1(f) as an *advantage* of the system. A pupil who has understood what A E Housman meant by "Poetry is not the thing said but a way of saying it,"² or has realised for himself the sheer depths of despair and hopelessness conjured up by the lines

" I am in blood
Stepp'd in so far, that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er." ³

¹ Op.cit.

² *The Name and Nature of Poetry*, 1933 p 37

³ *Macbeth* III.iv.136-138

does not need, and should never be made to feel that he needs "to measure his attainment" by any external standard or comparison. The second is that the character of the teacher who suffers good or bad effects from public examinations fluctuates wildly during the course of the passage. The teacher who needs an examination in order to ensure that he covers "with intellectual thoroughness a prescribed course of study" is not the same man as he who allows an examination to limit the freedom to choose "the way in which he shall treat his subject." This is the essential dichotomy with which we began the previous chapter – society can never decide whether the typical teacher is a man of wisdom and probity with a vocation that may be hindered by external interference, or an indolent dilettante who needs the spur of an externally imposed system in order to ensure that his pupils and their parents get their money's worth out of him. In seeking to legislate for a profession which contains both, society has produced a system which deals appropriately with neither. Nevertheless, the conclusion reached in 1911 has never been seriously challenged since: examinations are a crude and dangerous methodology, but we need them. The Newbolt Committee, as has been shown already,¹ endorsed it, but not without seeking to establish some positive and useful safeguards. The specific suggestions of this Report relating to English and Examinations, as expressed in the 'Summary of Conclusions and Recommendations', were:

"88 That the examination system should be applied as widely as possible to the power of communication in English

89 That examinations in English for scholarships to Secondary schools should be tests of this power rather than tests in grammar, analysis and spelling

90 That in the First School Examination [i.e. School Certificate] a test of power to grasp the meaning of a given passage of appropriate difficulty should be compulsory

91 That similarly in the Second School Examination [i.e. Higher Certificate] all candidates should be tested in the understanding and use of English, either by an essay, or by other tests, or in both ways

92 That in University Scholarship Examinations candidates should not be allowed to sacrifice competency in the use of English to the attainment of a high standard of achievement in other subjects

93 That an examination on set books should leave the teacher as free as possible to draw up his own syllabus and adopt his own methods

94 That both at the School Certificate and Higher certificate stages questions of a suitable kind on General Literature might with advantage be included as well as questions on prescribed books or a prescribed period.

95 That oral examination should be resorted to more frequently"²

¹ v.sup p 104

² Op.cit.

Considered collectively, these recommendations have a surprisingly varied history. The first two, which were surely intended to have a wider application than merely to the 11+ examination, were not really taken seriously until the CCE English Language papers were revised in 1966; the third has been acted on consistently right up to the present day, at least in so far as a comprehension exercise may serve the required purpose; the fourth was acted upon to a large extent by the subject grouping of Higher Certificate, but abandoned upon the introduction of the subject-based CCE; the fifth was ignored until the 1960s, at which time the short-lived Use of English paper made its appearance; the sixth has never been more than a pious aspiration, and the failure of the examination boards to pay more than lip service to it more than any other action on their part is the ground for the greater part of the objections to examinations in literature; the seventh, similarly, was endorsed in spirit more than in action – the Oxford Board, certainly, in its series of period-based A level Paper IIs included such questions, but they were seldom tackled and usually as a last resort; and the final recommendation had to wait until the birth of CSE to find significant application, and lost it again on the inception of the GCSE in 1988. This disparity of response illustrates very effectively the difficulty of ensuring that everyone involved in the teaching, examining and assessment of English as an element in the programme of national education, is speaking on the same wavelength, or marching to the same drum. The members of the Norwood Committee were well aware of this, and, in composing their Report, made every effort to take all sides into consideration before making their recommendations. As, for example, in the case of the English essay:

"We note the various objections which are raised to the value of an essay as an examination test – such as those mentioned by the Investigators appointed by the Secondary Schools Examination Council 'that there is no subject in which examiners are more liable to differ in their estimate of the value of an exercise, and no subject from which it is more difficult to eliminate the element of chance.'¹

They also quoted Hartog's *Examinations and their relation to culture and efficiency* :

"The field for real originality, on the part of the great majority of pupils, in Latin and Greek, History, Geography, Arithmetic, Algebra, Botany or Chemistry, is so small as to be almost negligible. A person can only show individuality when he has acquired some technical mastery of the medium

¹ Op.cit. §272 .

through which that individuality is expressed.Language is the only medium of which the average child has a technical mastery, and, in the use of that medium, he can be not only promising, but intrinsically original."¹

What we have here is an early example of the dispute between reliability and validity which has bedevilled discussions on English examinations ever since. The examiners, represented here by the 'Investigators', are concerned with the reliability of their examinations, that they should effectively discriminate between pass and fail, or between Grade A and Grade B, or whatever levels or standards the examination sets itself to assess. And, of course, this is the primary concern of the employer, the politician, and the 'man in the street', echoing Lord Powis ², and the general tendency to see an examination rather in terms of a cross-country run in which all the competitors start together and finish by passing through a 'funnel' in a neatly segregated single file. Any other sort of examination tends to be regarded rather in the light of the Caucus race in *Alice in Wonderland* of which it could be said that "Everybody has won, and all must have prizes". Yet it is just such a conclusion that an English teacher might well regard as the ideal ending to a year's literature course – that every pupil had derived benefit and enjoyment from the books collectively and individually studied; had matured personally in the process; and had also acquired an increased sensitivity to the possibilities of language. It is from this kind of standpoint that Hartog is arguing for the importance of the essay as means of gaining insight into individuality, originality, quality of mind, and from which the 'Investigators' recoil at the prospect of trying to harmonise and standardise the assessment of the resulting subjective material. The Newbolt Committee did its best to resolve the problem, and then came down on both sides:

"To arrive at a just appreciation, in terms of marks, of such originality and individuality is not an easy matter, but it is essential, if the essay test is to help, not hinder, the teaching."³

Declaring a solution to be essential is not, of course, the same as explaining how to arrive at it. Nor does the emphasis on a final conversion to 'marks' (shades of Kipling's Army Class) sit easily with the idea of 'a just appreciation'. As a close scrutiny of the English Language examination will make clear,⁴ examiners preferred to go for reliability and to mark essays on areas where solid evaluation held sway, such as

1 Op.cit. §274

2 v.sup. p 54

3 Op.cit. §274

4 v.inf. Chapter Four

spelling, punctuation and grammatical structure, with the result that many teachers did, indeed, find the essay more of a hindrance than a help.

(At this point, it may be apposite to point out parenthetically that the discrepancy between what teachers may be expected to achieve, and what examiners are competent to assess, is illustrated even more starkly in the post-1988 era. The standards of the National Curriculum are encapsulated in this extract from the Cox Report:

"The best writing is vigorous, committed, honest and interesting. We have not included these qualities in our statements of attainment because they cannot be mapped on to levels. Even so, all good classroom practice will be geared to encouraging and fostering these vital qualities." ¹)

The Newbolt Committee also recognised that this problem, though intractable, was by no means the worst with which they had to deal:

"Yet the difficulties involved in examinations in the use of language are slight in comparison with those of examining in literature. 'Every teacher knows' says Mr Hartog, 'that examinations do effectively control the class-rooms of our Secondary Schools.' The control necessarily tends to encourage those subjects and that type of teaching to which examination tests can be most conveniently applied.....Thus the Headmaster of Sherborne appealed to us to throw our weight into the scale against examinations. He thought that English teaching in schools would gain greatly 'if examinations of all kinds were reduced to vanishing point, and that examinations prevented schools from doing all sorts of things that they would otherwise do.' But for good or ill the examination system is with us. To exempt literature alone from its scope would simply exclude the teaching of literature from a number of schools. Nothing less than the total abolition of the examination system would serve the turn of those who object to examinations in English, and to make such a recommendation, even if we desired to make it, would be entirely futile." ²

This is expediency at its most simple. It is effectively impossible to examine set texts by means of an external examination system and still leave, as the Newbolt Report naively requires, the teacher free "to draw up his own syllabus and adopt his own methods"; yet such is the stranglehold which examinations exercise on the mind of society that literature will not survive in the classroom at all unless qualifications derived from examinations are to be obtained in it. If one accepts that the value of the experience of studying literature outweighs the disadvantages and detriments inalienable from associating that experience with the business of preparing for an examination, there is virtually nothing left to be said, except to initiate a damage-limitation exercise on the content of examination papers, and this is what the Newbolt Report attempts:

¹ *English for Ages 5 - 16*, HMSO, 1989, §17.31

² *Op.cit.* §§275-276

"In the first place the examination must be in literature, not in something else. The examiner must not suggest to the teacher a method of substitution as an easy way out of their common difficulties. In this respect there has undoubtedly been much improvement in recent years, at any rate in examinations on set books. The old type of paper, treating the text mainly as a field for grammatical exercises and explanations of allusions, and eked out with excursions into biography, history, and geography, survives today mainly as a target for the belated critic. Most examination questions on particular books concern themselves nowadays with.....the actual contents of the books themselves." ¹

The Newbolt position was thus to acknowledge the danger of examinations, take comfort from the hope that they seemed to be improving, and settle for the fact that "examinations do effectively control the class-rooms of our Secondary Schools." Needless to say, those who were bitterly opposed to this state of affairs, and saw, with William Croft, the effect as producing a situation wherein "the pearls of English Literature existed only to be wrenched from their settings and cast before young swine rooting for marks"², were not disposed to retire from the battlefield because Newbolt had not supported their cause.

David Shayer, in *The Teaching of English in Schools 1900-1970* maps the progress of the campaign. He refers to a publication of 1922, *Training in Literary Appreciation* by F H Pritchard, as a book where "something akin to the 'practical criticism' method of today is to be found" as opposed to the kind of crammer that devotes itself to "unusual vocabulary, the pathetic fallacy, and the number of stresses per line" and goes on:

"Robert Finch's *The Approach to English Literature*, 1923, is even better. Finch insists that the first thing teachers have to do is to get away from the wretched influence of External Literature Examinations, with their deadening pressure to read texts in the worst possible way. The pupil cannot read an examination book for enjoyment, but 'must dissect it, criticise it, track down allusions, explain difficulties, and cram its literary history.'"³

Shayer then goes on to observe:

"Finch's remark about External Examinations comes as no surprise. The increasing dissatisfaction with the 'content' approach to literary texts meant that the friction between some teachers of literature and the public examinations system tended to become more acute - the examinations continuing to rely upon the easily assessable materials of 'facts' (many of those irrelevant to the real business of genuine critical reading) where more and more teachers wished to move into those areas of study and appreciation that are extremely difficult, if not impossible, to assess by formal examination. A significant book was A J J Ratcliff's *The Teaching of English to Upper Forms*, 1926, which is a well argued and sensible plea for more

¹ Op.cit. §277

² v.sup. p 20

³ Op.cit. p 98

humanised literature papers (requiring personal responses at first-hand from the candidates rather than the regurgitation of memorised generalities) and warning that 'successful' teaching, in terms of examination successes, is not always synonymous with good literature teaching" ¹

and concludes this part of his survey with the strongest criticism yet:

"In July 1928 the *Journal of Education* included an article, 'The Teaching of English' by J H Arnold, in which the writer suggests that advances in English teaching are being held back more by the examination system, with its fondness for the wrong kinds of question on the wrong kinds of text, than by anything else." ²

It would be possible to go duplicating material of this kind for some considerable space without materially strengthening the case, rather like the mediaeval disputations in which the superior number of precedents cited tended to be the measure of the success of the argument. Nor, as a case, is it confined in application to secondary schools. The same objection was also made in respect of University Final Honours Examinations – 'Schools' in the Oxbridge vernacular, – in a way which seems to me to be particularly well conveyed by D J Palmer, in *The Rise of English Studies* of 1965.

He begins by quoting from the Inaugural Lecture of H C Wyld, given forty years earlier, at about the same time as the publication of the Newbolt Report:

"If we thought more in terms of studies and less in terms of examinations, if it were understood that the student's prime aim was not to 'prepare' for examinations but to learn his subject so far as the time at his disposal would permit, the intellectual atmosphere would be healthier and more bracing." ³

Palmer also ascribes to Professor Sir Walter Raleigh "a profound distrust of the examination system" derived from his experiences of the British Raj, where was, apparently, to be seen, "stripped of the modifications and adjustments with which it was tramelled at home, the full rigour of the Victorian belief in examinations and education systems", ⁴ and quotes him effectively when the time comes to establish his own position on the subject:

"But as [the study of English Literature] expands and moves ahead, the ineluctable examiners are always in close pursuit, devising ways to trap and imprison the free spirit of enquiry within a cloven pine. 'There are two Days of Judgment', wrote Walter Raleigh, 'and Final Schools are the less important.' If examinations must remain, and it is difficult to see how we can do without them, the kind of ability they measure may at least be extended at University level by reducing the emphasis on the three hour paper answered from memory." ⁵

1 Op.cit. p 99

4 Ibid. p 119

2 Ibid.

5 Op.cit. p 165

3 Op.cit. p 147

This seems to me eminently sensible. The fact that, from time to time, a particular examination paper presents us with a classic instance of "the wrong type of question" is grounds for questioning the methods used to set that paper, and for making constructive suggestions for improvement; but it is hardly grounds for demanding the abolition of the entire examining system. I cannot dissent from Palmer's conclusion that it is difficult to see how we could do without examinations, and I accept the validity of the Newbolt Committee's conviction that to exempt literature from the scope of the examination system would simply exclude the teaching of literature from a number of schools.

Attention must, however, be given to the frequently overlooked fact that the Norwood Committee of 1943 took the opposite view to their predecessors, and recommended precisely such an exemption, thus demonstrating that one official body, at least, was persuaded by the argument of the abolitionists. No reference to English (or any other subject, for that matter) appears in the nineteen recommendations and six expressions of hope which constitute the 'Brief Summary' with which the members of Norwood Committee conclude their Report, and the opinions on English teaching which they express in the body of that Report cannot, therefore, be regarded as part of their primary intention in influencing forthcoming legislation. As with so much of the Norwood Report, however, it is interesting if fruitless to speculate upon the shape and nature of English teaching today if their approach had been embodied in the 1944 Act. In the first place the Norwood Committee seem to have taken for granted that, by comparison with Language, Literature took a secondary place in every sense of the word:

"By English we mean in the first instance training in the comprehension and arrangement and expression of ideas, and the chief objective of the training is clarity. In addition, as a specific subject in the curriculum, English involves a) further training in the use of the English Language, usually undertaken by means of exercises in composition and essay writing, the teaching of formal grammar and the study of prose passages; b) the study of English literature."¹

Part of the problem of English teaching, the Committee felt, and a contributory factor to the "severe criticism of the way in which the Secondary School pupil uses his own language", was the "very marked tendency for the teaching of each subject to be placed in the hands of specialists" as a result of which teachers of the other subjects left deficiencies in the expression and linguistic technicalities of the work submitted to them

¹ Op.cit. p 91

to the English teacher, whereas the pupils regarded English as "something to be turned on" only in the appropriate context.

It may, perhaps, be surmised that the Norwood Committee had not researched closely into the qualifications of some of the English "specialists" employed during the period between the wars. David Shayer quotes one relevant excerpt from the evidence submitted to the Newbolt Committee:

"To the question 'What proportion of the students who pass from College with Certificates every year are really qualified to take English with a class?' the answer given by the English Section of the Training College Association was 'Certainly not more than one-third'." ¹

On the basis of this assessment, that one of Newbolt's 105 recommendations which reads "that an examination on set books should leave the teacher of literature as free as possible to draw up his own syllabus and adopt his own methods" ² must seem implausibly optimistic, and one cannot be surprised that it had little or no effect. Indeed, one must bear in mind the possibility that if anyone had made a similar assessment at various stages over the seventy-five intervening years, he might well have expected to find himself charged with arrogance, cynicism or élitism, but not with inaccuracy."

At all events, the proposal of the Norwood Committee was to dispense altogether with English specialists at the younger end of secondary education:

"We would urge that, especially in the lower forms, English and one or more subjects should be in the hands of the same teacher. The direct attack upon English should for the most part spring from the reading of books, read primarily for what they say rather than for the way in which they say it; it does not matter whether these books are taken from the so-called 'subjects' of Travel, or Natural History, or Geography, or History or whatever it may be." ³

"Reading", to the Norwood Committee, was an essential part of language work:

"We would invite the earnest attention of all teachers to the importance of giving full opportunity to their pupils to hear English spoken.....and to utter English themselves.....the important thing is that pupils should hear good reading and should be placed in a position to be sound judges of it." ⁴

While it is difficult to dissent from the literal truth of these emphases, the mental picture created is hardly enticing. On the literature front, however, the Committee has been brought very much up to date:

¹ *The Teaching of English in Schools 1900-1970*, p 67

² v.sup. p 107

³ Op.cit. p 95

⁴ Ibid. pp 95-96

"We think, therefore, that at school, English literature can be studied successfully only when there is freedom given for the "variables" of which we have spoken – the teacher, the book under study and the pupil – to be adjusted to each other in the most appropriate way. And that right adjustment cannot be dictated in advance; it is discovered during the process of teaching and learning.

To sum up, we take the view that from its own nature the teaching of English literature is limited as regards objective and method in a particular way; it is dependent upon special qualities in teacher and pupil and upon a special relationship between them: it is concerned often with what is past analysis or explanation and with values which are caught rather than taught. If English literature is made the subject of direct frontal attack, the value of the teaching is destroyed. When, in the interest of training in the English language, it is so attacked, the purpose neither of the teaching of English literature, nor of training in the English language is achieved."

I am uncertain what the practising English teacher should make of this. On the one hand, it is flattering to be told that English teachers have special qualities and special relationships with their pupils, and that they are jointly engaged in an enterprise so sensitive that progress is only possible by a mutual approach insusceptible to advance planning. On the other hand, does one want to be marked out quite so clearly from the rest of the teaching profession, and to be so absolutely dependent on hitting the right balance time after time with groups of adolescents? It is encouraging to be told by a government sponsored group that using literature texts as an aid to language teaching is counterproductive and to the detriment of both halves of the subject – but is it quite so encouraging to realise where Norwood thinking must inevitably lead?

"We would assert our belief that premature external examination of pupils at school in English literature is not only beset with every difficulty but is productive of much harm in its influence on the teaching of English literature, and eventually upon English as a whole; and for that reason we would advise against any such form of examination. The teacher's success, we feel, can be gauged by himself or one of his immediate colleagues who knows him well: but it is difficult if not impossible for the outside examiner to measure by standardised question papers anything but the coarse fringe of so sensitive and elusive a thing as successful literary teaching. The external examiner is therefore compelled to give disproportionate attention to what he can measure and to test this measurable element in ways which are readily standardised. The teachers then cannot help turning their attention to matters of secondary importance, such as structural analysis or historical commentary; yet neither analytical nor historical method can reach the heart of a great book, whether poetry, drama, fiction or essay.

Released from the necessity of embarking upon literary studies with his pupils in such a way as will yield measurable results, the teacher would be free to revert to his real work, which is, quite simply, the reading of good books with his pupils; indeed, we wish that this simple notion of 'reading' could replace in many minds the more pretentious and often harmful ideas of 'literature'.

He will choose books that are worth reading and he will read them with his pupils because they could not read them without help. Whether results can be measured or not will not concern him; the real test of his success is one which, from its nature, cannot be applied: it is to be found in the desire of the pupils to read more." ¹

Again it is perfectly possible to sympathise with some of the points made here: the picture of the external examiner reducing everything to readily standardised measurements will strike a chord with most teachers – but is it not, in fact, something of a cliché? Must examinations inevitably reduce everything to the factual and banal, or is this merely a reaction to the admittedly rather barren pastures of School Certificate papers? No one would quarrel with the idea of a class's enthusiasm for further reading being a proper measure of their English teacher's success, but is that genuinely all there is to it? And if the real job of the English teacher is actually "quite simply, the reading of good books with his pupils", the question has to be asked as to whether, in times of financial stringency, the local authorities are justified in continuing to pay him to do it? Finally, I am personally far from happy about the section of that passage which refers to 'replacing in many minds the pretentious and often harmful ideas of literature with the simple notion of reading'. I cannot help but wonder exactly what sort of ideas the Committee had in mind, and whether I would actually share their wish to protect my pupils from them – and whether all those teachers who argued so strenuously for the abolition of English examinations really feel entirely happy about the nature of this kind of endorsement? The simplified scenario offered by the Norwood Committee tends to highlight the discrepancies between English teachers so far as attitudes towards examinations are concerned, to say nothing of the discrepancy of attitude between those at "the chalk face" and those who may, perhaps, be termed educational purists. And, for a significant number of teachers, examinations, however ill-found, provide a target and a structure for the day-to-day routine of the classroom which must otherwise derive from the personality and imagination of the teacher; they provide a means of encouragement or, at worst, a bribe or inducement for the student, and thereby a reinforcement to the business of classroom discipline; and they provide an obvious 'purpose' for the school which can be marketed to solace and comfort parents. None of these things is a particularly

¹ Op.cit. pp 96-97

worthy objective when placed beside the genuinely academic love of learning for its own sake, or, in the case of those concerned with English, a genuine love of literature – but for those who have the task of driving bored and recalcitrant classes through the interval until the next bell, they may well seem more immediately significant.

It is for this reason that when Michael Paffard asks his simple question "Can literature be examined?"¹, he cannot expect a simple and unqualified response. The answer which he goes on to provide for himself begins with the Norwood Report's assertion that the "premature examination of pupils at school in English literature is not only beset with every difficulty but is productive of much harm in its influence on the teaching of English literature and eventually upon English as a whole", and develops the case as follows:

"The only questions to which an objective marking scheme can be applied are ones which require facts or standard views. Questions which explicitly ask for candidates' own opinions are therefore usually a well-meaning deceptionThe questions capable of being marked reliably which can be asked on a set text are strictly limited and therefore highly predictable. Facts and accepted judgments, moreover, can be crammed by the candidate, sometimes at the last moment, sometimes without the text to which they relate ever having been read.Even at university level, F W Bateson has confessed that in tutorials what don and undergraduate are cooperating in is often a private conspiracy to defeat an obsolete examination system.....Context questions at school or university level may test diligence more effectively than essay questions, but preparing for them may destroy enjoyment, deflect attention from what is central, involve a great deal of unprofitable labour in memorising footnotes and an element of luck may significantly affect candidates' results." ²

Paffard himself describes the picture he has drawn as 'a dismal sketch' and makes a somewhat half-hearted attempt to find a palliative in recent developments, but his final conclusion does not move far from that of the Norwood Committee:

"....examining literature is still beset by fundamental problems and perverts good teaching and study habits. Could a literature examination ever be both reliable and valid? It seems unlikely. It seems impossible to test the central concerns of literature teaching; enjoyment, personal imaginative response, taste and discrimination, even in this age of wonders, by measuring glandular secretions, rate of respiration, blood pressure or electro-encephalograph, let alone by formal written papers." ³

Writing twenty years after Paffard, I am inclined to feel that he "doth protest too much", but I must acknowledge the possibility that in the course of that period my sensibilities may have been blunted by constant exposure to the harmful effects of examinations in literature, such as the perversion of good teaching and study habits.

¹ *Thinking About English*, 1978, Title to Chapter 17

² *Ibid.* pp 88-89

³ *Ibid.* p 91

Of course it remained, and remains, true that the examination system imposes a very considerable stress upon candidates, and that this stress intervenes unhelpfully in the education process. Any teacher who has ever been faced with an accusatory "Are we going to get questions on this in the exam?" will need no further evidence on that score. My point is that I do not accept that this intervention, this reduction of the apparent validity of the education process to the squalid business of final grades, bears down more heavily on English than on other subjects, or that the quality of my relationship with the pupils to whom I taught Chaucer and Shakespeare and Jane Austen, or with whom I shared the experience of those authors, was any more violated by the fact that in due course they had to take 'O' and 'A' level examinations, than it would have been had I been teaching History, or even mathematics. And in this respect at least I have not changed in the course of twenty years – I was not particularly worried by the examinations dimension of my work at the time at which Paffard was writing.

Where I believe he was right, however, is in the conclusion to his examinations chapter in *Thinking About English* :

"Certainly examiners must now take more seriously than previously, the inevitable effects on teaching and studying in schools of any testing device just as their teacher critics need an understanding of the constraints of the examiner's unenviable task. Both teachers and examiners could do more to maintain that dialogue which is often woefully lacking. Examiners' reports are highly critical of schools and candidates and they receive in return more complaints and abuse than constructive suggestion. Neither is prodigal with praise of the other when there is evidence that the interests of literature are being well served." ¹

Had the Norwood Committee had its way on the matter of Examination reform, it is highly probable that Paffard would not have found it necessary to write this, since the principle of internal control of school examinations, as recommended, for instance, by A N Whitehead,² would have been long since fully established. Before lamenting the failure of the opportunity to rid English of the intrusive examiners once and for all, however, it is necessary to remember that, on the same premise, English literature would have ceased to be examined entirely.

Within the scope of what did actually happen, Paffard's concluding emphasis, less on damning examinations outright and more on reforming the system by improving relations

¹ Op.cit. p 92

² v.sup. p 110

between teachers and examiners was both wise and prescient. Later chapters of this thesis will provide a detailed scrutiny of the development of GCE 'O' and 'A' level English papers in terms of the syllabuses to which they related, the nature of the questions they asked, the precise nature of examiners' reports and, so far as they are available, details of correspondence between school examination centres and the examination boards. What will, I believe, emerge clearly from this scrutiny is the fact that, over the period from 1951 to 1988, examinations moved nearer to the spirit of literature and to the atmosphere of a good English lesson; that relations between examination boards and their clients very much improved; and that in the matter of the battle for control of syllabus and examination design, the emphasis moved slowly but surely away from the universities and towards the teachers.

It was, of course, the intention of the Norwood Committee that

"The present Higher School Certificate Examinations should be abolished and State and Local Education Authority scholarships should be awarded on a different basis."¹

and that a school-leaving examination for pupils of 18+ should be conducted twice a year to meet the requirements of entry to the universities and the professions.²

So far as the School Certificate Examination was concerned, there are three heads in the 'Brief Summary of Main Recommendations' which were designed to bring about highly significant changes:

"In the interest of the individual child and of the increased freedom and responsibility of the teaching profession, change in the School Certificate Examination should be in the direction of making the examination entirely internal, that is to say conducted by the teachers at the school on syllabuses and papers framed by themselves..

For a transitional period of seven years the examination should (a) continue to be carried out by existing University Examining Bodies, but should be conducted in each case by a Sub-Committee containing strong representation of teachers; (b) become a 'subject' examination, pupils taking whatever subjects they wish to take. A certificate stating the performance of the pupil should be given to each candidate; to this statement should be added by the school authorities an account of the pupil's school record.

At the end of the transitional period the decision should be made whether conditions make possible a change to a wholly internal examination, or whether there should be a further transitional period in which teachers would take still greater control of the examination, and the universities still less."³

Of these aspirations only that recommending the establishment of a subject-based rather

¹ Op.cit. *Brief Summary of Main Recommendations* §13

² Ibid. v. §12

³ Ibid §§9-11

than a matriculation examination was achieved as a result of the 1944 Education Act.

As R J Montgomery observes:

"Introduction of the GCE in 1951 left the 16+ and 18+ examinations substantially in the hands of existing examining boards, subject to the increased overall control of the central SSEC.Results were given unclassified at first, there being an attempt to remove the pressures of competition from the increasing numbers of candidates. The pass/fail arrangement was intended to emphasise the 'qualifying' nature of the examination. Grading was omitted from the certificates though available confidentially for use by schools and colleges. 'Distinctions' were placed on A level certificates from 1953 and a fuller system of grading, A to H, from 1963 onwards, A to E being 'passes'.

GCE 'O' level grades remained 'unofficial' and were not placed on certificates until 1975, even though many university departments made use of them in selecting freshmen. At this stage the pass/fail arrangement was jettisoned, in a curious reversal, and five official grades were awarded, the top three (A, B and C) being equivalent to the passes of earlier years and retaining their status for the purposes of matriculation, professional qualification and the like." ¹

In the course of the period covered by this brief summary, the number of candidates for 'O' level had increased very substantially. Despite having been designed initially for the grammar school segment of the secondary school population, sometimes otherwise referred to as 'the top 20%', the spread of applicants from other types of school was apparent from the beginning, and became increasingly marked as the comprehensive school began to establish itself as the future norm. As Stuart Maclure put it, in his contribution to the special edition of the *Times Educational Supplement* to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the 1944 Act, there was at first repeated insistence that the secondary modern schools should be allowed unfettered (i.e. unexamined) opportunity to experiment:

"The schools themselves responded to this exaggerated liberalism by stretching out for any examination they could lay their hands on." ²

Maclure's observation is intended to cause a cynical smile, and is no doubt exaggerated for the purpose, but his point remains valid, and serves as a further reminder of the fact to which I referred earlier³ – that by no means all teachers were as opposed to the idea of external examinations as the most vocal protagonists of a purist philosophy would have us believe. Nor, of course, were these advocates of an 'unfettered' educational system the only pressure-group with which the government had to contend. Even such small

¹ *A New Examination of Examinations*, 1978, p 47

² Op.cit., May 6th 1994 p vi

³ v.sup. p 120

movements towards the Norwood vision as were achieved by legislation were quite as much resented by some segments of society, as the failure of government to endorse the whole body of recommendations was resented by the anti-examination lobby. The Norwood Committee's conviction that it was "in the interest of the individual child and of the increased freedom and responsibility of the teaching profession" that the examination system should be changed did not awake support in all quarters.

"I well remember addressing a body of employers on this very subject. One after another assured me, with varying degrees of hostility and grievance, that these new arrangements [the introduction of GCE] had reduced the examination to a farce, because it was no longer possible for an employer to use it as his general criterion in assessing candidates for a job, and (here is the sting), since that was the purpose and object of the whole examination system, then obviously these new arrangements were ill-conceived and very nearly fraudulent. My suggestion that school examinations existed for the sake of children and schools, not for the sake of employers, met with blank disbelief."⁽¹⁾

That was Sir John Wolfenden in 1957, in his capacity as a member of the Secondary Schools Examination Council, addressing a symposium on the role of that council and the evolution of policy on external examinations; and while in the the course of the next thirty years employers finally ceased to lament the departure of the old School Cert. with its assumed guarantee of a minimum standard in a fixed group of subjects, and accepted the different approach of GCE, it is reasonably certain that they maintained the same basic attitude to its essential function. Certainly the principle underlying the CSE examination and subsequently transferred to GCSE which virtually eradicated the 'pass/fail' concept and substituted that of 'degree of success' has never been fully understood. It was for this reason that a CSE grade 1 was officially deemed to be equivalent to an O-Level pass, and that GCSE Grades A*, A, B and C are commonly referred to as "equivalent to GCE passes" or, as I recently heard a member of the teaching profession describe them as he looked through his school's results, "real passes". As I have remarked already², human scales of value are remarkably difficult things to change, as witness the substantial number of people who laboriously convert metric to imperial measures when shopping and who insist on the temperature in Fahrenheit rather than Celsius. Addressing the same symposium as Sir John Wolfenden, Miss H. Lister,

1 *External Examinations in Secondary Schools*, ed G B Jeffery, 1958, p 30

2 v.sup. p 41

Headmistress of Selhurst Grammar School for Girls, observed:

"A distinguished headmaster once said in my hearing that his chief aim with regard to the General Certificate of Education was to allow it to disturb his established habits as little as possible."¹

That this comment should have been repeated to this particular audience of educational professionals is, however, potentially more interesting than that Sir John was able to amuse them with an account of the outdated and materialist attitudes of industry and commerce, because it focuses attention on the fact that it had been found desirable to hold a symposium on External Examinations in Secondary Schools at this time. 1957 was only six years after the introduction of the General Certificate of Education and, perhaps more significantly, within the period that the Norwood Report had allowed for the transition from an externally to an internally controlled examination system. Clearly there were still influential people looking forward to the demise of the public examination system as we know it, as well as those who were determined to maintain the control and influence of the examination boards and universities. Miss Lister was, at the very least, sympathetic to the former group, and there are other aspects of her observations on which a brief focus is apposite, in that they contribute effectively to an understanding of the way in which 'standards' have been re-defined in the forty years since she gave an address which takes as absolutes certain educational principles that have simply been abandoned:

"In theory, the impact of examinations has, or should have, little influence on the fundamental aims of the school. These include developing a marked quality of intellect, and even of scholarship, in its pupils. This is not the same thing as equipping them with the necessary examination passes for entry to the next stage of their career. It stands far higher in the scale of absolutes, and we normally assume it to be the over-ruling factor in all school policy. There are many welcome signs that local authorities are realising the mistake of too rigid demands for paper qualifications, and where this is so the schools are finding it easier to maintain and practice their liberal beliefs in the width and freedom of sixth-form education.It is clear that, while examinations may influence the curriculum, they must not govern it.We know, in fact, what and how we want to teach, and we have a right to expect that examinations shall be with us and not against us in our aims.It is only too well known, for example, what a widespread influence has been exerted on primary school teaching by the 'eleven plus' transfer examination, so carefully designed as an objective test of ability and promise, and so serious – sometimes disastrous – in its effect on the years of teaching that precede it. It takes teachers with an extraordinary grasp of their principles to avoid preparing pupils for the kind of test they are to undergo and to be judged by."²

¹ Op.cit p 61

² Ibid. pp 58-73 *passim*

Not that Miss Lister existed entirely in a world of her own untroubled by dark clouds. The standards which she took for granted were under threat and she knew it. The essential distinction between her position and that of today is that she clearly believed that with resolution and conviction the battle could be won. She had enough of both to declare:

"There can be considerable pressure from pupils and parents towards the abandonment of subjects not directly related to the proposed career, subjects not being offered for examination, subjects, possibly, found irksome. There is no denying that higher examination marks could be gained by this means; but to succumb to such pressure is to sell a vital pass."¹

This was a pass she felt confident of her ability to defend, as, even then, with some of the principles she enunciated she did not – such, for example, as the purist CCE concept that those working towards Advanced level could omit Ordinary level in the subjects concerned, thus allowing vastly more time to do the job properly:

"But this is the ideal, and for most of us it is, like other ideals, inclined to exist rather in heaven than on earth"²

and on earth

"is the demand, increasing year by year, for passes in particular subjects and combinations of subjects to qualify young people for entry to more and more and employments. It is against this background that the schools have to maintain their responsibility for the subjects and content of the education they give to each pupil".³

Nevertheless, Miss Lister gives every impression of remaining convinced of her ability to stand firm against the pressures to compromise with her principles:

"Have [schools] been forced to adapt their organization, not from internal cause but for examination needs? Speaking from my own experience, I should say....that there are some concessions in planning that I should never feel it right to make whatever the pressure; or so, at any rate, I hope."⁴

It is just those final two words which suggest an element of doubt – a doubt, of course, more than justified by subsequent history – and which was echoed by other speakers at the symposium. By Dr. G B Jeffery, for instance, Chairman of the symposium, and editor of the book which reprinted the principal speeches delivered thereat. Jeffery died before the book was published, leaving his editorial incomplete, but what survives makes it clear that he understood the fundamental problem and its complexities, and had no hesitation in holding them up to the light.

¹ Ibid. p 69

³ Ibid. p 60

³ Ibid. p 68

⁴ Ibid. p 62

"our real problem, however, is not whether we should have examinations but whether we should have external examinations. For a teacher, knowing his class and the ground he has covered, to set a test is one thing. As soon as *anybody* outside that classroom takes a hand in framing that test it is a different thing. Authority has passed from the teacher to some outside person or body, and the personal freedom of the teacher is to that extent limited. Let there be no mistake about it, external examinations and the complete professional freedom of the teacher are mutually exclusive." ¹

There can be little doubt as to upon which side of that dividing line Miss Lister would see herself taking her stand if the call to battle had been sounded in 1957. The task Dr. Jeffery seems to have set himself in his editorial is to explain why it was never to be sounded at all. He goes on:

"Unfortunately, this reflection does not settle the matter, for teachers have not yet made up their minds as to how far professional freedom is either possible or desirable. Recent controversy about university entrance requirements has made it clear that some teachers feel that they cannot do their work properly without the support of external examinations. Although I deplore this point of view, I am prepared to admit that there is much more in it than the simple evasion of responsibility." ²

As has already been acknowledged, this is an unfinished, and, therefore, a presumably unedited text; and it may well be that Dr. Jeffery intended to return to explain what ameliorating factors he had found to justify this position, but the only one that emerges from his text as it stands is personal inadequacy. His argument continues:

"If there are to betraditions of good teaching, these must grow out of the experiences of good teachers and not from the activities of that great and growing multitude of ministers, local authorities, inspectors of divers sorts, butchers, bakers, and candlestick-makers, who conceive that it is their duty to protect the teacher from error and to keep him on the straight and narrow path. Teachers should not rest until they have won the same measure of professional autonomy as is conceded to lawyers and physicians, or until the intrusion of external authority into the classroom has become as unthinkable as it now would be in the consulting-room." ³

One can readily imagine the cheers with which this might have been interrupted had Jeffery ever delivered this exhortation as a speech: it echoes the arguments of the most vehement anti-examinationists, and reinforces the position of heads like Miss Lister who "know what and how we want to teach", but these were not the teachers responsible for the hole in the dyke of professional autonomy. As Jeffery warms to his theme, his underlying position becomes clearer:

1 Op.cit. p 12

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid. p 13

"Anyone who has seen the efforts of other countries to move rapidly towards universal education must acknowledge that teachers are not always fit to receive this measure of professional responsibility, and that, when they are, they are sometimes reluctant to accept it. It is often possible to meet a right political demand for the spread of education only by using such teachers as are available. Their qualifications may be little in advance of those of their pupils, and they lack any adequate standards of professional conduct. There may thus be no practical alternative to a rigid centralized control in which the teacher is told in detail what to teach and how to teach it." ¹

Unfortunately, despite the opening sentence, Jeffery is not talking about "lesser breeds without the law" but the situation on his own doorstep – and it is an interesting reflection that, had he been able to visualise the situation forty years into the future, and the 'rigid centralized control' which we now take for granted, he might legitimately have claimed to prophesy the inevitable result if the fundamental problem were not tackled with fervour.

"How do we stand in this regard in England today?Almost alone among the countries of the world with any pretensions to educational maturity, we are staffing our secondary schools to a large extent by secondary school pupils with only two years of further education and training. Again, we see that every year large numbers are admitted to the teaching profession, by a variety of side-doors, who have had no training whatever. No profession can hope to attain to maturity until it is in a position to insist on good standards of professional competence as a condition of admittance to its ranks." ²

The punchline of Jeffery's somewhat indirect approach is left to the final two paragraphs of an uncompleted text, in which the brighter side of the educational picture of England is to be revealed.

"We are here concerned with secondary schools. The development of the English county grammar schools in the first half of this century was a very remarkable achievement. They established academic standards which invited comparison with those of the best of our older schools, and thereby made possible a great expansion of the universities and of other forms of higher education. They evolved a tone which made a notable contribution to the moral and spiritual life of the nation through a critical period of English history. I like to think that these happy results are not entirely unconnected with the fact that from the beginning the county grammar school was staffed to a predominant extent by trained graduate teachers who entered the profession, after due preparation, with a conception of the meaning and purpose of education and with a sound grounding in the traditions of good teaching.

More recently we have broadened the scope of secondary education. New kinds of secondary schools have come into existence. They have produced many problems the complete solution of which lies in the future. The teachers in these schools are showing themselves to be of the same mettle as those who made the grammar schools fifty years ago." ³

And there the manuscript finishes, ostensibly on an encouraging note.

¹ Op.cit. p 13

² Ibid. p 14

³ Ibid. pp 14-15

Nevertheless, we are obliged to wonder whether all these new teachers are trained graduates with appropriate conceptions and grounding, or whether these are the secondary school pupils with only two years of further education and training who are staffing our secondary schools, and thereby preventing the teaching profession from achieving the autonomy of lawyers and physicians to which reference had just been made. There is a clear implication here that the grammar schools are entitled to be freed from the intrusive shackles of externally imposed examinations which inhibit their complete professional freedom, but that other schools and their teachers are yet to prove themselves, and may well need fifty years to do so. This may seem an unnecessarily harsh interpretation of what Jeffery intended to convey: unfortunately it is, to some extent, reinforced by the completed speech of Sir John Wolfenden, whose opening address to the symposium on the Evolution of Policy on External Examinations seems to stray into much the same ground. He begins by summarising the various changes to the constitution of the SSEC, including the removal of representation from it of the Examination Boards, and goes on to deal with the decision of the Minister, in 1946, to assume personal responsibility for the direction of policy in regard to school examinations, "relying as hitherto on the co-operation of the Approved Examining Bodies to carry out the work of the examinations"; a form of words which, apparently, left the Boards, already smarting from their exclusion from SSEC, even more disgruntled. He then turns to what he describes as "the much more important element of the 1946 position, the schools themselves", and continues in these words:

"For fifty years the grammar schools had been growing to a full, healthy and vigorous life. Combining in their history many and diverse strands, they had attained a richness which justifies us in claiming that in this country over the first half of this century we had really learned something about running grammar schools. (I personally hope, in parenthesis, (a) that we shall never lose sight of the contribution we have made to educational theory and practice in the development of our grammar schools; and (b) that in this second half of the century we shall make as good a job of the secondary modern schools as we did, in its first fifty years, of the grammar schools.)" ¹

after which eulogy he explains first, how the grammar schools had come to see themselves as growing out of the School Certificate – "The examination system was a bed of Procrustes, and it was high time that the schools freed themselves from it" ²

¹ Op.cit. pp 23-24

² Ibid. p 24

– and second, how the SSEC had determined, in the light of this growing criticism, to act upon the recommendations of the Norwood Report, which

"was regarded at the time as an advanced and progressive document; its major proposals were designed to introduce more flexibility into the examination system, and thereby to give more freedom to the schools." ¹

The SSEC, he goes on to tell the symposium, accordingly considered the educational ideals enshrined in the 1944 Act and issued a Report which recommended a

"rearrangement of the external examination....intended to reflect a radical change of outlook and practice. This is not just a tinkering with the then existing School Certificate and Higher School Certificate; it is a rethinking of the whole pattern of external examinations, and it is on that basis that it should be judged. The important elements of standard and national currency are firmly preserved. Nobody would wish to see the nationally valid Certificate abolished; it was a source of great strength to the schools, and, incidentally, to many other interested parties. Indeed the actual standard of a 'Pass' in the examination was raised, with the consequence of continued argument ever since. But fundamentally the prime object in the Council's mind was to combine the guarantee of standards with a larger measure of freedom for the schools." ²

At best, the main elements in this address so far must be called arguable. The grammar schools were never quite such paragons of educational efficiency and achievement; a fact which has been glanced at already³ and will be dealt with at greater length in my final chapter⁴. To describe them in this way is to falsify history, and in doing so to create quite unnecessary problems for the future by misrepresenting the problems of the past. Then the suggestion that the SSEC had not just "tinkered with School Certificate and Higher School Certificate" but rethought the whole pattern of external examinations is a misleading claim: the only real change apparent to candidates or their teachers would have been in the fact that the new examination did not require any group or combination of subjects to be taken at the same time but had made all its subjects independent; the actual changes in the papers in English, for example, were initially imperceptible.⁵ Subsequent chapters will look at the development of a distinctive character for GCE in some detail. Finally, the bland statement that "Nobody would wish to see the nationally valid Certificate abolished" is simply untrue – as we have seen already in this chapter, a solid body of opinion had been expressing that precise wish ever since the Certificate had been introduced. What we are getting here is an apologia for what Sir John clearly

¹ Op.cit. p25

² Ibid. pp 25-26

³ v.sup. p 18

⁴ v. inf. pp 507-519

⁵ v.sup. pp 261-262

sees as the necessity for maintaining as much of the status quo as possible. There is a clear hint in his description of their Report as "an advanced and progressive document" that the audience should not expect much more from the aspirations of the Norwood Committee – he also said that this Report had "in modern phrase, stuck its neck out quite a long way"¹ – and a further indication of the realities of the situation in the closing comment that the SSEC's prime objective was "to combine *the guarantee of standards* with a larger measure of freedom for schools". In other words, there never was any chance of an agreement to hand over the conduct of the examination "to teachers at the school on syllabuses and papers framed by themselves." The "large measure of freedom for schools" was to be contained entirely within the removal of bureaucratic aspects of School and Higher School Certificate administration, and what remained for Sir John Wolfenden to explain was why more could not reasonably be expected. As with the unfinished editorial, this explanation is to be found in a kind of *trahison des clercs* among the teachers themselves, who can be shown to be unfit or unready to handle any greater amount of delegated responsibility:

"It would be an exaggeration to say that the reaction was wholly favourable. One of the most disappointing features of it was the apparent reluctance of some teachers to accept the gift which was offered to them, of exercising more freedom in arranging their pupils' curricula and school lives which should be appropriate to the capacities of each. It seemed almost as if, in some quarters, the props and supports of the old system had been used for so long that the limbs which should have been being supported had in fact atrophied, or that Procrustes had done his work so well that there was by now neither leg to walk with nor head to think with. As soon as the old examination was swept away nostalgic speeches in its favour became almost normal; the beloved enemy left a nasty draught when he was removed."²

Like Dr. Jeffery, Sir John deplores this lack of spirit and initiative among teachers whose "mental arteries harden before the physical ones."³ He ends with the usual self-deprecating acknowledgement that GCE may not yet be perfect, but insists upon a substantial improvement:

"doubtless there are other deficiencies in an examination which has been running, after all, for little more than five years. It remains true that the opportunity for freedom is there, for those who are willing to use it."⁴

And there, more or less, the situation was to rest until the 1988 Act. There were increased freedoms of internal administration for schools, opportunities for experiments

¹ Op.cit. p 21

² Ibid. p 30

³ Ibid. p 31

⁴ Ibid. p 32

with the curriculum and the ability to offer whatever subjects pupils wanted to study that the school was in a position to teach. There was, often overlooked as a by-product of the new system, the freedom for a pupil to resit a subject in which he or she had failed, and with it the opportunity to invent quite imaginative courses for one year sixth form students who lacked the academic ability to tackle A level. But the real freedom, in the sense in which A N Whitehead and the 'advanced and progressive' Norwood Committee had meant it, was not on offer – and the SSEC had no intention that it ever should be. Sir John's own position was made clear at the end of his address:

"I am not one of those who think that all external examinations are a bad thing. I think that they are necessary, and not wholly evil. But I think that they must be kept in their place, leaving also a place for work which is not to be examined at all.The external examination, in its proper place, seems to me to be valuable both to the pupil and the teacher. But its proper place is following the teaching, or rather the learning, not dictating it. Its purpose is to serve the schools, not to tyrannize over them, so that the learners and teachers get the best of both worlds – a national currency for a certificate whose standard is nationally guaranteed, and at the same time, much more importantly, that freedom to breathe and live and move which every school needs." ¹

To all intents and purposes, this became the position of most educational writers, the object of reform being now the emphasis on the freedom to breathe and live and move, rather than suffer tyranny; or to put it another way, to improve examination papers and bring them into line with developments in teaching technique, rather than to abolish them. The battle to hand over the examination system to the internal arrangements of each school was lost, though inevitably this did not deter a few last adherents of the policy. Perhaps the most immoderate root and branch attack on the General Certificate of Education came from Brian Jackson, in *English versus Examinations*, 1965:

"At every point, from primary school to university, examinations through their side-effects threaten the most precious and vulnerable parts of English teaching.....Examinations necessarily are the terrain of the measurable, and our *prime* concern is with the play of sensibility.....All the time new examinations are proposed or already on the way – CSE, 'A' level English Language, Use of English. The confident cheek of that last title gives you the enemy's formidable measure." ²

Assertions of this kind not merely lack the credibility and balance of writers like Paffard and Shayer: in the abandonment of any pretence of constructive criticism, in the all-embracing anathematization of all examinations, it patently lacks any awareness of the

¹ Op.cit. p 35

² Op.cit. p 10-12

value of discrimination. When he goes on to remark:

"Perhaps examinations appeal to some deep rooted insecurities in our society, for despite the opposition of serious English teachers, the 'Use of English' paper – like the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) – took fast root"¹

the casual grouping together of 'Use of English' and 'CSE' is a sufficient case in point. The CSE examination was, in the opinion of most 'serious English teachers', a success, and, but for its comparative lack of status, in many ways preferable to CCE. It certainly approached, as nearly as anything has during the intervening half-century, to the ideal that the Norwood Report envisioned. 'Use of English', on the other hand, died the inevitable death that befalls examinations which are imposed upon the system from a level one stage more remote from the schools and their pupils than the O and A level examination boards – the Universities which had originally demanded it simply ceased to require it as soon as they realised that to do so would automatically deprive them of some of the candidates they wanted to admit.

As Frances Stevens more diplomatically puts it:

"There are two ways of dealing with [a] low standard of performance: one is to have a not very high pass mark; the other is, in spite of the use of the word 'compulsory', not to be too insistent on a pass. It would be interesting to discover the number of promising science students actually refused university entrance solely because of failure in this test: one suspects it to be very small."²

(Parenthetically, it is even more interesting to read the correspondence between Examination Boards in which they plan methods of ensuring that the number should indeed be reduced.)³

Nor is Jackson very much more convincing when he leaves appeals to the emotions, and polemic, and moves on to what he presents as argument. His six points against English examinations include: that all exams create a powerful publishing industry, supplying text-books; that examination successes create promotion ladders for teachers; and that examinations 'are big business and therefore self-perpetuating'. The only one of them worth serious consideration, and even that by no means peculiar to English, is that all examinations purport to be testing devices but immediately become teaching devices, and this point has been made by every other writer on the subject whose work is

¹ Op.cit. pp 13-14

² *English and Examinations*, 1970, pp 143-144

³ v.inf. pp 147-148

familiar to me. Attacks on the examination system such as this simply invite the inevitable response provided by Stephen Wiseman, who edited *Examinations and English Education*, Manchester U.P., 1961, and who addresses himself to those who

"believe that examinations foster the 'wrong' things in education and thus prevent the development of the 'right' things, the 'unexaminable' elements. They stress the 'whole child' and remind us that mind and body are indivisible, that emotional development is as important as (or even more important than) intellectual development. One cannot help having a great deal of sympathy with this point of view, founded as it is on a number of accepted (albeit selected) facts. [But] it becomes evident that its extremism must be opposed.....we are in danger of finding ourselves committed to a view that a school is a place not for teaching and instructing, learning and knowing, but for adjustment and therapy, for 'creativity' and 'involvement'. The word *academic* becomes pejorative and examinations must be abjured because they foster unhealthy competition.The education system of the USA has suffered much more than ours from this kind of perverted philosophy."

One might, indeed, suppose this work had been written as a counterblast to Jackson, were it not for the circumstance that it appeared four years earlier than *English versus Examinations*. As it is, one must suppose either that Jackson had never read it or that he simply ignored it. Certainly he never addresses himself to any point that Wiseman makes, and has nothing to offer in response to the sense of reason which Wiseman conveys effectively:

"A great deal of very poor and inefficient examining goes on, the educational effects of which are far from good.To condemn all for the sins of a few is an emotional reaction only pardonable in the young revolutionary. Our purpose should be to adapt examining method to educational aims".²

This was clearly the purpose of the National Association for the Teaching of English, (a group whom I imagine Brian Jackson might accept as serious English teachers), who in 1966 published *English Examined, A survey of 'O' level papers*. It was, in point of fact, a fairly devastating critique – but it was constructive, and I shall refer to it in some detail in my chapters dealing with the development of GCE 'O' level examinations in English Language and Literature.³ In the meantime, one quotation may summarise a very useful distinction not always immediately apparent in the observations of those who feel themselves entitled to pontificate on the subject of standards.

¹ Op.cit., *Introduction*, pp xii-xiii

² Op.cit., *Introduction*, p xvi

³ v.inf. Chapters Four and Five

An examination, we are told, must have the virtues of comparability with other examinations in the same subject and for the same level of attainment; of reliability in the way it discriminates between candidates; and of validity in testing what it sets out to test. The survey then goes on:

"Unfortunately, reliability is the prior demand. An unreliable examination.....is clearly not valid. An examination, however, can be perfectly reliable and not in the least valid." ¹

The question as to the degree to which the validity of a syllabus, and of the questions asked upon it, has become a requirement that the Examination Boards acknowledge as readily as they have always acknowledged the necessity of comparability and reliability, is central to the matter of standards in English. The problem is that it is a good deal more difficult to obtain agreement on what validity means, and to measure it when you have found it. It was therefore upon this question of validity that subsequent writers on examinations in general, and on examinations in English in particular, tended to concentrate – the old problem of finding questions that could be answered without detriment to the subject and still be susceptible to a reliable marking system.

The detailed survey, in Chapters 4, 5 and 6 of this thesis, of the development of the various GCE papers, will, I believe, demonstrate conclusively that the difficulty was eventually at least partially resolved to the satisfaction of the majority of English teachers. Progressively, papers evolved to a point at which Language candidates could write with imagination and verve and expect to have these qualities recognised and evaluated alongside the accuracy of the grammar and spelling; and Literature candidates could expect to be questioned along lines which included their feelings and reactions to the text, as well as their knowledge of appropriate background facts and their understanding of any passing difficulties of linguistic usage. Equally progressively, examiners mastered the task of evaluating and ascribing marks to these less 'tangible' aspects of candidate response. Inevitably, of course, the increase in validity as defined by teachers led to an increased concern for reliability as defined by those whose concerns lie primarily with the capacity of public examinations to grade candidates into rank order, and a small industry developed for the production of comparability studies

¹ Op.cit. p 3

and for refining the methodology of assessment. This aspect of the examining process is, of course, inseparable from any use of examinations as a measure of standards, and will be studied in Chapter 3. Our concern here is with the task of changing the early approach of the Boards to something more readily identifiable with the aspirations of good English teaching : a lengthy and difficult process. As Michael Paffard put it:

"A candidate of 1960 would hardly have been put out by a paper of 1920 or vice versa. It is difficult to apportion blame or distinguish cause from effect: was the *rigor mortis* in which the subject was locked for forty years in grammar and public schools the result of or the reason for the extreme conservatism of the examiners?"¹

Answering this question is not easy – solving problems where the two alternative solutions are intertwined seldom is – and it is instructive to read two books on the subject in conjunction: George Bruce's *Secondary School Examinations* of 1969, and *School Examinations* by John Pearce of 1972. The two books rely upon the same basic material, and often upon identical facts, but reach radically different conclusions.

Bruce was a grammar school master before the second world war, and after it Secretary to the University Entrance and School Examination Council of the University of London, and must therefore have worked closely with Dr G B Jeffery who was Chairman of the same body. His standpoint is understandably but unquestionably that of an Examination Board officer, but the passage of nearly twelve years has radically changed the manner of public officials, and their willingness to communicate. As a result, he provides some insights into the reasons for facts that Jeffery was content to gloss merely as 'a larger measure of freedom for the schools'. Bruce is much more informative. The problem of the School Certificate Examination, he tells us, which explains the insistence on making GCE an examination in separate subjects, was that by the end of the life of that exam., English language had become the only compulsory element, the only surviving additional requirement (from the original insistence on at least one modern language together with maths or a science subject) being five other subjects of which one had to come from either of these areas. As a result of this unique position, the standard required for a pass in English Language steadily dropped:

¹ *Thinking About English*, 1978, pp 15-16

"There came a point in each examination when examiners were required to undertake a specific scrutiny of the work in English language of a large number of candidates who had met all the other conditions for the award of a certificate but whose work in this one subject appeared to be below standard. Contrary to general belief examiners as a class are kind-hearted and like to have an excuse to pass candidates.....One of the first laws of examining is that to make a subject compulsory is to lower the standard of what is acceptable." ¹

He is equally enlightening on the subject of why a new external examination was created at all when the SSEC Circular of 1947 laid down the principles on which the Minister required examinations to be conducted, though in describing the position of teachers, one suspects that his tongue is, at least slightly, in his cheek:

"The critics concentrated on the allegedly stultifying and cramping effects of external examinations. The teachers, they argued, had been forced to follow printed syllabuses and had enjoyed no freedom to teach what they thought best for their pupils; they had no say in drawing up the syllabuses; they were bursting with frustration. The policy makers of 1947 gave a grudging admission that for those who required a national credential, an external examination was still essential, if only to ward off the danger that without it the universities and professional bodies might re-introduce their own individual preliminary tests.For those who needed this credential, and for them alone, a new examination, the GCE, would be introduced; but it would be so framed that as to discourage as many as possible from taking it.The Minister of Education and her advisers in 1947 were determined to ensure that the Modern and Technical schools, which they aimed to build up to a position of parity of esteem with the Grammar schools, would not be defiled by external examinations. They sought to achieve this end by imposing an age limit on entry.....it was decreed that no one could enter for the examination unless he had attained the age of sixteen by the first of September of the year in which he proposed to enter. Further, to discourage the taking of the examination by all but those who needed a national credential, other conditions were imposed on the GCE. First of all the pass standard in each subject was fixed to be that of a *Credit* in the School Certificate. This meant that if the old pass mark was 35% the new one would be 45%; or, put another way, whereas in the old examination with an unrestricted entry 80% of the candidates were expected to pass, only 65% would be successful in the new examination if the entry remained unrestricted. However, it was confidently expected that the quality of the entry would be very different from School Certificate days because the schools would be advised to enter only those with a reasonable chance of passing." ²

The final suggestion to limit entry was the recommendation that good candidates be encouraged to by-pass 'O' level in those subjects which they intended to take in the sixth form and to go straight to 'A' level. All of these ideas had the same underlying motive, to reduce to a minimum the burden of external examinations on school pupils, and to allow schools to devise for themselves syllabuses appropriate for their students.

¹ Op.cit. p 3

² Ibid. pp 4-7 passim.

In other words, from the perspective which Bruce offers, it is perfectly possible to argue that the SSEC in 1947, far from announcing a system which ignored the advice of the Norwood Committee that external examinations should cease, was actually seeking to comply with the principle upon which the Norwood recommendation was based, and to exempt from public examinations altogether all pupils except those who needed to compete for university places or professional training opportunities.

The opportunity was there for all those teachers "bursting with frustration", begging for the opportunity to teach what they thought best for their pupils, to do exactly that, with the support of the Minister and the SSEC.

If this really was the position, then the question which remains to be answered is why was all the encouragement to schools to devise their own leaving certificates so negative – so concentrated on denying access to a new examination which was inevitably going to be seen as a replacement for School Certificate, and as such, a nationally guaranteed statement of ability. What happened is very much what Jeffery described – prospective employers continued to regard GCE exactly as they had regarded 'School Cert' – as a kind of basic qualification for employment – and were shocked to discover that GCE was unsuitable for this purpose. Similarly, as Bruce puts it, "teachers, pupils and parents were quite indifferent to the underlying principles",¹ and schools ignored all the restrictions on GCE which were not mandatory. Thus no attempt whatever was made to limit entry to those with a reasonable chance of passing, and in general whole forms were entered for the entire range of subjects which formed the fifth form curriculum. In my own school, this was certainly the practice from the first years of GCE: apart from Jews and Roman Catholics who were able to opt out of the examination in Religious Knowledge, all pupils in the top form were entered for all ten subjects of the standard curriculum, and in the other two forms in the year group for nine, the missing subject in their case being Latin. Bruce reports a clear distinction between girls' and boys' schools in that the former all made English literature compulsory for all candidates whereas many of the latter dropped it altogether: and also a marked reduction from School Certificate numbers in the entries for History

¹ Op.cit. p 11

and Geography, but otherwise there seems to have been very little change. The idea of by-passing 'O' level for the most able seems to have been taken up by almost no institution as a regular practice, though some may have applied it on an *ad hoc* basis in a few instances. The one inhibition that schools were unable to ignore, that imposing a restriction on entry to pupils who would be sixteen within the academic year of the examination, was, in any case, abolished after only two years, after repeated complaints that it held back bright pupils. It seems very difficult to believe that the government was really as determined as Bruce suggests to bring about the end of external examinations, unless one subscribes to the conspiracy theory which holds that the Minister was woefully and deliberately ill-advised by civil servants determined to retain the status quo. At all events there was no serious attempt to persuade schools to devise internal systems to record pupil achievement, and no real resistance to an almost universal determination to ignore the change in philosophy which underwrote the move from School Certificate to General Certificate of Education. What does emerge from Bruce's testimony is that while there was, in fact, no genuine widespread desire on behalf of the teaching profession to take over the business of syllabus design, the failure to take up the challenge gave both SSEC and the Examination Boards an excellent argument against those still fighting for abolition of external examinations. The other interesting point which emerges from Bruce's preliminary remarks is that concerning the relationship between the SSEC and the Boards, which, as Jeffery had implied, had been soured by the exclusion of the Boards from membership of the revised Council. Bruce is rather blunter about it:

"Why were the examining bodies given no representation on the Council, although for better or worse they have a profound effect on what goes on in the classrooms of the country?Possibly the heart of the matter is that the rules should be drawn up by amateurs and professionals should play the game." ¹

and this sense of ill-feeling pervades what follows:

"Each GCE Board has its own specialist committees in the examination subjects and one of their major duties is to ensure that syllabuses are constantly under review. Unfortunately in discharging this duty they have often been in conflict with the similar panels which were set up by the SSEC, ostensibly to ensure that there was reasonable uniformity of

standards between them. In the early years of the CCE the Council panel were usually centred round a Ministry Staff Inspector of Schools who was assisted by an acquiescent panel of school teachers and university dons. Later the composition of the panels was very much improved, but, because most of the issues raised were matters of opinion, it was not unusual for an SSEC panel to reach a conclusion quite different from its counterpart belonging to an examining body." ¹

The choice of a word like 'acquiescent' in this passage should be born in mind when we approach the divergence of opinion between Messrs Bruce and Pearce on the degree of influence exercised by schoolteachers over CCE examinations; in the meantime Bruce is of considerable use in providing explanations of some aspects of development of the CCE system that may have been forgotten over the course of the intervening years. For instance, that not all of the original boards were set up to deal with the needs of the same kind of client:

"The Oxford and Cambridge Schools Examination Board was founded in 1873 to provide an examination suitable for the sixth forms of those schools which sent a large number of their boys to the two universities. This was the first external examination to cater for schools rather than individual candidates and it was intended to form a link between the participating schools and the universities to which their boys were soon to go. The Oxford and Cambridge Joint Board enabled the public schools to have the benefit of the ideas and advice of the university teacher, but it became one of the means of isolating the public schools from the rest of the educational system.another special feature of some significance is that it is the only CCE board where the fees are largely met from the pockets of the parents of the candidates; in all the others public money is used to foot the bill." ²

Whereas, of the new Associated Examining Board set up in 1953, he observes:

"Its special mission was to move away from the academic approach which was deep-seated in the older boards, and papers were to be set of a more practical type in subjects which might not be found in Grammar Schools but which were appropriate to Technical College or Technical School courses.Its examinations cover the whole range of the school subjects and it also provides examinations in some subjects not provided by other bodies; for example, Building Construction." ³

Knowledge of this kind is vital when it comes to evaluating the studies into the comparability of the results of the various boards such as, for instance, the *CCE Results Analysis*, in glorious technicolour, published by the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority in 1996. It is material also to an understanding of the very occasional scandal which has accompanied the scrutiny of public examination results, such as that concerning the OCSEB A level English results in the same year.

¹ Op.cit. p 14

² Ibid. pp 83-84

³ Ibid. pp 85-86

The inside information which Bruce can provide as a Board officer is also extremely useful in matters such as the short-lived and unlamented Use of English paper, referred to above,¹ which seems to have had its origins in the kind of hyperbolic attack on standards of literacy which had been reported by Newbolt and were to be echoed by Newsome and Bullock; though, interestingly, not by Lockwood, whose *Report on the GCE and Sixth Form Studies* was published in 1960, much the same time as the demand for the Use of English paper was crystalising into a fact. Although a comparatively brief incursion into the area of public examinations in English, and certainly not worth a section to itself in my detailed study of the development of GCE examinations in subsequent chapters, I believe it to be worth extended mention here as an illustration of how ineffectual an examination requirement could be when schools were not effectively involved with its creation, and examination boards at odds about its validity. George Bruce, writing in 1969, describes its inception like this:

"Ten years ago it was safe to assume that all students in the universities had passed in English Language at the Ordinary Level or its equivalent and yet there were widespread complaints about the illiteracy of undergraduates. There are always those who maintain that standards of English have been declining ever since the time of Shakespeare, but was there any extra cause for alarm about the standard of English among university students ten years ago?Had the demands for specialized studies in the sixth form led to a consequent neglect of English? Was there a feeling that once English language at Ordinary Level had been passed it could be put aside in order that the time might be spent on other more important things? Was the English Language test any good?"¹

It might have been no bad thing if the University authorities had answered these questions, or even asked them. Instead, they came up with the recommendation that there should be:

"a new scheme of general entrance requirements which included tests in English, General Studies and a foreign language."²

Again it is a pointless, but interesting, speculation as to what might have happened to education from the age of fourteen upwards if this proposal had received general endorsement. Simply because it would have involved much more reconstruction than was involved in laying on Use of English courses, it is possible that it would have endured and thereby enormously have improved the status of modern language studies throughout the country. Far more probable, however, is that the new examination would

¹ Op.cit. p 71

² Ibid.

have perished even faster than was actually the case. In point of fact:

"The foreign language proposal met with little support, but the other two recommendations were more popular. Oxford and Cambridge joined by a group of Universities associated with the Joint Matriculation Board decided to institute a use of English test as part of their entrance requirements. The Joint Matriculation Board with S.S.E.C. approval had been running an examination in General Studies at the advanced Level for several years and the universities it served were prepared to accept this subject as an alternative to an examination in the use of English. Other universities were sympathetic, but the University of London stood out against the plan in the belief that however well conceived an examination in General Studies might be it would force these studies into a particular mould, especially if the subject was prescribed as a university entrance requirement. in declining to introduce a *Use of English* test London made it clear that it did not believe that a reliable examination could be devised and it has not yet been demonstrated that London was wrong." ¹

Bruce was, of course, an officer of the London Board, and his impartiality in this matter must therefore be liable to question. Certainly what followed must have left the London Board delighted that it had refused to be involved in Use of English.

The test was designed to establish that a candidate could write an essay, comprehend a passage, and summarize the contents of another – and in essence, therefore, repeated the principal elements of the O level English Language paper, though, reasonably enough, at a rather higher level of demand. Having regard to the fact that its only candidates were those applying to those universities which had specified a Use of English pass as an entrance requirement and were therefore, presumably, at the upper end of the academic spectrum, it seems surprising that, from the first, it proved an awkward hurdle to surmount. To some extent, this may have been due to resentment on the part of those compelled to take it, almost exclusively mathematicians, scientists, and those applying for courses such as engineering. Applicants in English, Modern Languages and Arts subjects generally were expected to prove their own literacy by the quality of their A level grades, and the resentment lay in the fact that they were not similarly required to pass a test in numeracy, which the scientists were convinced would have proved equally difficult for them. Speaking from quite distant memories as a teacher required to provide U of E courses to classes from the science sixth, I can say that nothing, with the possible exception of compulsory RE, seemed to arouse such determined antipathy, even from normally intelligent and benevolently inclined pupils

¹ Op.cit. p 72

who had happily co-operated with my English lessons lower down the school, and I am inclined to suppose that the sense of victimisation which seemed inseparable from the lessons was accompanied by wilfully deaf ears to what went on. Certainly, attempts to justify the course on the grounds that mathematical skills or basic scientific knowledge were skills to be acquired whereas competence in handling one's own language was a matter of the educated Englishman's birthright made no impact whatever. I do not suppose my own pupils were in any way exceptional – scientists generally thought themselves hard done by and were mutely unco-operative; and Use of English results were startlingly poor. Even the trial tests went badly, according to Bruce, despite being conducted at Winchester, where the headmaster

"had co-operated by allowing the test to be administered to a substantial number of Wykehamists and he was unhappy to report that some who were considered among the college's best students of English had failed the test. This was a serious warning about a test which was to be used to bar a student from university no matter how well he did in other subjects." ¹

Clearly, the schools were going to be extremely unhappy if their better candidates should fall foul of such requirements, and the great public schools have means of making their unhappiness very clearly felt. It was not long before the requirement was officially tempered. To quote Bruce again,

"New arrangements made for the Use of English examination in 1965, reveal how those concerned had come to distrust their own examination. A candidate was not to be turned down until his performance in his other subjects at the Advanced Level was known. Ostensibly this can be justified by claiming that there is a need to test each candidate's English in his specialist subjects, but those who review his work may be unduly influenced by being aware that his work in other subjects is good even if his English is poor. Will a candidate really be turned down in *Use of English* if his grades in Chemistry, Physics and Mathematics are high? Is it not more likely that in the end he will be deemed to have satisfied the examiners in *Use of English*?" ²

Here I strongly suspect Bruce of being disingenuous: I am reasonably sure that these rhetorical questions mask certain knowledge that an agreement existed to pass in Use of English candidates whose A level grades would pretty well have guaranteed acceptance at University. Bruce, after all, was Secretary to the University Entrance and School Examination Council of the University of London, and as the London Board had refused to offer a Use of English paper of its own, schools which took London A levels were

¹ Op.cit. pp 72-73

² Ibid. p 73

obliged to find a Use of English paper elsewhere. The decision that the performance in A level subjects should be scrutinised before the Use of English result was determined, meant that London was required, on request, to send the appropriate scripts of a candidate to the Board which had conducted the relevant Use of English test. In these circumstances, it seems to me highly improbable that Bruce was not aware of the content of the following correspondence between the Secretaries of the Northern Universities Joint Matriculation Board and the Oxford Delegacy Of Local Examinations, which I discovered in the Delegacy archives, now (since the amalgamation of the Delegacy and the Oxford and Cambridge Schools Examination Board with the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate) lodged in the main Oxford University Archive.

"28th November 1964

Dear Cummings,

As you know, many people are disturbed at the possibility that "brilliant scientists" are going to be excluded from all the seven universities which have instituted the test in English because of their inability to pass the test. Our experience so far suggests that the numbers will be very small indeed. But there may be some, and this could be regarded as particularly unfortunate at a time when authority insists that we must have more, and yet more, scientists and technologists. Of course, the less the brilliance, the greater the number. Still, there is a real problem here. In consequence, the Board has empowered its Awarding Committee in 1965 to consider some system of 'compensation' for failure in the Test in the sense that all candidates who in our July test fail narrowly* are to have their work in the Test considered by the Awarding Committee side by side with what they do in Advanced level subjects provided that they do not fall below Grade B in each of two approved subjects. The Committee has also been empowered to look at special individual instances falling outside these limits and/or to take into account Grades in Advanced subjects obtained in 1964. But candidates obtaining Grade IV in our March Test will not normally be considered by the Committee since they have the opportunity to recoup at the July examination.

In our July Test in 1964 58.5% of 1667 candidates passed and a further 14.3% were given Grade IV. It is the intention that the Head of a school will be informed in confidence of all instances in which compensation has been allowed (III+) but the official pass list will not make any distinction between Grades I, II, III, and III+; all four groups will be stated to have passed.

The Board instructed me to inform your Board of this decision and to consult with you firstly as to whether your Board contemplates making any similar provision, secondly if no provision for compensation is acceptable to your Board whether we can devise a procedure by which I could have information about candidates taking your Board's Test in order to satisfy our matriculation requirements who fail 'narrowly' in the Test and take Advanced level subjects with you."

* The grading system for Use of English was on a five grade scale within which Grades I, II, and III were passes, Grade IV was a 'narrow fail', and Grade V an outright fail.

The reply is dated December 11th 1964, and reads, omitting the usual pleasantries:

"Dear Petch,

...I have an instinctive feeling that if there is a syllabus for a subject and a paper is set on it in accordance with the syllabus, the results ought to be based on the results of that paper and on that alone. I expect, however, that I am being over-sensitive on this and we must obviously look at the matter from a practical viewpoint.

This sort of thing has been discussed by the Delegates in a slightly different context and part of their minute on the subject reads:

(a) in appropriate cases the Delegacy could divulge, to the Registry only, some detail of the performance in this examination of candidates who had not reached the pass level;

(b) information concerning the quality of English used by candidates in their specialist scripts could be revealed to the Registry in very exceptional cases only, it being kept in mind that scripts are only available for a limited period after the examination.

Since we have stated that we are willing to do this for potential entrants to Oxford, it seems to me important that we should also be willing to do it for other universities having the Use of English Test and....in my view we are likely to co-operate with you in the way you suggest."

The archive contains one further item of this correspondence – if there were more they have not been bound into the Office papers for 1965 – a second letter from Mr J A Petch of the NUJMB to Mr J R Cummings of the Oxford Delegacy of Local Examinations dated December 16th 1964 and containing this paragraph:

"On the theoretical point I agree with you!As an examining body we have persuaded ourselves that, as a matriculating body, it would be as well to allow the examining body to use other information which may be at its disposal to decide whether certain candidates have or have not given the evidence required by the matriculating body of their proficiency in English!"¹

Proof positive that the answers to the questions rhetorically put by George Bruce – Will a candidate really be turned down in *Use of English* if his grades in Chemistry, Physics and Mathematics are high? Is it not more likely that in the end he will be deemed to have satisfied the examiners in *Use of English* ?" – are 'No' and 'Yes' respectively; and, just as Frances Stevens suspected,² the number of scientists who actually lost a university place through an inability to rise above Grade V in Use of English will have been very small.

Only the most passing of references to this correspondence is to be found in the official records of the Delegacy – a minute from the record of a Delegate's Meeting held on February 4th 1965:

¹ Oxford University Archive, ref. LE 34/53 (Oxford Local Examinations Office Papers 1965 Part 2)

² v.sup. p 136

"§13 The Use of English examination was considered and the following decision was made:

beginning with the March 1965 examination, the results be issued to schools in 5 grades (three of pass, two of failure) but only the fact of pass or failure be issued to universities or other bodies, and pass only be recorded upon certificates." ¹

This suggests to me that Oxford had quietly decided to go along with the NUJMB practice and were altering their own marking system to suit, while, at the same time, making it impossible for any university to detect which of its candidates had sailed over the Use of English hurdle, and which had been bundled over by a generous re-adjustment by the examiners. What becomes immediately apparent is that the change of strategy had not been communicated to the Chief Examiner for Use of English. Her marking scheme for the March 1965 paper, has also, rather unusually, been preserved in the collection of Office Papers, – most probably because the Delegacy was aware that the subject was sensitive – and it is clearly not written to encourage a lenient approach to those who had trouble expressing themselves in the written form:

".....this paper...has been devised specifically to implement the intentions of the University in demanding proof of proficiency in the Use of English. We have, therefore, the right to remember that the examination has at present no other purpose.....and that no candidate ought to be entering for it who does not have the intention (or at least the hope) of working at a university; we must not give charity marks to a stupid tryer who thinks it would be nice to have a spare qualification before departing this academic life." ²

The Chief Examiner's Report on this examination would normally have been presented orally to the Delegates Meeting on May 13th 1965, but by a coincidence fortunate for researchers, she was unable to attend this meeting. A hand-written note records this fact together with her request that the following report be circulated to delegates.

"This year there were, in spite of the greatly increased entry, fewer total disasters than in the past, though there were a few almost unbelievable lapses; at least one candidate found it possible totally to misunderstand passage 1(a) from beginning to end. In general, however, there was an increased understanding of what is required.

In question 1 (a) was done worst by those who assume that narrative is always easy to understand, and therefore carelessly miss the connectives and implied arguments; (b).....caused trouble to those who cannot, or will not, consider context when they read; (c) was misinterpreted when ideas were imported into the passage.

Many candidates have lost all sense of the distinction in meaning between shall and will and should and would. This is serious. Much ambiguity arose from confusing were and where, there and their, affect and effect,

1,2 Oxford Univ. Archive, ref. LE 34/52 (Oxford Local Examinations Office Papers 1965 Part 1)

infect and infest, contact and contract, imply and infer.
 Some otherwise satisfactory work was marred by deplorable punctuation,
 making sentences and even whole paragraphs unintelligible.
 The best work was intelligent, lively and accurate." ¹

The only response recorded is the typical laconic minute:

"A report on the Use of English examination in March 1965 was received and the secretary was asked to discuss some points with the Senior Examiner." ²

It is, I think, a reasonable conjecture that it was in the course of this discussion that the Senior Examiner was confidentially informed of the decision to rely upon A Level grades rather than exclusively upon the paper "devised specifically to implement the intentions of the university in demanding proficiency in the Use of English," and requested not to make any more of the shortcomings of the candidates than was absolutely necessary. The statistics appended to her Report make it abundantly clear that Oxford was dealing with a much larger entry than the 1667 quoted by the Secretary for NUJMB – the "greatly increased entry" was from 6894 to 10,316, of whom 7489 (72.6%) were deemed to have passed. If, like the JMB, Oxford awarded Grade IV to some 15% of its entry, there would have been some 1540 candidates whose A level grades would have been checked to establish which of them had a minimum of two B grades – and clearly a quite substantial number must have taken a university place on the strength of a doctored result.

Clearly, an examination which is, in any case, passed by some 60% of the entrants, and which is prepared to invent a special pass-grade for any of the next 15% of the candidature so long as they have at least 2 B grades among their A level marks, has lost any real power to discriminate; and it is not surprising that the Use of English paper ceased to be a required university entrance qualification in the early seventies.

There are various things that can be learned from this experiment: one is that an examination which is disliked, not only by the candidates and their teachers but also by some of the Boards required to administer it, is unlikely to have much credibility; another is that setting the standards of difficulty of an examination so as to make it effectively discriminating among the number of candidates while still passing the needed proportion is a skilled task; a third, which must not be overlooked, is that all the

^{1,2} Oxford Univ. Archive, ref. LE 34/52 (Oxford Local Examinations Office Papers 1965 Part 1)

candidates must have successfully taken O Level English language a little less than two years previously, yet were still capable of making the sort of errors of which the Chief Examiner complained. Concerning this last fact, there are numerous possible explanations, but the view that pupil opinion regarded English grammatical accuracy as a matter of concern only in English lessons, which could conveniently be forgotten as soon as one entered the science sixth, cannot be dismissed out of hand. If this was indeed the case, then it obviously lends strength to the argument that much grammatical or 'language' teaching was directed towards examination success, and was accepted in this light rather than as useful knowledge to be deployed in a variety of situations. In other words, there was a strong tendency for 'English Language' to be seen as an artificial rather than as a practical subject, and there was an unfortunate tendency for teaching methodology to reinforce this view, constrained as it was by the nature of School Certificate examinations, and by the early GCE papers, which followed the School Cert. model closely – some critics would say blindly – until the mid sixties. If the university authorities really desired to improve the level of literacy (in the rather rarified sense in which they used that word) among their undergraduates then they needed to start with a reform of the educational process involving teachers, not with a kind of super O level English language paper bolted on to a sixth form science course and scheduled for the fifth term. The idea failed because the method was wholly wrong: candidates who were not naturally able to produce accurate English could not be persuaded that it *mattered* ; and having escaped from the 'hoop-jumping' exercises inseparable from the general GCE course up to the age of 16 into the far more engaging pastures of specialist A level work they were intensely reluctant to be dragged back to them. This idea of getting pupils involved in what they are doing, as opposed to merely cramming up techniques, is at the root of most of the bitter opposition to examinations which has been referred to so often in this thesis; and even among those who have ceased to fight examinations in principle, and have engaged themselves instead to fighting to improve them, the same fundamental argument is to be heard – there needs to be a sense of common purpose and worth, shared by teacher and class, for real education to occur and genuine knowledge to be transmitted.

It is for this reason that the question of teacher representation on examination boards and, quite distinct and far more important, teacher influence on the content and structure of examination papers, is so important; and it is in the study of the process by which teachers began the transition from representation to influence that the conflict of opinion between George Bruce and John Pearce is particularly illuminating.

Bruce, as I have pointed out already, was writing very much as an examination board officer, aware of the complexities of the examination system as no outsider can be, and quietly proud of the way in which the boards mastered the difficulties and provided an efficient and smooth-running service. John Pearce "spent thirteen years teaching in grammar schools, and for most of that time was a GCE examiner at one or other level in more than one subject."¹ Where Bruce is emollient, Pearce tends toward the abrasive:

"My discontent with the kind of schooling I took part in, and with the kind of examining system that propped it up, grew steadily; but it was largely intuitive, and this book is an attempt to make these intuitions explicit."²

I shall return to the dissatisfaction of Pearce, and others, with the grammar school education of the fifties and sixties in my final chapter³; here I am more concerned with his reasons for feeling discontent "with the examining system which propped it up". It is not, I think, too fanciful to find a basic illustration of the difference between Bruce and Pearce in their initial glances back into the remotest history of public examinations:

"The University ran the centres and at the appropriate time a Presiding Examiner wearing academic dress and carrying the locked box containing the examination papers would arrive from Cambridge at the local railway station from where he might be escorted to the examination centre by the Mayor and Corporation."⁴

This is Bruce recalling the spirit of 1858 when "Cambridge was following Oxford in responding to petitions requesting.....help in the development of 'schools for the middle classes'",⁵ whereas Pearce finds it

"faintly shocking to read that one of the difficulties in the way of the formation of examining boards to certify pupils' attainment in the 1850s was the widespread belief that there were not enough good schools to justify the effort involved!"⁶

1 School Examinations, 1972, p vi

4 Secondary School Examinations, 1969, pp 78-79

2 Ibid.

5 Ibid. p 78

3 v.inf. pp 507-519

6 Op.cit. p 39

Bruce, at times, seems to be trying to advance two mutually exclusive arguments: firstly that teachers are already in control of GCE, at least so far as Ordinary Level is concerned; and secondly, that teachers are not trained or competent to run an examination system, have no real wish to do so, and are very happy to leave this business to the experts. Pearce, on the other hand, is arguing both that teachers have been carefully shut out from any real influence in the secretive world of examining, and that they have supinely been ready "to sign away their professional birthright for a mess of certificated pottage."¹ The truth may well embrace all these positions.

For example, Bruce writing on the then newly established CSE examination quotes from *Examinations Bulletin No 1* of the Secondary School Examinations Council and comments disapprovingly:

" 'It will be the responsibility of the teachers themselves to ensure that what is examined is what they want to teach; they will not be obliged to teach what someone else has decided to examine' from which it is clearly inferred that before the advent of the C.S.E. teachers had to teach what someone else decided to examine, a contention which the strength of teacher representation on the G.C.E. Committees completely belies." ²

"At the Ordinary Level, Chief Examiners are almost all practising teachers, contrary to the popular belief that they are supernumeraries out of touch with schools" ³

Bruce does admit, somewhat obliquely, that A level examinations are still firmly in the control of Universities when he says:

"In each subject, if the Moderators and [Principal]Examiners are considered together, there is a rule that school teachers should outnumber university teachers at the Ordinary Level, and the reverse applies to the Advanced Level." ⁴

Apply to Advanced Level, the reverse most certainly did. As with the instance referred to above in respect of Use of English, most if not all A level papers were set by dons, and reference to the Oxford University Archive makes it clear that it was the standard convention for the Chief Examiner to convene meetings of the Principals in his or her college rooms.⁵ Even at O level it is questionable whether the numerical superiority of the teachers amounted to control over the papers, as Bruce himself admits:

"University members often feel that the Ordinary Level examination belongs to the teachers and wish to leave it to them, but in spite of themselves

¹ Op.cit. p 175

² Op.cit. p 46

³ Ibid. p 20

⁴ Ibid. p 90

⁵ Oxford University Archive ref. LE 34 (Office Papers) *passim*.

they exert an influence far greater than their numbers would suggest. Many of the brightest and newest ideas come from the university members." ¹

Pearce sees the same reaction through different eyes.

"For although the GCE examiner....may believe himself to be the equal of his fellow examiners, in practice GCE examiners in meetings exhibit a marked degree of deference to their academic superiors. Where university and school teachers gather as examiners, the latter defer to the former, and the former tend to expect this ascription of authority. In a point of dispute or disagreement the deference can get in the way." ²

The explanation which Bruce offers in respect of subject committees is doubtless equally valid, and where it applied, would doubtless magnify the effect reported by

Pearce:

"The practice of accepting nominations from, for example, the Joint Four Teaching Associations and the National Union of Teachers receives general approbation, but sometimes disappoints, because such representatives may prove to be no more than professional committee men, perhaps of long standing as teachers but no longer full of enthusiasm and new ideas. It is comparatively rare to have interesting suggestions for experiment and change coming from teachers of this kind, and there is much to be said for choosing teacher members of committees on a personal basis although the critics might claim that this was nothing more than an excuse to pack them with teachers known to conform to the Board's policy." ³

The self-defensiveness of this final comment, coupled with the remark on O level

Chief Examiners:

"some members of the teaching associations have expressed the view that once a teacher becomes a Chief Examiner he crosses the floor from their party to become a competent hireling of those who pay him to examine." ⁴

hardly suggest that the generality of teachers felt that they controlled O level, or that they and the examination boards were 'on the same side'.

When Bruce is not trying to convince us that any real and meaningful control over examinations at O level is vested in the teaching profession, his conviction of the superiority of the boards' collective competence and expertise over the unfocussed demands of the profession for reform is apparent – and by no means unconvincing:

"An oft-repeated axiom in education during the last fifty years has been that examinations must follow the curriculum and not vice-versa.....The G.C.E. examining bodies have always been ready to conduct examinations on syllabuses more in accordance with the curriculum of schools than those they publish as the normal ones. Of course, if every school availed itself of this facility the demand could not be met.Nevertheless, this alarming prospect does not intimidate anyone because in spite of every attempt to publicize the existence of this facility few schools avail themselves of it. The two largest G.C.E. examining bodies have between them about twenty special

¹ Op.cit. p 20

² Op.cit. p 172

³ Op.cit p 19

⁴ Ibid. p 20

syllabuses and most of these relate to History or English Literature. It can hardly be said that the schools are deterred by the extra cost of an examination on a special syllabus, which is minimal and which is usually met by the local education authorities.

It is possible that most teachers do not have the confidence in themselves or the time, or even the ability to draw up syllabuses which compete with those of the G.C.E. examining bodies who are so careful to profit by the advice of selected teachers and can bring considerable resources and long experience to their aid in working out a good syllabus. Is there really nothing to be said for an examination which dictates the curriculum?" ¹

John Pearce had no doubt at all about the answer to the final question, but he was by no means so foolish as to question the argument that leads up to it:

"The GCE system has the great advantage of being supremely well run. In the context of a book which is hardly an apologia for public examinations it is pleasant to have no complaints about administrative inefficiency. This condition carries with it the embarrassment of being obliged to make severe criticisms of a system, not because it is a good system run badly, but because it is fundamentally a bad system which cannot be redeemed by the undoubted skill and efficiency of its administration." ²

Indeed, it is precisely the level of that skill and efficiency which is at the root of Pearce's main complaint against the system, because, in his view, it effectively invalidates the emphasis which Bruce seeks to place upon the number of schoolteachers upon each O level subject panel, ensuring that the real power is firmly vested in the permanent member of the board's staff who acts as subject officer:

"His task is to service the subject panels within his group of subjects, arrange the selection and appointment of examiners, and keep in motion the processes of preparing future papers, syllabuses and so on. His power derives from the fact that in all these panels and committees, he is the one full-time participant and the source of most relevant information, and he is continuously in operation while the panels may meet at most twice a year.radicals are apt to see the GCE subject-panel system a guarantee of a conservatism which teachers do not share, and the power of the board's officers as exercising obtuseness or blindness without regard for the educational considerations involved. It does not help either the GCE boards or their critics that Secretaries are on the whole disinclined to answer criticism, and when they do so they write in somewhat defensive terms." ³

It is at this point that Pearce enters upon the nucleus of his objection to the system. Not only are teachers who serve upon the committees daunted by their university colleagues and reduced very largely to the function of a rubber stamp by the superior knowledge and practical experience of the board's subject officer; but it is extremely difficult for anyone who might wish to voice dissatisfaction with a particular syllabus, or the papers set upon it, to find out how to set about the task of doing so.

¹ Op.cit. pp 24-25

² Op.cit. p.17

³ Ibid. pp 24-25

The one resource obviously available to the concerned teacher was to write a letter to his or her union, the substance of which would eventually be passed on to the subject panel; or to write direct to the Secretary of the Board. Even Bruce does not pretend that either method was likely to produce immediate satisfaction:

"Examining bodies encourage teachers to submit criticisms of their examinations. The Joint Four Teaching Associations and the N.U.T. send in their criticisms jointly and these are carefully considered because they represent the views of many teachers. ... Some of the criticisms may appear to their originators to receive no more than an evasive reply from the examiners, but teachers should not be unduly unhappy if the replies they receive are very much on the defensive. The papers for the next examination will show best what notice has been taken of their comments."¹

It is interesting to note that, on this point, Pearce and Bruce speak in almost identical terms, though, predictably, Bruce is at pains to put a protective gloss on the picture. Pearce's version of the probable response to any approach to the Boards reads simply:

"It does not help either the GCE Boards or their critics that Secretaries are on the whole disinclined to answer criticism, and when they do so they write in somewhat defensive terms."²

Exactly what kind of criticism did find its way through to the examiners and what responses were made will be examined in some detail in subsequent chapters dealing with the individual GCE papers in English at O and A level – I include here a brief sample of the kind of thing that teachers wrote to their unions about, and of the kind of answer they received. In 1962, the O level English language paper contained an exercise which required candidates to fill in the blanks in given sentences with compound words including the element 'water'. The complaint about this question read as follows:

"This question raised considerable criticism – in particular that 'water-shed' favoured students of Geography; that 'water-tight' had no relation to the *erection* of a tent; and that 'to be in low water' is a colloquialism no longer in current use."

The examiners, tongue very slightly in cheek as is not unusual, replied:

"We think that the implication that knowledge is divided into watertight compartments, so that anyone who had not studied Geography as a subject would not understand 'watershed' is not to be accepted. So far as 'water-tight' is concerned it must be remembered that the very best of tents, however waterproof the material, will not be watertight if it is not well erected. We find it impossible to accept the comment that the expression 'to be in low water' is not in current use."³

¹ Op.cit. pp 111-112

² Op.cit. p 25

³ Oxford Univ. Archive ref. LE Teachers Criticisms/Comments

While this is a trivial, if by no means atypical complaint, I remain unconvinced that the response given here would in any way justify the word "encourage" in Bruce's opening sentence. The self-defensive tone which he acknowledges is happily illustrated, but it is surely firmly at odds with any kind of encouragement in the normally received understanding of that word; and this contradiction is apparent throughout his insider account of the examination board at work. The picture which emerges is of a system seeking to give the impression of seeking teacher involvement and participation, while actually denying to outsiders any real influence or power. The justification for this in the mind of those who think like Bruce (and they are by no means confined to the ranks of professional examiners) is that the smoothly oiled machine of the examinations system, its virtually total and absolute reliability in terms of producing results which are comparable over standards and time, is dependent upon skilled and trained personnel, and would be irretrievably jeopardised if amateurs were allowed to get their hands on any lever or button more significant than a light switch.

The barely disguised patronage of Bruce's tone when he discusses the newly instituted CSE examination is explained by his conviction that examining is a craft, or perhaps a mystery, requiring an apprenticeship very different from that of teacher training:

"Even if the teacher knows what he wants to teach and intends to examine on it himself, rather than submit a special syllabus for approval, it does not follow that he can do this satisfactorily. In his teaching he knows what he is going to teach but when he has to construct an examination he must consider not only how much fact should be tested, how much understanding his pupils should show, what conclusions they should reach, what other qualities they should be called upon to display, but also what weight to attach to each.

Once he is clear on these points he must proceed to set a paper to test these elements and there lies the main difficulty because the setting of questions to test the desired quality in the right proportion is a highly skilled operation of which teachers have little knowledge. A teacher may succeed very well in teaching the very things he wants to teach, but his own tests may prove entirely misleading.The setting of a good question paper does not consist of writing out a few questions which come readily to mind and allowing the candidate to use them as pegs on which to hang almost anything he pleases. "1

There are, of course, teachers who would dissent from this last point, and hold that questions which encourage the candidate to write with enthusiasm about those aspects of the subject which have actively engaged his interest and his thoughts are far better than those which nail him firmly down to topics which he finds less worthwhile; but, by and

1 Op.cit. p 25

large, I suspect that most teachers would actually accept most of this. Examination boards are annoyingly remote, and they are certainly guilty from time to time of asking the wrong questions on the wrong subjects, but a desire to inhibit both of these qualities is some distance remote from a desire to take over their task. Despite the enthusiasm for the teacher control of CSE endorsed by Pearce, and for Mode 2 and 3 exams within that system, it remains a fact that the same opportunities were to be found inside the GCE and that only a tiny proportion of teachers bothered. When Bruce says, in the passage above, 'rather than submit a special syllabus for approval' he is referring to an option which he knew both to exist and to be almost totally ignored. To some extent, of course, this is because, like the 'encouragement' to submit criticisms, the facility was never widely promoted or advertised, and enthusiasts were given very little help in discovering what specific qualities in syllabus or specimen paper would ensure the board's approval or rejection. The twenty syllabuses to which Bruce refers¹ constitute a tiny minority of those administered by the boards, but they proved that those with sufficient determination and conviction about the needs of their pupils could establish a hand-tailored academic programme. And when such a syllabus was established, there is no doubt that the board took its responsibilities to the school which had created it with as much seriousness as it devoted to its standard examinations for several thousand candidates. Even more so than is the case with Use of English, the contribution of Mode 2 or 3 GCE papers is too insignificant to deserve inclusion in a chapter devoted to the detailed analysis of Ordinary Level English Literature, but the matter should not be ignored completely. I have not been successful in locating a file devoted to examinations of this kind, and suspect that the incidence was altogether too small to have warranted such a degree of official attention. An account of such an examination is, however, to be found in the random collection of material, bound in date order from back to front of large leather folios and entitled 'Office Papers'. It deals with a special literature paper administered in 1964 by the Head of the English department, not of a public or direct grant grammar school, but of a Secondary Modern in Slough. The pupils were required to deal with a syllabus containing 7 prose texts; 2 poems plus 2

¹ v.sup. p 154

short anthologies; and 5 dramatic texts. The paper required the candidates to answer 5 questions, one on each genre and the other two *ad lib.* – and there was also course work and an oral endorsement for those who passed the written paper. The function of the delegacy was to moderate proceedings, and to validate the results, which, in the case of successful candidates, would, of course, have been marked by the award of the usual Oxford Delegacy Certificate.

The school's recommendation after the written part of the proceedings was that out of thirty candidates, fifteen should be deemed to have passed, and seven should fail, while the remaining eight were listed as doubtful and referred to the judgement of the Delegacy Assessor, who sat in on the oral tests of nine of the candidates: the eight 'doubtfuls' and one pass candidate, presumably as a control. He approved the award of a pass to three of these, including the pass candidate. His report reads:

"It was quite obvious from the exam. scripts that those whom the school marked as failures could not be considered for the oral examination.

One interesting case was that of a boy whom the school had put last but one on the doubtful list. This boy was obviously of high ability and would undoubtedly do well in better company. The oral examination was worthwhile if only in discovering this candidate.

The whole experience seemed to be worthwhile. Both the Head and Mr Thompson [Head of Department] were much impressed with the care that the Delegacy had taken over their syllabus, written exam and oral exam. It was obvious too that they were impressed by the liberal attitude taken to them in their wish to experiment.It was also apparent that Mr Thompson, who embarked on this scheme thinking possibly that he might teach the Delegacy a great deal about the liberal conduct of examinations himself learned far more than he expected. He was kind enough to say so, and obviously meant it." ¹

Clearly the whole episode reflects reasonably well on the Delegacy, and as a public relations exercise might have been turned to their account and used to encourage other schools to experiment similarly, as Pearce believes that genuine professionals should wish to. At the same time, one wonders whether the Delegacy learned anything at all, such as, for instance, why Mr Thompson had held the original opinion attributed to him in the first place. Convincing him of the error of his ways seems, however, to have been quite enough for Oxford: there was no attempt to capitalise on the success of the event or to inform others of the circumstances, which are buried in obscurity.

¹ Oxford University Archive ref. LE 34/53 (Office Papers 1965 Part 1)

The situation then, some twenty years after the introduction of GCE, is clear – the examination boards have established a reputation for efficiency, and despite some early opposition from employers, GCE Certificates have become an accepted currency in academic achievement. The externally administered examination has become in a very real sense the ultimate goal of school leavers at 16, and unquestionably the appropriate target for those staying on to 18 and the passport to University. The raising of the school leaving age has substantially increased the percentage of fifth year pupils looking for qualifications, and the introduction of the CSE examination, aimed at the segment of the school population immediately below the top 20% for whom O level had been designed, seemed apt to fill that need. Overlap between the two examination systems and the problems and costs of dual entry, reinforced very probably by the sense that the GCE boards were seen by many teachers as remote, authoritarian and even arrogant, had led the Schools Council to decree that the two should eventually be combined into a single system; much to the satisfaction of those, like John Pearce, who saw in this a move towards effective teacher control such as CSE had already developed, proving in the process that, at least for the more limited scope of CSE examinations, the tasks of examining of which George Bruce makes so much were not beyond the grasp of the serving teacher.

There were, however, questions being asked about standards and, indeed, about the principles on which those standards were predicated. John Pearce pointed out that

"There are relatively few subjects in the secondary curriculum where a candidate can secure an examination pass by virtue of his practical performance if his written or 'theory' paper is weak – certainly not in the sciences or languages. Nor can many of the so-called practical subjects be passed in this way – and here a weak theory paper can bring down even the strongest practical performer. In order to succeed in education in England, the student must show a disposition for 'pure' forms of knowledge, and a competence in the forms of language in which such knowledge is represented and discussed."¹

It is interesting, but by no means entirely surprising, to note that Bruce sees this argument entirely from the other side:

"Time and again candidates fail in Science subjects at the Advanced Level because of weakness in the practical test and consequently lose, at least for twelve months, a university place although their schools will testify that

¹ Op.cit. pp 7-8

they were good at practical work; a fact borne out later by their distinguished practical work at the next examination. Even a good candidate can fail to do himself justice once in a while and his whole fate should not be made to depend on three hours of examination work once in a year."¹

Most people who think seriously about examinations would be inclined to say 'Amen' to that – but it takes the peculiar tunnel vision of the professional examiner to see this fault in respect of practical tests.

Pearce was also concerned about the fact that the "success" of candidates at GCE was unnecessarily limited, and seemed to pride itself on the proportion who did not make the grade.

"There is no doubt whatever that an examination which employs a category labelled 'fail' is a norm-referenced assessment. There are many other respects in which GCE at both levels is a norm-referenced system. As long as its dominant feature is to select, to differentiate, an examination must be of this kind. If candidates do not come out of the examination graded and sorted, the examination cannot be used for social sorting. It becomes useless for the purpose of putting educational pegs into occupational holes."²

This, like the earlier passage from Pearce on the emphasis on 'pure' or 'theoretical' knowledge, is part of an attack on a fundamental weakness of the old School Cert. and Higher Cert. system which GCE took over and maintained – the same weakness which led to his emphasis on the part played by university personnel in examination administration which Bruce tries, rather unavailingly, to play down. To Pearce, and to many others, what it meant was the sacrifice of the interests of the majority, of their educational prospects, even of their potential, in order to establish the intellectual superiority of the minority of academic inclination and competence. In Pearce's own words:

"the priority of pure knowledge is educationally misleading and the focus on the minority who will become academic specialists and their ostensible requirements is bad for the minority as well as for the majority."³

It is an attack which today has very largely won its victory. GCSE examinations have only a tiny percentage of 'failures', many of whom simply failed to turn up for all the papers, or failed to hand in the required modules of coursework. Examination results today are measures of degrees of success rather than a distinction between sheep and goats. But there are still elements of the old prejudice in favour of 'pure' rather than

¹Op.cit. p 110

² Op.cit. p 11

³ Ibid. p15

'applied' studies, and not merely in mathematics. There is still a shortage of applicants for engineering courses, because engineering is not in England, as it is in many other countries, seen as a prestige job. There is still a tendency for students of average ability to choose an A level course at which they will not do particularly well rather than a GNVQ course at which they might well do considerably better. There is still a tendency to cling to "the gold standard" of A level, rather than face the prospect of a combined national certificate which would equate competences of different types in preference to giving a spurious elevation to the purely academic. The fact that so many more students nowadays are staying on in the sixth form or at F E colleges for post-compulsory qualifications, and that an enormously increased proportion of 18 year olds are continuing with education at degree level is a clear indication that the old values were based on an altogether false assumption about the distinction between the "top twenty per cent" and the rest. The implications of this false assumption on the educational standards of this country will be examined in more detail in my final chapter: here it is important merely to note that the challenge to the old values was being clearly heard at the end of the sixties, and that the examination boards had not yet seriously reckoned with it. They were not inflexible – as we shall see in the detailed studies of the development of the various English papers, changes could and did take place over this period – but there was an instinctive resistance. The concerns of George Bruce at this time were not with steady growth in the number of aspirants for GCE qualifications at both levels, and therewith an inevitable broadening of the social class and background of candidates, but with the unreliability of the grading system of his examinations as discriminators:

"Five grades are recorded on certificates and the difference between being classified in one grade rather than another may mean being offered a university place or not. All may depend on the turn of a single mark. The most critical points come between grades B, C, and D; it is at these points that there is most need for discrimination, but it is just at these points that the candidates are most closely bunched.Grade D spans only 50–54 and Grade C 55–59. Thus the difference between a Grade B and a Grade D may be only six marks. the demanding of a particular grade as the price of admittance to a university course is indefensible." ¹

¹ Op.cit. pp 107-108

Again, a vast majority of those concerned with education would agree with his conclusion, but it is disturbing that his pre-occupation with ensuring that the right students get into university, or more probably that universities get the right students, should so dominate his thinking that it comes in at the beginning and end of his paragraph on grading. It would have been more reassuring had he been contemplating a revision in the marking schemes to prevent the bunching which he describes – by, for example, reducing the range of thirty marks available for Grade A, which enabled the universities to discriminate very finely between the brilliant, the outstanding and the merely very good. It would have been encouraging had he been thinking of how the papers might be improved in such a way as to bring out the best in candidates at the lower end of the ability range, instead of achieving the fairly obvious task of demonstrating that they were not so good at jumping through a particular class of hoop as those at the upper end. This resistance in the early years of the GCE to any practical recognition and acknowledgement of the underlying social implications of the 1944 Act, and the apparently automatic assumption that it was desirable to maintain all the characteristics of School Certificate English papers under the new banner, is, at first encounter, something of a surprise. John Pearce, in his later book *Every English Teacher*, written conjointly with Anthony Adams in 1974, puts his finger on the explanation as succinctly as usual:

"Quite the most distinctive feature of GCE English work.....until a little over a decade ago, was that it was largely confined to grammar and public schools. For many pupils, the English curriculum in those schools could be taken for granted, and could rely on, a degree of linguistic competencewhich the comprehensive school of today finds itself having to create.the model of English teaching which was a formative experience for most of today's teachers cannot be expected to work in today's classrooms. This is not necessarily a criticism of O-level itself. Rather is it a criticism of applying to a quite new situation the assumptions and practices which were well adapted to a quite different one.The way in which historical change could cause an examination to become out of step with its clientèle and its original intentions is well illustrated by the case of English Literature. It settled very early into the procedure of questioning candidates very closely on a small number of prescribed books, usually three at Ordinary Level. The assumption was at the time that the three books would be representative of, and only a small part of, the wider reading naturally practiced by the candidate. However, as the population of secondary schools grew,what happened in practice was that most candidates concentrated on the set books to the exclusion of all else. What originated as a sampling developed into a memory grind, and the enormous increase in

numbers taking the Ordinary Level examination in the 1950s and 1960s accentuated the difficulty of bring bringing about improvements." ¹

In the sense that an improvement would have meant a return to the ideal that candidates could and should be expected to read a considerable amount of literature, the bulk of which would be left to the discretion of their teachers or even the pupils themselves, while the examiners produced an estimate of their literary knowledge and critical competence from a 'representative sample', it was, of course, never to be achieved and was always a forlorn hope, save for a small proportion of self-motivated pupils. Instead, emphasis switched to the task of persuading the examiners to move their concentration on the three books from a style appropriate for "detailed study" to that which would concentrate on demonstrating personal involvement and enthusiasm for the texts themselves. This task of trying to create an atmosphere in which the effective techniques for successful English teaching and the rarified assumptions and practices of the examiners could co-exist is, of course, exactly what the teachers in correspondence with Fred Inglis were describing in the last chapter,² and we must not forget the description of the *disappointment* that their pupils felt in their examination, or why Inglis called it a betrayal.

For English teachers then, the problem of seeing teaching and examining together, of teaching in a context in which the examination represents the end of the course and a measure of achievement, was not so much mastering the skills of the examiner and learning how to frame questions which would provide an appropriate portion of reward for the various learning skills involved, as of finding a way to inspire their pupils to a genuine interest and involvement in the subject – to a real enthusiasm for thought and expression about it and active participation with it – which would not be totally at odds with an external examination system and which would not make that examination seem a let-down and an irrelevance at the end of the course. Progressively, if slowly, the examination boards moved to meet the new requirements, opening out questions and removing hurdles which at this remove seem to have been remarkably artificial, but whose retention was still supported vigorously at the time. This is not in any sense a lowering of standards, but an adjustment of approach in order to provide a challenge

¹ Op.cit. pp 5-6

² v.sup. pp 75-79

which might reasonably provoke a display of subject-related potential from a markedly less restricted candidature.

It was as a logical extension of this that writers on English teaching began to concentrate less on denouncing examinations as the enemy of good classroom practice, and more upon taming the beast and making a useful servant out of it.

Michael Paffard, in *Thinking About English*, was unable to satisfy himself that, essentially, literature was examinable:

"Information about literature...can be taught...in a straightforward way and there are no peculiar problems involved in examining candidates' knowledge about literature.With more advanced students other relevant knowledge about literature is a reasonable requirement but, at any level, knowledge about literature is subsidiary to appreciation, taste, the ability to read perceptively and personal judgement and discrimination. Whether valid and reliable means of testing these capacities can be devised is a much more doubtful matter." ¹

He was, however, able to detect some movement nearer to his ideal, or in the image he actually used: "the picture that I have sketched is a dismal one, but it would be wrong not to notice some chinks of light in the general gloom." ² My personal opinion is that he has, in any case, rather exaggerated the gloom, since I believe it is possible to teach literature in such a way as at least to awaken, in those individual members of the class susceptible to such suggestions, an awareness of the importance (and the joy) of the highly personal skills which he identifies; while at the same time preparing the class as a whole for the rather more limited demands of the examination. I am sure, however, that in the examinations themselves he is absolutely correct in identifying significant points of improvement. In his words, these are firstly:

"....a good student should reveal something of his perceptiveness as a reader by his ability to comment on unseen passages of prose or poetry, particularly if the necessity for speed is reduced: practical criticism of this kind is now a part, and an increasing one, of many literature examinations. Secondly, mode three in the CSE makes it possible for course work written about literature to be marked internally by teachers and submitted to the examiners.....Thirdly, examiners have become more adventurous in choosing works for study, particularly recent ones, outside the long established canon.Fourthly, some examiners have recognized the desirability of testing the breadth of a candidate's general reading.Finally, some GCE boards now allow candidates at A level to submit some creative writing in verse or prose not done under examination conditions and endorse their certificates accordingly." ³

¹ Op.cit. p 87

² Ibid. p 90

³ Ibid. pp 90-91

One further glimmer of light that he would certainly have acknowledged had its first instance occurred in time, was the decision to allow candidates to bring their texts into the examination room. As it is, he can only denounce examiners for their "inexplicable reluctance to make this highly desirable reform."¹ It is, of course, true that this last reform has not proved an unmixed blessing. In this instance, however, the problem perhaps should have been foreseen: a considerable number of candidates, knowing from the beginning that they would have their books with them, make no real effort to familiarise themselves with the content, and thus either spend far too long trying to find references, or abandon the effort and make even less use of supportive quotation than they would have done when dependent upon memorized chunks of the text. Perhaps the moral is that no reform can ever be an unmixed blessing, and that the progressive development of the first four of the reforms welcomed by Paffard (the fifth has not developed at all) have not improved things as far as he supposed that they would.

What cannot be denied, however, is that they made at least some improvement, and that examinations in literature are no longer as stereotyped, as predictable, and as totally restricted to matters of fact appropriate to a standardized and objective mark scheme, as Paffard describes.

It is, perhaps, in the light of these improvements that later works to guide the newly qualified teacher (and those of greater experience who had erred and strayed from their way) are able to adopt a more positive and hopeful note. In *The Effective Teaching of English*,² that note is set early:

"I love English. I love sharing things that I've enjoyed with others. My relationships with the pupils are the most important things. I want them to like English. I want them to get the enthusiasm"³

and is maintained more or less throughout:

"I believe that the first principle in the teaching of English was, is, and will always be, ENJOYMENT. As long as the system demands it, we must clearly realise the pupils' full potential as regards exams. But, nowadays more than ever, we must try to create a situation in which they will ENJOY taking part in debate and discussion; ENJOY producing a piece of lovely written work; ENJOY discussing a poem; ENJOY having a good read; ENJOY having a spelling battle and, above all, ENJOY words. From this comes my second principle: I must begin teaching each year as if I had never taught before. Therefore all previous materials are put aside,

¹ Op.cit. p.90

² ed. Protherough, Atkinson and Fawcett, 1989

³ Op.cit. p 5

because, if the pupils are to enjoy the lessons, so must I, and if I am going over the same material in the same way year after year, I shall be bored and boring." ¹

This seems to me to be entirely the correct approach: examinations are recognized as a necessary part of the system, but neither the most significant nor to be agonized over for their imperfections.

Of course, not all the quotations from serving teachers mustered in *The Effective Teaching of English* are so infectiously enthusiastic – the energy sapping influences of the school system are also apparent:

"The pupils almost imposed a traditional teaching style upon me. They seemed to want to be given notes, to be tested, to be told rather than to offer opinions of their own. Consequently it was difficult at first to do as I had wanted and had planned." ²

It is a very fortunate teacher who has never inherited a class from someone guilty of that kind of pupil abuse: fortunately the effects are not irreversible. One notices with relief the words 'almost' and 'at first' in that account, and they tie in with the book's opening quotation from Kohl's *On Teaching* of 1977 on the motivation of entrants to the profession, that they "are becoming teachers to negate the wounds they received in school." ³ There is no shortage of supportive evidence for this assertion:

"English was always my own favourite subject, but I cannot remember any particular instance of being inspired or enlightened: rather of a constant sense of feeling that opportunities were being missed, that there was much more to be said, that my classmates were being deprived of the real joy of the subject, and, finally, not only that I could teach English better myself, but that I had a vocation to do so." ⁴

More important, however, to this chapter even than this evidence of a revived spirit of enthusiasm among English teachers, is the clear understanding that the monolithic traditionalism of the examination system was itself crumbling, and that the new atmosphere in the classroom was penetrating to the examination papers themselves.

"Some years ago your assessment of students' work in the fourteen and fifteen years age range would have mirrored your expectation of the modes followed by external examiners. With the help of published examiners' reports you would have advised pupils 'the examiner will want a more organised opening paragraph' or 'you must have a reference or quotation to back up every point you make about Lady Macbeth.' As examining styles changed (from analytic to impression to criterion-based), so teachers learned to adapt." ⁵

1 Op.cit. p 158

4 *Cytringian Farewell*, 1995, p 276

2 Ibid. p 25

5 Op.cit. p 164

3 Op.cit. p 15

As seems inevitably to be the case, the movement of the examining boards toward the ethos of the classroom, the greater willingness of examiners to evaluate an opinion rather than to measure it against received wisdom, was not an unmitigated mercy. As one enemy to free expression pulled back, so another advanced: no sooner had examinations begun on the journey toward mirroring rather than dictating the curriculum than the teachers' historic (if nominal) control of the curriculum was threatened.

"Because of its wider role, many other groups will have a legitimate interest in what takes place in English: parents, industrialists, managers, institutions of higher education, the media, politicians, curriculum theorists – and not forgetting the children themselves. Those interests will not always necessarily be helpful or enlightened, as the Inspectorate have discovered. Problems can arise as soon as any of these groups attempt to translate the standards *they* value, *their* principles, into universal curricular objectives for any age, and particularly when it is proposed to measure the attainment of those objectives. A school's English curriculum has traditionally grown out of the ideas and the activities of a group of teachers with different experiences, values and expectations, trying to formulate a policy unique to their situation. That has now changed abruptly, with the coming of the National Curriculum and its assumption that all subjects can be codified and assessed according to the same pattern. The Publication of *English in the National Curriculum* marked an essentially managerial attempt to tidy up varieties of practice into coherent, if artificial shape: four key stages, five attainment targets and ten levels of attainment."¹

This scenario, of course, takes us beyond the period which I have elected to study, (though I shall return to it in the Conclusion to this thesis) and beyond what I have called the watershed of 1988. Teachers entering the profession today are faced with a radically different working environment from that which prevailed during the years examined in this thesis, and indeed from that which characterised part at least of their own schooldays. Perhaps the last 'guidebook' for teachers written before the revolution, and conceived within the context that informs my approach to the subject, was Robert Protherough's *Teaching Literature for Examinations*, published three years earlier in 1986. Appropriately enough for a work dealing with the subject which, above all others, relies upon personal reaction and response to the stimulus provided by the syllabus, this book incorporates the feelings and reactions of O and A level students to their studies, as well as the more familiar responses of those who teach them; together with some insights into the disparities between the published intentions of examiners and their actual reaction to scripts; in an attempt to create a greater correlation between

¹ Op.cit. p 31

aspiration and achievement on the part of those engaged, both in the teaching of English and in the setting of papers to measure their progress, who are convinced of the worth and value of what they have set out to do, but who have never been entirely certain of the validity of the outcome. At one level, of course, the answer is obvious – cease to examine English literature: the act of examining is incompatible with the qualities of the subject and inimical to a proper approach on the part of the teacher. This argument has been advanced in one form or another ever since the days of Matthew Arnold, and none of the undoubted improvements to examination methodology in that time has silenced it, nor does it seem likely that any conjectural future modifications will succeed on a system which is essentially designed to measure, select, grade and classify the work of candidates under pressure: terms which are all at odds with an area of learning which places a premium on reflection, deep personal thought, and emotional response. For me personally, the problem was summed up years ago by a fourteen year old who failed to hand in a homework essay on Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country* and defended herself with the words: "This book is about something that matters. I can't write an essay on it – it made me cry!" It is, perhaps, an illustration of the real *lacrimae rerum* of the situation, that, four years later, a passage set for comment from *A Man for all Seasons* had the same effect, but without in any way inhibiting her from completing her A level paper with complete success. A E Housman observed in the course of his lecture, *The Name and Nature of Poetry*, that he could no more define poetry than a terrier can define a rat, but that he thought that both of them recognised the object by the symptoms which it provoked, such as a shiver down the spine:

"there is another which consists in a constriction to the throat and a precipitation of water to the eyes."¹

There is no other classroom subject in which such reactions are in any way to be expected, still less to be regarded as evidence of a real success in communication at the personal level. Indeed, therein lies one of the hidden dangers of the subject. All really good English teachers must be personally familiar with the symptom, and I suspect that a large number would hesitate to teach a text which they knew to be liable to produce that effect upon them.

¹ Op.cit., 1933, p 47

Sometimes the motive for rejection of a personal favourite work is disguised – "I never teach books I really love because I can't bear to read the unfeeling rubbish the worst pupils would produce" – but the problem remains the same. It is not just the difficulty of examining subjects which arouse the emotions which is the issue here; there is also a difficulty in teaching them. I personally doubt whether a teacher who was moved to tears by a particular passage in front of a class would lose respect in the process; certainly not if the respect of the class was worth having; but it is none the less a risk which most of us would hesitate to take, certainly below an A or S level group. And this inhibition or restraint is itself a barrier to the concept of full communication of what literature is for, but, clearly, not so substantial a barrier as is the clinical reduction of the proceedings to an examination mark and a grade on a Certificate.

For those who find any discussion of examinations in literature ending at this point, and who dismiss accordingly any argument for their retention with all the scorn of Clermont D'Ambois assessing the claims of the Monsieur to nobility:

" You did no princely deeds
Ere you were born, I take it, to deserve it;
Nor did you any since that I have heard;
Nor will do ever any as all think"; ¹

there is nothing more to be said. Fortunately Robert Protherough and the teachers and pupils who have assisted in this approach to teaching literature for examinations still see some point in seeking to avoid such pitfalls as can be recognised in advance, and in attempting to introduce some additional safeguards for the future.

Some of these may fairly be described as obvious:

"Some sixth-formers who were taught by three different members of staff, each of whom introduced a different book, complained that at the end of the third week all three teachers set essays that had to be written over the same weekend." ²

Beyond the offered answer of improved co-ordination by the staff concerned, there remain two questions which I would have raised: why did the sixth formers concerned not complain immediately, at least to the third member of staff if not the second, rather than wait for the opportunity afforded by Robert Protherough's research; and

¹ George Chapman *The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois*, I.i.284-287

² Op.cit. p 23

why did any one of the three expect to get a reasonable essay on a set book written over a weekend? The relationship between teacher and class necessary for the sort of discussion implicit in the subject matter should surely preclude any embarrassment about pointing out a clash of commitments; and setting aside the fact that many sixth-formers may wish, or need, to take Saturday employment, there is also the fact that the weekend provides the only unbroken days in term-time for any kind of social activity, within the family or with friends. There is an elementary demand on teachers to work in co-operation with their students as individuals with personal needs and wishes as well as devotees at a shrine of learning, and one of the first rules is not to act as though one had some divine right to first call on their time. As the Head of an English Department I made it a rule that, from the third year up, the 'handing-in-by' date of any written homework should be not less than a full week from the date that it was set. All too often, the inflexibilities of the examination system turn into a justification, or an excuse, for the greater inflexibilities of the teacher. As Protherough puts it "as though the real-life constraints of examinations are not enough, some teachers create imaginary constraints"¹ and he quotes from Douglas and Dorothy Barnes' *Versions of English* :

"English teachers frequently lay the blame for their use of a more restrictive pedagogy in the fifth form upon examination demands, but here some teachers seem to have forged their own manacles since the examination appears (at least on the surface) to be more enlightened than the teaching."²

This level of 'double-talk' or 'double-think' is not confined to relations between teachers and pupils, but is also to be found in those between examiners and schools:

" 'A sensitive and informed personal response is hoped for, but what will be assessed is the ability to communicate it.'The boards seem to be saying to teachers: We are keen that your students should enjoy reading and respond to it personally, but in examining them we shall have to confine ourselves to assessing how far they display certain skills and abilities. Those abilities are perceived as the literary ones rated low by teachers, but that notion of literariness is rarely defined. In one recent guide for the JMB almost all the examiners' expectations (with their implied aims) stress *literary* abilities in question-begging, circular terms: 'the setter will expect candidates to have read and understood literature as literature'; 'candidates are expected to explore literary aspects in order to achieve the higher grades'; examiners expect candidates to appreciate texts in literary terms'."³

¹ Op.cit. p 21

² Ibid.

³ Ibid. p 13

Against this emphasis on the cognitive areas of literary work as the assessment objectives for examiners, teachers, Protherough tells us, place the emphasis elsewhere:

"Malcolm Yorke found that English teachers, whatever the age group with which they were concerned, rated a cluster of affective aims (concerned with enjoyment, personal response, widening of experience) as overwhelmingly the most important. Cognitive aims, learning *through* books, were perceived as much less significant, and those concerned with specifically literary objectives (developing critical ability, widening knowledge of conventions and techniques, awareness of literary history) were rated the least important of all." ¹

The attitudes of the students, however, were more complex and less easy to pigeon-hole.

"Asked 'What do you see as the chief benefits you gain from studying literature?' many of the O-level sample mentioned several, and only about 3% said 'none'. However, the proportions of different responses were interesting. Over 80% of the sample chose to mention specifically literary advantages (reading with more discrimination or comprehension, improving in technical analysis); some 30% specified other curricular benefits (mostly linguistic, but also including help with other subjects or towards a career, such as 'Having an O-level in English Literature proves to prospective employers that you have an understanding of written work'); but only 15% pointed to any personal affective benefits (pleasure and enjoyment, increased self-understanding, or a widening of experience). This neat reversal of teachers' expressed priorities suggests that their major aims are hardly being achieved at sixteen." ²

It also suggests, to me at least, that too many people are being entered for the examination in English Literature. Motivations such as help with other subjects or towards a future career are evidence of a student population convinced by the national dependency upon qualifications, and tie in better with concentration on statistics concerning the percentage of the age cohort with 'five or more O level passes at grade C or better', than with any real concern for English Literature as such. It is, and was at the time this book was written, a fairly standard practice for comprehensive schools to enter as near to the entire fifth year as possible for a qualification in English Language, or English where the examination in question makes no discrimination, but no more than half for a separate paper in Literature. Where this practice is followed, however, it is again the practice to select the half who will do the literature course not on any particular aptitude for it, but on a perception of general intelligence, of the ability to pick up an extra qualification; on the same fundamental principle, indeed, as

¹ Op. cit. p 12

² Ibid. p 14

might nowadays determine whether a pupil should be entered for Double or Single award GCSE Science. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that no great personal affection for the subject is to be detected in the majority of those thus dragooned into reading the required set texts over a period of two years, and that

".....nearly 30 % made negative or critical comments. Some of them had apparently never greatly enjoyed reading, and had not changed their opinions:Several felt that the imposed syllabus had destroyed enjoyment...'The course put me off reading at home because I am so busy reading and learning books that I don't like.'" ¹

If we are going to claim the vital importance of a personal response to the stimulus of literature, we must not expect it from those who are disposed to resent that stimulus as an imposition. It would be interesting to ask the same question on perceived benefits of the entry for mathematics, which like English language is almost a compulsory subject; and for history and French which are nominally options, but where the concept of 'option' tends to be more honoured in the breach than the observance. It would also be interesting to know the correlation between the 15% acknowledging a personal affective benefit and the proportion of O level English Literature candidates going on to take the subject at A level. If that figure is higher than the 15% it is distinctly worrying, but if lower, it probably represents a vindication of the teachers' commitment to their cause.

What is more to the point is that the response of the actual A level sample in Protherough's survey came up with "a strikingly different pattern":

"Three-quarters of the students mentioned personal benefits: pleasure and enjoyment, self-understanding and awareness of life, widening of experience through empathy and so on. Over half suggested curricular learning of one kind and another: gaining knowledge or information, extending vocabulary or powers of expression, help for other subjects and material for thought. A similar number expressed ideas that were more directly literary: increasing their critical skills, extending their ability to tackle more difficult works, reading more sensitively, or becoming more aware of the literary heritage. It is important that while some of these students suggested a single benefit derived from their courses, the majority mentioned two (or occasionally three), and these were normally related to *different* clusters of objectives. It would seem that at this level there is not a major discrepancy between the perceptions of students and the aims of those who teach them (or, more cynically, that by the self-selected sixth-form stage they have mostly been well conditioned)." ²

The cynical footnote is honest, and a typical reaction from the period at which it was

¹ Op.cit p 15

² Ibid. p 14

written – a period which coined the aphorism that if you could see a light at the end of the tunnel it was almost certainly an oncoming train. These are, in fact, encouraging responses even allowing for the Pavlovian effect, and they help to support Protherough's contention at the end of the Introduction to this book:

"Is it possible to have a secondary English programme that will cater for students with very different needs, encourage the enjoyment and extension of reading, and still produce 'good results'? The remainder of this volume claims that the answer can be 'yes' and outlines some practical proposals for achieving this."¹

I have no doubt that the claim is justified, and that the ten years that have intervened between that book and this thesis provides evidence to support that view. The 'practical proposals' which follow can be more effectively examined in the chapters devoted to a detailed analysis of O and A level literature papers over the GCE period where I believe it can be shown that some of them have been effectively implemented.

I also believe that the fact that those questions were being asked of teachers and students, and being answered in the way described, is yet further evidence of the general tenet of this thesis – that while there is and has always been room for improvement in both preparation for, and performance at, examinations in English, there is nothing in the relationship between classroom teachers and external examiners to justify the argument that there has been an actual decline in standards.

¹ Op.cit. p 11

CHAPTER THREE

Standards, Comparability, and Statistics

"The setting of standards in Advanced level examinations is a complex and difficult process, which depends to a large extent upon professional judgement; it can never be completely precise. Similarly, there are no absolute measures which can be applied to compare these standards, particularly where examinations in a subject may have some quite different features."

OFSTED, *GCE Advanced Level Examinations*, HMSO, 1996

"On the basis of the evidence considered, it is concluded that the CSE and GCE O-level examinations are equally reliable and that the level of reliability attained is as high as might reasonably be expected. Nevertheless, in common with all assessments of human beings, the results from these examinations are far from being perfectly precise."

A S Willmott and D L Nuttall, *The Reliability of Examinations at 16+*, 1975

"The annual statistics of the DES are constantly being mined for evidence in the debate about standards, often with a great deal of statistical tomfoolery."

Tyrell Burgess and Elizabeth Adams, *Outcomes of Education*, 1980

In the Preface to this thesis I made the point that the business of awarding grades to examination candidates is, in the vast majority of subjects and levels of attainment, not susceptible to statistical verification or scientific analysis, resembling less the litmus-paper tests of a laboratory than the procedures of wine-tasters and whisky blenders.¹ Yet since the next three chapters will concentrate on the task of eliciting a clear picture of the progress of the standard of requirement of pupil knowledge and capacity in English Language and Literature at GCE Ordinary Level, and in English at GCE Advanced level, by a process of verbal analysis, or, in other words, by a demonstration of my own personal skills as a wine-taster, I thought it appropriate to devote this intervening chapter to a commentary on such evidence as is available from the application of more obviously scientific and statistical methodology to the matter of academic standards.

Of course, the point is also made in the Preface that "standards" is a word used to cover a multitude of meanings², and that when the word is deployed in an educational context it is by no means always clear precisely what the user means by it, or even that he means anything precise at all; a point that has been made many times previously:

"'Standards' is a term which is probably more loosely used than any other in education. When we talk about standards we may be referring to levels of attainment in basic skills such as reading and maths, or levels of

¹ v.sup. p 9

² v.sup. p 13

attainment in a much wider range of school activities; we may be talking about standards of provision, e.g. the number of teachers and books per child, or we may be talking about levels of behaviour, dress and other social phenomena. Thus, in the narrowest sense, standards can mean level of performance on a test, and in the widest sense can encompass notions of social and moral behaviour and discipline as well as educational attainment. It is when defined most widely, moving into the area of general values, that it is most prone to subjective and anecdotal use. The link between the narrow and wide uses of the term is tenuous, but one that is often made. In the minds of the general public, a decline in standards of dress and 'moral' behaviour, which may well be due to changing social and cultural conventions, is likely to be linked to a perceived decline in educational standards. The fact that many members of the public seem to feel that educational standards are falling (despite evidence to the contrary from, e.g. the DES School Leavers Survey) is one to which educationists must face up. In the current climate, when consumerism is the dominating educational ideology, parents', employers' and politicians' opinions about standards are vitally important."¹

An interesting, if somewhat disturbing, manifestation of this growing public conviction as to the decline in educational standards was observable in the summer of 1996, at a time when the publication of the SCAA Report *Standards in Public Examinations 1975 to 1995*, usually known as 'Standards over Time', was imminently expected. On Monday July 29th. 1996, nearly three weeks before the publication of the summer's A level results, the *Guardian* published an article under the headline Exams now 'easier than 20 years ago'. Despite the weasel inverted commas, and a progressive change of emphasis as the article develops, the opening paragraph is unequivocal:

"The most comprehensive review yet of GCSE and A level results has confirmed that the examinations are easier than they were twenty years ago"

Those to whom the 1996 results happened to be of major significance, and who saw them thus devalued before publication would hardly have been comforted by a close reading of the full text in which subsequent extracts substantially modified the impact of this assertion, as well as casting doubts upon the writer's grasp of his material. The fundamental indictment, echoing as it did what seemed to have become an annual and determined onslaught on the validity of contemporary examination results and public achievements, would be likely to remain impressed upon the mind of the reader, unless he were reading with some professional knowledge of the subject matter and an interest in accuracy in comments upon it.

¹ From Caroline Gipps, "The debate over standards and the uses of testing", *British Journal of Educational Studies*, Vol. 26, No.1, pp 104-118, reprinted in *Judging Standards and Effectiveness in Education*, ed. Moon with Isaac and Powney, 1990, pp 32-33.

It is interesting to compare the interpretation of what is clearly a common source by the *Guardian* and by the *Times Educational Supplement* four days later. In a much less prominent position, and with a much less imperative headline: 'No firm line on grade inflation', the T.E.S. observed:

"The Government inquiry into whether exam standards have declined over the last 20 years is unlikely to produce firm conclusions. Early analysis of the work of subject experts examining papers and candidates' scripts suggests that the final report will contain only tentative suggestions. The study, carried out jointly by SCAA and OFSTED will not be published until the end of October, after this year's GCSE and A-Level results. However, the research has been hampered by the scarcity of scripts. In subjects such as maths, the question papers are an indicator of the kind of standard required. In other areas, particularly English and history, the task is difficult without scripts."

Armed with this interpretation, it is easy to reconstruct the *Guardian* article; and to be fair to it – since the *Guardian* is by no means the first newspaper to come to mind as an exemplar of persistent over-simplification and misrepresentation on educational matters – the article does contain all the necessary material to make the reconstruction a fairly straightforward affair.

The writer continues from the opening already quoted as follows:

"Results of the investigation.....suggest it is now easier than it was 20 years ago to get passes and high grades in core subjects such as maths and science. ...inquiry advisers found questions on this year's exam papers were less challenging than previous years, and students are given too much assistance to ensure they pass."

The phrases "now easier than it was" and "this year's exam papers" give a typically journalistic but unwarranted immediacy to the article; in point of fact, as the article goes on to make perfectly clear, "this year's papers", i.e. those for 1996, were no part of the investigation which

"involved 40 experts examining papers from 1975, 1985, and 1995 to determine if less is now expected of candidates. In mathematics the inquiry will identify algebra, calculus and trigonometry as key areas where "grade inflation" has led to some candidates being awarded higher marks than they deserve. In chemistry, syllabuses have been cut, so demanding less of pupils. Exam questions were also structured to guide them through problems."

It would be fairly simple to pick holes in the interpretation so far. Two subjects only have been identified as potentially causing concern, and "core subjects such as maths and science" have been whittled down to algebra, calculus, trigonometry and chemistry. No mention is made of the fact that GCSE was not introduced until

until 1988, so that insofar as comparisons at that level are concerned, these must be with GCE papers designed for a far more restricted clientèle; nor of the fact that the National Curriculum made the study of 'science' compulsory for all GCSE candidates who were not taking all three of the Physics, Chemistry and Biology group separately, thus inevitably reducing the syllabus requirements for the three elements significantly, with an inevitable roll-on effect in terms of preparation for A level courses. Finally, I doubt if any objective observer would feel that "candidates are given too much assistance to ensure they pass" is an acceptable paraphrase for a comment on questions structured so as to guide a student through a problem.

There remains a clear problem in respect of mathematics, but this is hardly much of a surprise, since attention to national shortcomings in both teaching and in student achievement in this subject has been a commonplace for at least thirty years. In short, what the article actually tells us is that subject specialists have studied exam papers but not scripts at ten year intervals from 1975 and seem to have satisfied themselves that it is possible to obtain high grades in mathematics on a narrower front of knowledge and skill than was formerly the case; and that there has also been a narrowing of the syllabus in chemistry – a circumstance that has a natural explanation other than a decline in teaching or learning standards, and provides not the slightest warrant for the generalisations of the introductory paragraphs.

Indeed, so little of any real significance or genuine news value underpins the alarmist headline that one might begin to wonder why the article was felt worth the space devoted to it – but there is more to come.

"The findings are sure to renew criticism of the structure of examination boards in England and Wales, where rival boards compete with each other for schools to register with them. In Scotland, by contrast, results have only improved slightly over the last six years. Critics of the system south of the border attribute this to Scotland's single statutory examination body.

The results of the full inquiry, due to be published in autumn, are bound to be used by critics who argue that last year's 84% pass-rate for A levels, and consistent improvements in GCSE passes over the last decade, are the result of a lowering of attainment standards resulting from the introduction of modular courses which lay less stress on final exams."

Setting aside the sloppy thinking which seeks to associate improvements in GCSE pass-rates over the last decade with the introduction of modular A levels over the last two years, the key to the whole article lies in the introductions to the last two

paragraphs: "the findings *are sure* to renew criticism of the examination boards", and "the results *are bound* to be used by critics". In other words, the decline of standards is now taken for granted as an established fact even if there is disagreement as to the causes – and the findings of those involved in the latest piece of research, tentative as the *T.E.S.* was absolutely correct in forecasting that they would be, could be guaranteed, to be pressed into service in scapegoating whichever aspects of current educational provision happened to be currently in the limelight. It hardly needed underlining, but the article nevertheless provided the appropriate conclusion in a quotation from a DfEE spokesman: "Whatever the findings of this inquiry there are those who will always maintain that standards are dropping" and, as he might justly have added, they can be sure of a good press coverage for their allegations.

The question as to why this determination to devalue the achievements of the educational system over the last few years should have arisen and expanded so ferociously will be examined in the final chapter of this thesis. At this stage, I am more concerned to establish the facts regarding the two sacrificial victims offered up in this particular attempt to prove the allegations of decline in educational standards. As the *Guardian* somewhat clumsily points out, in an apparent attempt to back two horses, these are inter-Board competition for entry fees, with the clear implication that schools are being bribed for their custom by the implicit promise of healthier positions in the league tables; and (at A level) the introduction of modular syllabuses. The education staff of the *Guardian* seem to have come to the conclusion that the second of these was the better bet, since their next foray into the business of devaluing A level achievements, which came on Tuesday August 6th., a mere nine days before the publication of the 1996 results, focused firmly on criticism of the modular examination system. Under the headline *Testing for fool's gold* the author develops the theme of declining standards in the opening paragraph:

"Unlike the Atlanta Olympics, this year's A-level results look set to be pronounced the "best ever". But critics claim the modular option, with staggered exams throughout the year, is devaluing the prize."

What follows is, in fact, reputable and balanced reporting of a genuine dispute.

Adequate opportunity is given for defenders of the modular approach to sixth form

teaching and assessment to fight their corner: the problem is that no-one is actually prepared to act as spokesman for the other side or to provide evidence or justification for the opposition to modular examinations. As the article puts it:

The cry that the "gold standard" of A levels is being devalued is being heard again in advance of next week's results, in what has become an annual ritual of claim and counter-claim over whether the exam is becoming easier. But this time the critics are armed with new ammunition – modular A levels and the rumour that those who have taken them this year have achieved better grades than those taking the traditional route, with the implication that modular is the softer option.

And there we have the situation in a nutshell: 'an annual ritual' reinforced by rumour, or a reflex action which presupposes a 'gold standard' which any change will tarnish or devalue (the cliché can be varied to taste) but which at the same time can be represented as requiring an ever-declining level of knowledge and achievement to qualify for its award. It is hardly any great surprise that the *Guardian* writer should continue

"It is an argument that exasperates many educationalists, and Gillian Shepherd has herself expressed annoyance that candidates and the education service are in a no-win situation – criticised for poor performance if grades go down and accused of sitting [or, presumably, setting] easier exams if grades go up."

followed by a detailed defence of modular examinations and their direct comparability in content and difficulty with the familiar linear style from the chief executives of the Northern Examination and Assessment Group, and of UCAS. Their arguments were unlikely, on the evidence of recent years, to silence the opposition, (which seems to base itself principally on the concept that modules taken earlier in the course can be repeated if performance is unsuccessful,) but they may possibly have helped to mute it.

Oddly enough, it is possible to argue that modular exams are lowering A level standards very marginally, on evidence which I have recently experienced for myself, and it would be dishonest of me to suppress it. As I explained in the Preface, the key to the system of grade awards is the opinion of an experienced and knowledgeable examiner who can read a script and say, with authority, "Mr Chairman, this is a B". It is precisely upon such people that continuity and stability of standards depends, and their valuation is particularly important in cases of inconsistent scripts where the candidate's standard of performance varies substantially from one question to another. Two factors of distinction between modular and linear examination papers have adversely affected that process, though not, I believe, to any large extent. In the first place modular papers in English have, hitherto,

tended to be shorter than those of the traditional linear style, and frequently contain only two questions. Where the performance in such a paper is uneven, it is more difficult for even an experienced examiner to determine which answer is more typical of the candidate's overall ability than would be the case in a paper where the writer had been required to tackle three or four questions; and in cases where inconsistent papers happened to have received a total mark in the area of a grade borderline, I have noticed an increased tendency for awarders to lean towards generosity by judging the script on the better answer. In the second place, when the awarding committee assign grade boundaries to individual papers in linear examinations, they are aware that this is an artificial proceeding and that it is the candidate's total mark, over all his or her papers, which will actually determine the final grade to appear on the certificate, so that any possible injustice will be evened out when all the papers are totalled up. In the case of modular entries, however, the script under scrutiny may well be the candidate's only paper in that particular exam session, and the grade awarded therefore of considerably greater significance. Aware of this, and justifiably reluctant to risk a harsh judgement, examiners are more likely to settle for the lower boundary in the circumstances I have outlined. Across an entire field of candidates, such discrimination is unlikely to produce more than a minor increase in grade awards, but it is entirely possible that it might influence them to a degree which would be perceptible to the statisticians. To this extent, therefore, the case argued by the opponents of modular examinations may be not entirely without foundation.

It is, however, typical of those who attack innovation on principle that they have no idea, as yet, where the thrust of their argument might usefully be directed, and that their case so far seems to be based on the the same sort of prejudice as was recently directed against coursework.

The first of the suggestions to account for the alleged decline in standards, competition between boards for clients and the exam. fees they bring with them, is interesting in illustrating a clash within the political philosophy of the group who controlled the state education system for the nineteen years prior to the 1997 election. In most spheres of human activity competition was to be actively encouraged –

and recent developments in the operations of British Rail and the National Health Service are a sufficient illustration of the principle. Indeed, even in education the principle apparently applied, with the increasing emphasis on competition between schools: the dogma of 'parental choice', league tables, and the enthusiasm for grant maintained schools which should be independent of, and thus freed from the retaining shackles of, local authority control. But free to do what? The essential business of any school is education, the supervision of the academic, social and moral development of its pupils; and beside this, freedoms in respect of building development, furnishings and equipment, and financial operation, pale into insignificance. Yet in this essential area very little freedom exists, and options that a few years ago could be taken for granted are now radically curtailed. The National Curriculum has imposed a straightjacket on curriculum experimentation, and while the concept has undoubted merits and advantages, freedom of educational opportunity and the power to offer courses tailored individually or to small groups have unquestionably been reduced to a level that, before the Education Reform Act of 1988, would have been unthinkable.

"It has usually been understood and recognised with some pride that in this country no Department or Ministry of Education, still less any local authority, prescribes the curriculum."¹

The power to choose an examination syllabus is one of the few remaining areas in which academic freedom still subsists in schools, albeit curtailed by random and dogmatic pronouncements on the acceptable proportion of course-work; and a decision to standardise public examinations under a single statutory examination body would be a logical move to complete the centralisation of educational provision and effectively to regulate the quality of the product. It would also finally achieve that absolute antithesis of the wisdom of Alfred North Whitehead towards which education has been irrevocably moving since the Education Reform Act of 1988.²

This is not the place to argue what the politicians' purpose in moving towards the sterility or inertia of a single system of external tests might hypothetically be.

Suffice it here to say that such a change would have nothing whatever to do with any

¹ Frances Stevens, *English and Examinations*, 1970, p 475

² v.sup. p 110

evidence of corrupt practices on the part of the examining boards or of any conspiracy on their part to introduce 'grade inflation' as part of a general slackening of standards. As I shall show in the course of this chapter, not one of the multitude of inter-board comparability studies, including recent objective and external assessments, has ever shown any significant leniency on the part of any one of the individual examining bodies, nor has any specific suggestion of "soft options" ever been found to have any general validity.

What is even odder about this sudden reversal of the usual competition and 'market-forces' argument to the products of the examination boards, is that it is rising to a crescendo at precisely the time that those market forces are themselves reducing the number of independent boards. In the course of the last two years, the Cambridge Syndicate (UCLES) has taken over both the Oxford Delegacy (UODLE) and the Oxford and Cambridge Schools Examination Board (OCSEB), creating the amalgamated Oxford and Cambridge Examinations and Assessment Council (OCEAC) which will work in co-operation with the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment; and the Northern Examinations and Assessment Board (NEAB) took over the Welsh Joint Education Committee (WJEC) and then announced an amalgamation with the Associated Examining Board (AEB) thus, together with the London Board (formerly ULEAC and now rechristened EDEXCEL), completing the reduction from what was once a total of nine autonomous bodies to three, one of which (the AEB/NEAB consortium) is, on 1995 entry figures, larger than the other two survivors combined. It will be interesting to observe whether, once the commitment of Boards to existing syllabus announcements is completed, and the effects of the amalgamations begin to show, inevitably in a reduction of the choice available, the charge of inter-board complicity in the devaluation of A-Level standards continues to be levelled. There have, of course, for many years past, been teachers up and down the country who are convinced that, in any given subject, one Examining Board offers easier syllabuses than another, or that pass-grades are given more readily to candidates for this board than for that. On the face of it, the methodology of arriving at grade boundaries might reasonably be expected to throw up discrepancies between Boards; yet, as I point out above, all the investigations so far into standards of comparability in assessment have agreed that differences are statistically insignificant.

One of the earliest of these investigations was carried out in 1978,¹ and the text of the report began with the words:

"In a climate of growing public interest in public examinations comparability of grading standards is a popular focus of attention; and of the various aspects of comparability – between subjects, between standards in a subject in different years, between modes of examining and between boards – the last usually generates the most earnest and heated debate."²

The Foreword goes on to make the point that I have already emphasised, that "examining is not an exact science" and "in the end depends upon the professional judgement of the examiners involved"³, while reaching the conclusion that there is "reassuring evidence ...of overall comparability."⁴ But, on the way, it mentions an important point which, I suspect, is widely overlooked:

"there is no basis in fact for the common assumption that each board necessarily has an equivalent cross-section of candidate potential or attainment. There is no justification, therefore, for the conclusion that a high percentage of high grades in a subject in one board, and a low percentage in another, means that the first board is necessarily lenient, the second necessarily severe. If the quality of the candidates of the first board were significantly higher than those of the second, the reverse could well be true"⁵

This point was made by George Bruce, with particular regard to the setting up of the Oxford and Cambridge Schools Examination Board, and of the Associated Examining Board,⁶ and the comment with which this *Review* follows the observation above could well stand as a permanent warning to those politicians and journalists who wish to produce instant soundbites on the state of education in this country or adapt them into tabloid headlines: "The issues of comparability are subtle, and the instant conclusion is very often the wrong one".⁷ The degree of subtlety involved is illustrated in the five brief sections of the *Review*, which comment on 34 separate studies into comparability carried out by a variety of different methods. In the process of explaining the techniques involved, the authors give us some useful statistical information on the candidature for the various boards, which illustrate the dangers of assumptions based on raw statistics. For instance, we learn that, for the 'O' level English Language examinations in the Summer of 1977, the largest of the examining boards, the AEB, attracted a total of 99,927, entries of which 57.7% came from maintained schools,

¹ *Comparability in GCE:A Review of the Boards' Studies 1964-1977*, Bardell, Forrest & Shoesmith, JMB, 1975

² Op.cit. p 5

^{3,4,5} Ibid.

⁶ v.sup. p 143

⁷ Op.cit. p 5

36.6% from Further Education, and a minimal 2.4% from the Direct Grant and Independent School sector; while the smallest of the Boards, the SUJB, which had only 3988 subject entries, had a clientele of which a very similar 58.4% came from maintained schools, but a radically different 13.1% and 26.6% for the second and third categories respectively. To add to the varied picture, the medium sized Oxford Board had 75% of its 50,620 entries from the maintained sector, 20.1% from the Direct Grant and Independent schools and only 4.9% from FE; while the much smaller Oxford and Cambridge Schools Examination Board attracted only 12,338 entries, of which a mere 10.4% came from maintained schools, and the remaining 89.6% from Direct grant and Independent schools, with no FE entries at all. ¹

This picture is, in general terms, reinforced by the *GCE Results Analysis* produced by SCAA in 1996, which provides "an analysis of the 1995 GCE Results and trends over time." I have arranged the percentage figures provided by that Analysis² for the types of institution from which the three surviving boards mentioned in the previous paragraph derived their entries in the table below:

	AEB	UODLE	OCSEB
Further Education Establishments	28.8	9.4	3.5
Comprehensive Schools (LEA & CM)	27.3	36.8	13.3
Sixth Form Colleges	15.5	9.2	8.1
Independent Schools	4.1	18.9	64.5

With discrepancies like that in the nature of the centres offering candidates, it is clear that it would be unreasonable to expect the Boards to produce even approximately identical figures for the percentage of candidates to be awarded any given grade in any given subject, but there are other unexpected disparities as well:

"For example, nearly all the entries to O & C are from boys' centres; at Ordinary level in 1977 slightly more girls than boys were candidates for London".³

One is thus confronted with two opposed factors for distortion applying to the same board: on the one hand we are told

"the proportion of girls to boys offering a particular subject is important when comparisons are made between boards since in a majority of

¹ Op.cit. p 14

² Op.cit. Figures 31, 35 and 37

³ Op.cit. p.14

Ordinary level examinations the percentages of girls obtaining Grade C or better are higher than the boys' percentages; a similar pattern is to be found, though to a lesser extent, in Advanced level examinations".¹

while, on the other, the authors remind us of "a common pattern which shows that candidates from independent schools tend to achieve higher grades than those from maintained schools."² The combined effect on the Oxford and Cambridge Board with its massively skewed catchment of independent boys' schools is a problem for the statistician, but only an optimist would expect the two factors to cancel each other neatly out.

In point of fact, the spread in the figures for percentage pass-rates for the separate boards in specimen subjects is considerable, and provides plentiful opportunity for sociological speculation and statistical analysis. In English Language, for example, the proportion of candidates obtaining Grade C or better in the 'O' level examinations in 1977 ranged* from 45.9%(AEB) to 66.4% (O & C) whereas, in the previous seven years, the national pass-rate in the subject had varied only between 59.9% and 61.9%. If the lowest figure, from AEB, and the next lowest (56.4%) from SUJB are discounted, the remainder provide a much more consistent picture, with all boards within the 62-66% area.

Similarly, the pass-rate in Latin varied from 46.8% (AEB) to 83.7% (O & C) and that for maths from 53.5%(AEB) to 63.3%(Cambridge).³

The nature of the centres selecting each of the Boards obviously accounts for most of the disparity, but the Review does not allow us to content ourselves with a single and simple explanation. Apart from the actual choice of Boards for their candidates, centres also very often have a choice of syllabus provided by the selected Board. The AEB, for instance, offered no fewer than six alternative courses in English Language. The "standard" and by far the most popular, with 65,869 candidates from a total of 99,927 entries, had a pass-rate of only 43.4%, but the other five with an entry range from 67 to 25,977 produced pass-rates varying from 45.2% to 74.6%.⁴

It is, of course, as the *Review* points out, "the duty of each board to see that the standards in the various alternatives and between the different modes of examining

* Figures relating to the regional boards for Wales and Northern Ireland are deliberately omitted.

1 Ibid. p13

2 Ibid p15

3 Ibid. p11

5 Ibid.

which are offered within a given subject are in some way comparable"¹, but, as the authors are also at pains to observe, the boards "do not normally control the kind of students who will offer themselves as candidates. The composition of the entry to different subjects will vary just as the composition of entries to alternatives to a subject will vary."²

As one might expect, the *SCAA Analysis* of 1995 results illustrates similar but very substantial variations in the performances in A Level English of candidates for the different boards:³

	AEB	UODLE	OCSEB
% awarded Grade A	12.3	13.9	29.9
% awarded Grades A-C	50.0	54.3	86.8
% awarded Grades A-E	89.4	88.3	99.7
% not passing	10.6	11.7	0.3

In simple terms, the implication here is that while syllabuses within a subject differ, so, too, must the style of teaching and preparation. It is of no use to switch a centre's entry from one syllabus to another of a given board, or even from one board to another, merely because the statistics for previous years demonstrate a superior pass-rate for the new course as against the old. If the teaching and preparation of the candidates are not geared to the nuances of the new syllabus the change will be ineffectual, and it is this factor of variability, the degree to which results are affected by the quality of teaching to which the various candidates have been exposed, which defies quantification and introduces a random note into the most careful analysis of examination performance. Not only can teaching be efficient or inefficient, as a simple measure of the communication of relevant information; it can also be more or less sympathetic to the receptivity of the pupils as individuals; and more or less sympathetic to the specific approach expected by the examiners; and pupils who have had the good fortune to encounter a teacher at the upper end of all three scales may well produce results which defy statistical prediction.

This is but one of the reasons for which the exercise of comparability studies in the field of public examinations can never be an exact science, and the *Review* emphasises

¹ Op.cit. p 11

² Ibid. p 13

³ Op.cit. Figure 45

this in the opening paragraph of its final section:

"Many of the people who have given thought to the problems of investigating comparability between examining boards probably began by thinking that the problems were routine, went on to think that they were difficult, and finished by thinking that they were perhaps insurmountable. In the first stage, they think it is simply a matter of auditing the books; of doing, as it were, a few sums on the back of an envelope and then coming up with a quick answer. In the second stage they think of it as a tricky piece of consumer research, but feel that with a careful scientific and objective approach, it should be possible to settle on a 'best buy'. By the time they have reached the third stage they think it is more like the task of the art critic: so that, although a pass in one board may be different from a pass in another, to claim that one is better is a value judgement like the preference for one picture over another."¹

An examination of the 34 various Studies which led the authors to this conclusion will leave little doubt in any unbiased mind that this is not, in any sense, an evasion of responsibility. The first of these was based upon the assumption that significant results might be obtained from a detailed scrutiny of the performance of groups of candidates for different boards, where equality between the groups might reasonably be assumed.

"There are few circumstances where it is possible to assert with confidence that one set of candidates for one board is equivalent to a set of candidates for another. One such circumstance might arise when candidates submit themselves simultaneously in the same subject to two boards.... Following the summer examination of 1966, the GCE boards completed an analysis of all those candidates who sat for the same subject with more than one board. Altogether, 6434 candidates had entered for the same subject with at least two boards. Of these, 762 candidates, nearly half of them from further education establishments, each made entries to two boards for the same Advanced level subject: 75% of the candidates received the same result (pass or fail) in both examinations. At Ordinary level there were 11,674 repeated entries, from 5672 candidates the majority of whom were from further education establishments: 72% of the repeated entries were the same in terms of pass or fail."²

At first sight, these seem to be disturbing figures: 190 candidates failed to obtain an A level pass for one board while passing for another, and 1588 candidates obtained the same disparate result from two boards at O level. Moreover, the comparisons are expressed only in terms of pass and fail – we are not informed as to any variation in level of performance among those who passed (or failed) with both entries. This would seem to suggest substantial differences in standards between the boards. But as is so often the case with educational statistics, appearances can be deceptive. The fact that

¹ Op.cit. p 35

² Ibid. p 16

so high a proportion of the candidates were from FE rather than from school centres is clearly a factor that cannot be ignored, but it may be less material than the supposition that "those who enter for two Boards simultaneously are likely to be near to the borderline between pass and fail"¹ or the provision of 'the most likely explanation' – "that the candidates were trained primarily for one syllabus, taking the other principally as a safeguard."² The implications of these two factors taken together might well, indeed, suggest that a higher proportion of candidates obtaining a pass grade with one board and a fail with another would have been neither surprising nor of much evidential value. The actual report of the study is summarised in this *Review* as follows:

"The results of the study in 1966 did not show any *major differences in standard between the boards. It has however drawn attention to the many factors which contribute to the differences in performance of candidates which lead to apparently discrepant results.* As part of the investigation examiners were asked to scrutinise the scripts where results were discrepant. Variations were found in syllabuses, in the character of the papers, in allocations of marks, in mark schemes as well as in grading, and there were several cases where candidates had shown quite different levels of performance in the two examinations or had found difficulty in one or the other case in choice of questions or in the control of time limitation."³

Studies 2 to 7, carried out between 1970 and 1975, involved examining and comparing scripts at the pass borderline in thirteen O level and thirteen A level subjects. Once discrepancies in pass-rates had been corrected for centre-type differences, no further differences in standard were made explicit, and no formal report was prepared. Study 8, carried out in 1971, involved asking candidates for A level Economics for AEB and the London Board to take also a multiple-choice subject test as a common paper, in order to establish performance ranking for all the candidates for both Boards, to provide a standard of comparison against which their actual A level performance with their respective boards could be measured. The *Review's* summary reads "No detectable differences in standards."⁴ Study 10 took the rather different approach of contrasting the performance of candidates who took both Nuffield Chemistry A level paper through London and Physics A level through Oxford. Here there were clear discrepancies, with Oxford tending to award higher grades, but only because, the report concluded, of "the superior performance in Physics of Nuffield candidates"⁵

1 Op.cit. p 16

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid. p.17

4,5 Ibid. p 18

It would, I feel, be superfluous to quote the results of each of the thirty-four studies. Suffice it to say that in only eleven of them was any discrepancy of any kind recorded in the comparability of the relative standards of the examining boards, and not one of these eleven indicated serious variations from the norm. Typical of such findings is that of the 1974 Study of A Level Economics, in which the Oxford, Cambridge, and O & C boards were compared by means of a multiple choice subject test used as a common paper. The survey found "Cambridge relatively severe"; and, in the same year, the Study of O level History, in which scripts at the pass/fail borderline, from AEB, JMB and O & C, were compared against the results of a general aptitude test resulted in the verdict "AEB relatively lenient".¹

Some were even less definite than the two quoted above. In 1975 a survey was conducted using the cross moderation method whereby experienced examiners from one board re-mark scripts originally submitted to other boards, in this case of candidates for O level Physics from AEB, Cambridge and the Northern Ireland and Welsh boards, with the intention of ratifying A/B, C/D and E/Ungraded borderlines. The conclusion was that "Cambridge standards may have been more severe at A/B and C/D than the others, and AEB and NI lenient at C/D".²

In only one of the eleven cases in which any discrepant findings were recorded was an English paper involved, and in this instance, too, the degree of variation was minimal. The full text of the Review dealing with this Study (no.26) is as follows:

"1975. English language at Ordinary level. JMB, London, O & C and Oxford. Ratification of A/B, C/D and E/Ungraded borderlines by ranking sets of borderline scripts. Some indication that Oxford was slightly lenient and O & C slightly severe at C/D borderline." ³

I do not, of course, suggest that the findings quoted or summarised above are proof positive that absolute comparability between all Boards, in all subjects, and in every year can be taken for granted. I do suggest that the evidence of the 1978 Review is convincing evidence that there is no significant failure of comparability, and that I am therefore entitled, in the next three chapters of this thesis, to make comments on the standards required at 'O' or 'A' level examinations on the basis of the papers of one or two of the examining boards, rather than needing to evaluate all of them.

¹ Op.cit. p 26

^{2,3} Ibid. p 33

The vital point here is that academic standards are not, and never have been, absolute – and never can be in a world that accepts the current definition of academic. It is possible to visualise a closer approximation to the absolute than has been achieved hitherto – indeed the authors of the 1978 Review concluded their brief booklet with precisely such a vision, taken from a 1973 Study of A Level French:

"Error exists in every procedure for educational and psychological measurement: it is unfortunate that, despite their importance to the individual and to society, public examinations are no exception. Differences between boards, reflecting as they do the different backgrounds of teaching practices, only exacerbate this problem. There are several ways of dealing with the situation, from, at one extreme, the introduction of a single national syllabus and examination in each subject, to the full exploitation of the variety which exists today at the other. *The former is not likely to receive much support from teachers used to the flexibility of British education, particularly those who believe in teacher responsibility for syllabus content; the latter demands more forthright acceptance both by boards and by users of the approximate nature of examination results in general.*"¹

Twenty years on, of course, perspectives have changed. A willingness to accept the concept of exploitation of variety has not been forthcoming. Yet the unceasing tide of centralisation, coupled with acute suspicion of any educational system operated and controlled by professionals, cannot with any degree of plausibility be blamed upon the indifference of the boards to demands for increased standardisation or to complacency in the face of criticism.

On the contrary, as the 1978 Review points out, with reference to the continuing series of comparability studies carried out since the GCE was introduced, and briefly referred to above:

"They are publishing details now, because of an increased public interest in the problems of comparability and to allay any possible suspicion that the boards have been blind to their responsibilities for the maintenance of standards. The very fact that so little has been published previously by the boards is at least evidence that these studies have not been undertaken simply to impress a supposedly suspicious public. They are examples of an intensely practical activity designed to have an effect on the grading standards of the boards from year to year."

The Review concludes by emphasising that the system of Studies will continue, and that one suggestion under consideration is the building up of a reference bank of scripts which have been the subject of cross-moderation exercises and on which there is a high degree of agreement, so that they may be used for initial and in-service

¹ Op.cit. p 37

² Ibid. p 35

training purposes as well as forming a permanent archive of exemplars of attainment at specified grades. Had this suggestion been accepted at the time, the SCAA Report on "Standards over Time" would not have been left lamenting the absence of such vital evidence. The preservation of such Archive material is now required of all Boards at each examination session, and future researchers at least will have a solid basis of evidence for their comments on standards. The authors of the 1978 *Review* also emphasise that:

"The Board's current view is that cross-moderation involving the boards' examiners (possibly with outsiders too) is the most fruitful and sensitive of the methods available for the study of comparability." ¹

Designing research study models which can produce quantitative results has been largely unsuccessful, we are told, whereas cross-moderation methodology, despite the possibility that its reliance on in-house rather than external scrutineers may seem to prejudice the findings, "is particularly attractive" precisely because

"it involves the very people who influence most the critical decisions which are made after each examination: their experience of reading scripts of different provenances are in their minds when those decisions are taken." ²

We are back, almost inevitably, with the "informed cohort" to which I refer in the Preface to this thesis, ³ without whom the examination system could not continue, and on whose academic integrity the whole business of grading depends. If such people can be relied upon to mark examinations at all, they can be relied on to adjudge fairly whether their colleagues working for other boards are applying the same standards or not; and if they cannot be so relied upon, then the whole concept of subjective valuation in the complex relationship of teacher, candidate, subject and examiner is at an end, to be replaced by the brave new world of single national syllabus and examination in each subject, complete, of course, with computer marking.

The *Second Review of GCE Comparability Studies*, by Forrest and Shoesmith, was published in 1985. It begins with a Foreword from that year's Convenor of Secretaries to the GCE Boards which contains a reminder of the the degree to which the period was one of fundamental disruption to a system that had endured more or less unchanged since 1951. The most significant impact, of course, particularly to a professional

¹ Op.cit. p 36

² Ibid. p 35

³ v.sup. p 9

examiner, was:

"the decision to introduce in 1988 a single system of examining at 16+: the General Certificate of Secondary Education. As part of this new initiative, a new emphasis is to be placed on teacher assessment of coursework, practical work, orals and aurals."¹

One cannot help but wonder how long that particular belief in the shape of the new emphasis lasted – certainly the remark, if unconsciously, illustrates beautifully the basic idea of fundamental and continuous disruption. At the time, however, examinations at 16+ were far from being the author's only concern:

"At 18+ the continuing reduction in the number of places available at the universities has meant that the competition for those places has become ever keener. Thus it is essential that the grade achieved by each candidate must not only be an accurate record of attainment in a subject but also represent a standard of achievement which is consistent between boards and even between subjects. The differences between grades B and C, and between grades C and D, have never been so significant."²

In retrospect, this element of concern might have been directed to far more wide-ranging changes. 'A' level might well have been completely reconstructed at the same time as 'O' level disappeared into GCSE, as the main text of the *Second Review* reminds us:

"The Secretary of State, having rejected proposals for a full-scale reform of examinations at 18+ (the N and F proposals), announced in 1979 that the existing examination would be retained subject to revision leading to clarification and rationalisation of syllabuses. There was a widespread feeling in higher education that, even recognising the value of a variety of boards and syllabuses from which schools could choose, there was nevertheless great benefit to be derived from establishing a core of educational experience which would be common to the boards' syllabuses and could therefore be taken as read by universities and polytechnics in designing their first year courses."³

The immediate result was the setting up by the boards of working parties, the membership of which included not only representatives of the boards themselves and of serving teachers who constituted the obvious clientèle of the examination system, but of HMI, the Standing Conference on University Entrance, and the CNAA. The resulting reports were published by the boards in 1983, under the title *Common Cores at Advanced Level*, and with the incorporated assurance that the boards would adapt their individual syllabuses so as to implement the proposed common cores over the following four years.

¹ Op.cit. p 5

² Ibid.

³ Ibid. p 21

Meanwhile, the Secretary of State had determined on the creation of two new advisory bodies to replace the the Schools Council, one to deal with curriculum and the other with examinations; and the new Secondary Examinations Council met for the first time also in 1983. Apart from confirming the 1978 Report of the Waddell Committee, *School Examinations*, which first recommended a common system of examination at 16+, and thus triggering the 1988 re-organisation, the new SEC also set up "a working party to review the grading system at Advanced level, and in particular the narrowness of Grade C"².

It is, perhaps, necessary at this point, to remind ourselves of the way in which grades at A level had come into being. Initially, 'A' level candidates had merely passed or failed the examination, though the actual percentages awarded for each subject as a whole (not for individual papers) were made available to their schools, which might or might not pass them on. Presumably the same information was also available to the universities (almost exclusively Oxford and Cambridge) to which third year sixth candidates might apply after completing an 'A' level course. ('Conditional admission' in the course of the second year had no place in the early stages of the 'A' level system.) The original pass level was pegged as closely as possible to the old Higher School Certificate, and in theory has never changed. It was, however, in 1963 that there came into being the present system of grouping 'A' level candidates into five pass grades (A to E) and two fail grades (originally O and F, and subsequently N and F). The 'O' stood for 'allowed an 'O' level pass' and was replaced by N, usually translated as 'near miss' after GCSE replaced 'O' level). In 1978, it was possible to make generalised statistical observations on the proportions of the candidates who had obtained each of the pass grades:

"The cumulative percentages suggested for the various grades are now as follows: A-10; B-25; C-35; D-50; E-70"²

but it is important to note the disclaimer that immediately follows:

"The report which proposed this grading scheme included the words in bold capital letters 'All the above percentages are to be regarded as no more than rough indications.' Accordingly it has always been recognised that boards should not be bound by these percentages when it is thought that a precise adherence to them would not be appropriate. That the boards have

¹ A Second Review of GCE Comparability Studies, p 23

² Comparability in GCE, 1978, p 12

flexibility in following the norms suggested by the Secondary School Examination Council has been confirmed by the Schools Council, the body which replaced it in 1964." ¹

Even allowing for this flexibility, however, the ever increasing number of candidates entering for 'A' level papers resulted not merely in the increasing competition for university places referred to above, and the consequent increasing importance of a C grade, but with uncomfortable congestion around the C boundary. With a theoretic 10% limit on candidates to be allowed a C grade, and with the theoretic "average" performer among the successful candidates turning in a script on or about the C/D boundary, the validity of the point made by George Bruce ² becomes apparent, both that a single mark might well be absolutely crucial in the awarding of the final grade, and at the same time that a decision so arrived at must, in the nature of things, be essentially somewhat arbitrary, particularly in a subject such as English. As the *Second Review* puts it:

"All this focused attention on the concept of absolute standards, at least as an ideal. The terms 'norm-referenced' and 'criterion-referenced' became commonplace. In practice, public examinations (and in particular GCE) are not norm-referenced; that is to say, it is not true that grades are awarded to conform to pre-determined proportions, any more than it is true that the pass-mark is pre-determined. Each board's practice involves, for example, the re-reading of scripts at critical regions of the distribution in order to make judgements of quality about where the grade cut-off points should come." ³

What is perhaps more significant than this emphasis on the rejection of the implicit terms of the 1963 system is the qualification which follows. It makes the usual (and fully justified) endorsement of the professional skills of the examiners on whom the system relies, but it demonstrates clearly that the boards' independence and autonomy in this matter has never been called into question.

"The boards' principal concern is to maintain the same standard from year to year, although that standard is nowhere explicitly laid down: it lies instead in the experience and minds of those teachers and administrators whose task it is to carry the standard across time. Moreover, since the only external guidelines available are expressed in terms of the expected proportions of candidates in the various grades in hypothetical populations, some drift in standard over time is extremely likely. The Secretary of State.....made clear his intention to prevent any drift of this kind as far as the new GCSE examination was concerned by redefining the standards in absolute or criterion-referenced terms. His aim was to provide motivation by improving the level of attainment in the schools by ensuring that any such improvement would be reflected in the grades awarded....." ⁴

¹ *Comparability in GCE*, 1978, p 12

² v.sup. p 162

³ Op.cit. p 23

⁴ Ibid. pp 23-24

It is, of course, quite obvious that if standards of performance actually improve, so that, for the sake of argument, eighty per cent of candidates achieve a theoretic pass mark of forty out of one hundred, but the proportion of candidates permitted to achieve a pass grade is limited to seventy per cent, the pass mark will be forced up to perhaps forty-five marks. This could be called a raising of standards, though it ignores the interests of the ten per cent of candidates whose papers were of a standard which would have obtained them a pass in previous years but no longer does so. There is an unfortunate tendency to be quite happy to ignore such interests among those whose first touchstone for success is that it should be limited to a privileged group, and whose measure of the relative importance of that success depends upon the size of the number of people who are unable to attain it. It is precisely such a philosophy which has led to the persistence of demands for the maintenance, or re-introduction, as appropriate, of selection at 11+, despite years of evidence that efficient comprehensive schools can significantly out-perform the combined schools of a selective area. The interest being ignored here, of course, is that of those who would have thrived in a comprehensive school but who would not be selected by the norm-referenced selective system which is based not on any specific standard of achievement but on the number of places available in the designated grammar school. Where, however, there is a danger that political decisions will be taken by those whose idea of raising standards is based upon increasing the height of the hurdle rather than the number who can jump it, there is a risk in stating too clearly the lack of external guide-lines which serve as parameters for the system in question. At a time when the future of 'A' level was uncertain, and not merely the reliability but the utility of its proceedings was being increasingly questioned, deliberate emphasis on the absence of any standard 'explicitly laid down' and reliance instead upon the 'experience and minds of teachers and administrators' might well have proved fatal. As it was, an arbitrary decision that 'A' level constituted a 'gold standard' saved the examination and, thereby, the operational methodology on which it prided itself; though subsequent developments have brought that methodology under increasingly close observation from external assessors, and its results under the control of a much increased level of statistical intervention.

It was, for example, in 1996, still up to a grading committee to set its grade boundaries where its experience and 'feel' for standards suggest that they should be. But over the last few years it has been required that, before such findings are ratified, they should be subject to rigorous examination in terms of their effect upon pass-rates; and if they should result in an increase in the proportion of successful candidates beyond a limit pre-determined as 'acceptable', the committee will be asked to reconsider its verdict.

At the time of writing the *Second Review*, however, neither the threat nor the ultimate salvation were as apparent as they appear in hindsight, and the authors were at the same pains as they had been in the production of its forerunner to emphasise the concern of the Boards to establish inter-board parity. Including second references to three of the later Studies among the thirty-four covered in the first *Review*, the second deals with twenty Studies in all, or a total over the two *Reviews* of fifty-one separate examinations of the marking and grading practices of the various boards, in all of the main subjects on offer, and at both 'O' and 'A' levels. Four of these studies concerned English examinations, and relevant report summaries serve as an accurate cross-section of the procedures adopted by the boards for the purposes of self-scrutiny.

Study 27 considered English Literature at Ordinary level in 1975:

"Scripts, syllabuses, question papers and mark schemes for four boards (AEB, NI, O & C and WJEC) were scrutinised by examiners from the other five boards. Appropriate criteria against which candidates' performances could be judged were agreed. These criteria were used separately with fresh batches of borderline scripts at at grades A, C and E. Despite the stated misgivings about the results obtained, it was thought that WJEC was somewhat lenient at the E/U boundary but it was not possible to quantify that leniency." ¹

The following year, Study 30 looked at 'A' level English Literature in what was called a cross-moderation study.

"Examiners from four boards (Cambridge, Oxford, O & C and SUJB) and four independent scrutineers, working as two independent groups, determined criteria for judging grade B and grade E scripts. Each group then ranked the four boards' scripts criterion by criterion, each grade being treated separately. Although the lists of criteria produced by the two groups was not identical it was agreed that there were no real differences. No conclusions were reached about differences of any kind among the boards: the participants commented that what they had been asked to do was even more artificial than was usually the case in inter-board studies." ²

¹ Op.cit. p 47

² Ibid.

It takes little imagination to recreate the rueful tones of that laconic conclusion. Nevertheless, the fact of its inclusion is not without significance. It can be taken for granted that the study itself was carried out thoroughly, objectively and in an appropriately scholarly manner: the honesty of the report mirrors the integrity of those who work in the examinations system.

In 1978 it was the turn of 'O' level English Language. Study 38 has been the subject of a published report by A J Massey for the Southern Universities Joint Board and Test, Development and Research Unit. – *Comparing Standards in English Language*.

The study involved all nine boards:

"Each of the nine boards was represented by a senior examiner. There were in addition six external scrutineers. Syllabuses, question papers and mark schemes were studied. ...Participants studied photocopies of five candidates' essays at each of grades A, C and E from each board: the examiners marked the essays according to their own board's scheme whereas the external scrutineers assessed the essays on a six-point scale. Although both examiners and external scrutineers found differences between the quality of different boards' essays, it was not possible to make any statement about the overall standards of the boards." ¹

This finding merely underlines the point I made earlier that, in commenting upon the standards required by the subject at any given time within the scope of this thesis, it is legitimate to rely upon papers from a handful of boards; and the final Study involving English does nothing to modify this assertion.

"Study 51. 1983. English Literature at Advanced level. All available statistical information for the various boards' examinations was compared. The exercise was preliminary to a cross-moderation study, and so was not of itself intended to provide a basis for changing standards. The analysis concentrated on the A/B and E/O borderlines. Inspection of pass-rates for particular gender and centre types provided some tentative indications as a background for the subsequent study. There was particular interest in the standard of Grade A compared with that of other subjects, and a subject pairs analysis investigated the grading of candidates who had taken both English and a cognate subject. There was no consistent pattern suggesting that English was particularly generously or severely graded at this level." ²

Of the remaining sixteen studies covered by the *Second Review*, ten produced comments indicative of some departure from absolute comparability. What is striking about these, however, is not the fact of variation in response from one board as against another so much as the marginal discriminations that were felt worth recording. For instance, the 1977 Study of 'O' level Chemistry summary concludes: "Differences in

¹ Op.cit pp 48-49

² Ibid. p 53

standard were regarded as minimal but SUJB was thought to be lenient at the A/B borderline"¹; the 1979 Study of 'O' level Geography ends with the words "It was felt that had O & C candidates been entered for any of the other boards' papers some grade D candidates would have been awarded grade C"²; and perhaps least momentous of all, the 1978 Study of History at 'O' level, which produced the conclusion, after examiners from each of the boards had studied C/D borderline scripts from all nine: "All boards thought all other boards generous".³

Even in those few cases where a more specific disparity was discovered we are hardly in the realms of a clearly indicated "best buy", and the nearest we come to such findings may well be in the the summary of the 1978 Study of 'A' level Chemistry, involving the re-examination of nearly 1200 scripts from all of the boards, which ends "There were no clear-cut judgements although Oxford appeared the most lenient and JMB the most severe"⁴; the 1981 Study of Latin at both levels, which concluded that "There were some differences between boards, with the suggestion that Cambridge may have been severe at both Ordinary and Advanced levels"⁵; and the 1978 detailed survey of 'O' level Biology:

"Examiners from all nine boards were involved together with four external assessors. Ten scripts from each board at the C/D borderline were considered at a residential meeting following an earlier scrutiny of syllabuses, question papers and mark schemes. Participants assessed each board's standard in terms of a five-point leniency to severity scale. As a result of the statistical analyses carried out it was concluded that the boards' standards were not comparable, SUJB and NI being lenient."⁶

Finally, it should be noted that such Studies did not always confine their conclusions to the leniency or severity of marking and grading, but could comment also on disparities of the examination papers themselves, a factor which may seem more immediately material to a consideration of standards; though since almost all studies did, in fact, consider exam. papers and mark schemes as part of the task of determining the comparability of grade boundaries, the infrequency of comment in this area may well be considered indicative in itself. I have been able to discover only the following references to possible disparities in the papers themselves. as opposed to the responses they evoked from the candidates:

1 Op.cit p 48

2 Ibid. p 49

3,4 Ibid. p 50

5 Ibid. p 52

6 Ibid. p 48

"It was thought that essay titles were comparable except that those for Oxford required less abstract thought. The demands of the prose passages set by London and WJEC were seen as being significantly greater than those of the rest"¹;

"Taken overall, Cambridge, Oxford and the Nuffield examination appeared to have the greatest expectation of their candidates, and SUJB and WJEC the least"²;

and

"It was noted that Cambridge and Oxford syllabuses were almost identical, NI was deficient in detail and JMB was defined in a very detailed way. O & C question papers were thought to be different from the rest and NI questions too closely related to text books. The assessors concluded that some examinations made demands different from, not necessarily greater or less than, others"³

which come from the 1979 and 1980 Studies, all of 'A' level papers, into German, Biology and Economics respectively. I cannot feel that any of them will seriously have undermined the faith of any interested party in the essential principle of comparability between the boards.

I observed above that the summaries of the reports into the various studies serve as an accurate cross-section of the procedures adopted by the boards in their continuing programme of refining examination practice, but while such a technique enables a considerable amount of ground to be covered by a brief survey, it perhaps fails to do justice to the detailed and methodical approach inseparable from exercises of this kind. I can, I think, best illustrate this point by returning to the first Study to which I referred, the 1975 report on English Literature at Ordinary level. The summary of the report, taken from Appendix B of the *Second Review*, is printed above.⁴ The complete analysis provided by the authors runs as follows:

"If the 1976 study on English Literature produced nothing in the way of conclusions about board grading comparability, the report on English Literature at Ordinary level in 1975 (Study 27) was a little more successful. It was not possible to make an absolute judgement about grading standards (no study has ever been able to claim to do that) although it was thought that the WJEC was lenient at the grade E/ungraded borderline: it is a weakness of studies of this type that it is not possible to estimate the degree of the leniency. Study 27 is the only example of a study in which none of the participating examiners was from a board whose examination was being studied. In the first stage of the exercise the participants independently scrutinised photocopies of two scripts at each Ordinary level grade (and also two Unclassified scripts) from each of the four boards. In addition they studied the syllabuses, question papers and mark schemes with the aim of identifying 'appropriate educational criteria against which candidates'

¹ Op.cit p 49

^{2,3} Ibid. p 51

⁴ v.sup. p 197

performance could be judged'. The participants met and agreed that the following criteria would be used:

- (a) knowledge of set books;
- (b) relevant use of knowledge;
- (c) expression of a personal response.

In the second stage of each study each board was represented by ten scripts at the lowest mark for each of grades A, C and E: each of the participants gave a scaled mark (3 for average, 4 or 5 for better than average and 2 or 1 for worse than average) to each of the 40 scripts at each of the grade borderlines. Each criterion was considered separately. The report of the study regrets that this idea of using scaled marks as norms was unfortunately 'not wholly successful': it was recognised, moreover, that the relative judgements made were not altogether trustworthy because the participants had found difficulty both in establishing and in applying norms. Nevertheless it must be noted that they were required to compare the scripts with one another and *not* with any concept of the appropriate standards in their minds.

The examiners commented on two aspects of the design of this study.... First, difficulties were experienced in making comparisons simply because of the differences among the syllabuses.....Second, the participating examiners expressed the view that the findings might well have been different had a different selection of scripts been used. ...The fact that Study 27 yielded but one tentative finding – about WJEC's standard at the C/D borderline when compared with AEB, NI and O & C – must not be allowed to detract from the importance and value of this particular study. As has been said, the participants were required to define criteria by which to judge the scripts of the four boards; therefore attention was paid to what it was that the candidates were able to do, a strategy which had not been followed prior to 1975. Because this report on English Literature provided detailed statistical information, it was possible for Christie and Forrest (1981) to make further analysis of the data. They showed that for O & C the relative emphasis of the three criteria listed above were identical at the three grade boundaries. With NI the criteria varied in emphasis from grade to grade. With WJEC the relationship between "knowledge" and "relevant use of knowledge" changed significantly and regularly from grade to grade whereas AEB showed a pattern quite different from those of the other three boards. Christie and Forrest concluded that the AEB might be making use of some other criterion which had not been taken into account."¹

It is an interesting speculation as to what criterion might legitimately have been given more weight by a Board devising examinations in English literature, than knowledge of the set texts, relevant use of that knowledge and the expression of a personal response to the texts concerned. Perhaps fortunately, it is a question to which we can never know the answer. It is, nevertheless, an interesting milepost on the evolutionary journey of examinations in the subject, that it took until 1975 before literature scripts were evaluated on the principle of what it was that the candidates were able to do.

The final section of the *Second Review* is entitled "The design of cross-moderation exercises" and is of interest because it is expressed in a series of questions rather than providing an explanatory answer. The passage begins:

¹ Op.cit. pp 28-29

"It is difficult to write about the design and execution of cross-moderation exercises in a systematic way, because the various points to be made overlap and affect one another. To pose one problem is to pose them all, and to leave one unsettled is to leave them all unsettled. We suggest several kinds of questions which have to be tackled, set out in the order in which one encounters them in the design of a study." ¹

It is this multi-dimensional complexity which lies at the heart of all attempts to define and measure standards, and perhaps also at the heart of the long-running distrust between politicians and those who work in education. The recent disputes over "league-tables" are but the latest symptom of a fundamental division in thought and approach between the two sides. As has been more than once observed, what the politician seeks is a simple, readily grasped measure such as used to be provided by the once ubiquitous IQ test. It is for this reason that the National Curriculum, particularly in its original form, placed so much emphasis on levels of attainment, to be expressed in straightforward numbers on a 1-10 scale. It is easy enough to ridicule such a simplistic approach, as individuals like Ted Wragg have regularly shown. But such reactions are played, almost exclusively, to a pedagogic and proficient audience and do not greatly advance the professional position in the world at large.

The persistent failure of the education system not only to provide a clear cut system of weights and measures, but to accept that such a thing can meaningfully exist, serves only, given the manifest simplicity of the request, to convince the outside world of another Machiavellian piece of obstructionism by the educational mafia to avoid being called to account for their own inadequacies.

Professional insistences on comparing like with like, such as that tables of achievement make sense only if a 'value added' component is built in to statements of performance, are inclined to fall on deaf ears, because deafness is a convenient cover for incomprehension. Nevertheless, it has to be acknowledged that a genuine understanding of what statistics actually tell us is hard-won and time-consuming, does not lend itself in the remotest degree to 'sound-bites', and is not assisted by the tendency of statisticians to use a language which may well shut out non-initiates. Where the education profession has, I think, failed is in the increasingly vital world of public relations, retreating in the face of unrealistic demands and dependency upon straight-

¹ Op.cit. p 43

forward, uncomplicated results into sterile erudition. Even for those with some inside knowledge of the complexities of assessment it is not too great a jump of imagination to find a niche on Swift's Isle of Laputa for an educational statistician, and the charge that those concerned with examination comparability have been sometimes more concerned with motes than beams cannot be simply dismissed with an indifferent shrug. Nor, perhaps, can it be totally refuted.

The concern for accuracy, for precise identification of the problem before offering a tentative solution, for knowing how the learning process takes place and how examinations actually affect candidate performance, for developing an awareness of the degree to which, within an examination context, the distinction between 47 and 49 is arbitrary and ephemeral, is a vital concern, an essential part of the educational process; but it is also less dramatic and much less immediate than results and percentage pass-rates, which are seen by the public as the products of that progress that really matter. Within the current demands of society, it is possible for an eighteen year old's entire hopes and prospects for the future to be changed because the examination system has decreed that his performance in a particular subject should be graded D rather than C. The system is at fault, rather than the examiners – marking and grading of 'A' level scripts was never intended to sustain such burdens of indirect responsibility. But confronted with the all too explicable demand from that eighteen year old, his parents, and perhaps his MP, that at least the D is an absolute measure of his achievement, and not a random response like the lucky numbers in a lottery, the system cannot afford to take refuge in evasion.

Conveying information to pupils and then testing accurately the degree to which they have not only retained it but made it usefully and applicably their own is not an exact science – but we live in a world that increasingly requires it to be so. If we cannot persuade the world that learning is essentially for its own sake and for self-development, and not a matter of hurdles and qualifications for external consumption, we must adapt ourselves to the accurate measurement of hurdles. If "standards" is a word we accept rather than reject as hopelessly imprecise, then we have a responsibility to establish them, which means that Grade D has to bear a fixed

definition which can be explained and upheld against question and appeal. It must certainly and beyond peradventure be constant from one examining board to another, or the days of autonomous boards are over.

In this light, some of the concluding paragraphs of the *Second Review*, commenting on the difficulties of deriving exact information from comparability studies seem to lack an appropriate sense of urgency:

What is the basic aim of the exercise?

Should it be to ratify (or repudiate) the equivalence of current grading practices, or to identify equivalent points on the various mark scales? The choice is crucial, since ratification requires a deep narrow sample (clustered around selected borderlines), and identification a broad one (taken across a range of performances likely to include the points which are going to be identified as equivalents) and consequently a shallow one. Identification gives results with less confidence, but repudiation makes it difficult for boards to take corrective action.

How many boards should be involved?

If all boards are involved in a study, the scrutineers have to master many syllabuses, and this may make their scrutiny superficial. If not all are involved, the results are difficult to interpret in a national context: a board out of step with others in the study may be the only one in step with those outside the study. Alternatively, are incomplete designs practicable? If each scrutineer looks at some of the participating boards only, essential discussion may be inhibited, and examiners taking part may be able to take from the meeting the kind of feel for standards which is the best means of carrying the results of the study forward into future grading sessions."¹

Yet again we are reminded of that essential "feel" for standards on which the whole edifice essentially depends, and however difficult it may be to define it or to make it scientifically or politically acceptable, it works. Moreover, it works better, if this series of questions and part-answers is to be credited, than any statistical analysis yet devised. The problem of individual overload implicit in seeking to measure the original nine boards against each other simultaneously was a very real one, but there is no consideration given here to the possibility of using examiners with a genuine and established 'feel' for standards in parallel exercises. Let one group satisfy themselves as to the comparability of Boards A, B and C; a second group as to that between D, E and F; and a third group as to that between G, H and I. Once everybody is satisfied as to these limited ends, let the groups be reassigned to compare A, D and G; B, E and H and so on. A crude and down to earth solution, but not as self-exculpatory and defeatist as apologists for inherent difficulties are wont to sound.

¹ Op.cit. p 43

However, as I have intimated above, the fault of comparability moderation lies more in its lack of self-conviction and inability to resist excessive complication than in any widespread variation of standards between the examinations themselves. Nothing in either of the two reviews so far examined gives more than the most minute and sectionalised ground for concern and the same can be said with some confidence of subsequent publications.

In 1994 there was published by the GCE Examining Boards an executive summary of a report commissioned from the Curriculum, Evaluation and Management Centre at the University of Newcastle. Entitled *Comparing Examining Boards and Syllabuses at A Level: students' grades, attitudes and perceptions of classroom processes*, the document itself is something of a disappointment, consisting as it does of a mere sixteen pages. Nevertheless, it provides evidence of the most comprehensive investigation so far into the comparability of A level papers from all eight examining boards in twelve different subjects. The work of 51,220 candidates for examination was considered, as were 171 separate A level syllabuses in Art; English Language; English Literature; French; History; Geography; Economics; Maths; Further Maths; Biology; Chemistry; Physics.

"The aim was to compare variations, by Board and by syllabus, of three aspects of A levels, 'standards' or apparent 'severity' in grading, students' attitudes to the subjects studied, and students' perceptions of the teaching and learning processes adopted."¹

On a more broadly educational front the third of these areas might well have proved the most rewarding, but it is, of course, the first which is material to this paper, as it was unquestionably the most important to the boards who commissioned the investigation and who end their Executive Summary happily with the observation:

"While there are many interesting findings within the CEM Centre report from the perspective of Board Comparability, one finding is particularly worthy of note. After comparing each pair of Boards and each pair of syllabuses, a between-Board difference of more than half a grade was found in only one comparison out of more than 350."

The four principal findings of the report were

- (1) the standards upheld by the Boards were commendably equivalent;
- (2) Students' attitudes to their 'A' level subjects showed no significant variation across subjects or Boards;
- (3) Learning and teaching activities varied substantially from subject to subject but not across Boards;

¹ Op.cit. p 6

² Ibid. p 4

(4) Syllabus differences in terms of student attitude and learning activities generally showed very minor variations;¹

all of which must have provided the various Boards with some degree of satisfaction. There were very few cavills on the way to these conclusions, though two are worthy of note:

"If examination results improve there are many possible explanations: for example, the grading was lenient, the teaching was more effective, students worked harder, the students taking the examinations were more able, or any combination of these factors. Over recent years the pass-rates at both age 16 and age 18 have improved although increasing proportions of the year groups have been entered for examinations. Whether or not there have been changes in absolute standards is not an issue addressed here. Rather the question is one of relative studies between Examination Boards."²

and

"A more intractable problem was the difference between absolute 'criterion-referenced' and relative 'norm-referenced' standards. The kind of statistical analysis undertaken for this report can only deal with relative standards. If some syllabuses consistently resulted in greater motivation and higher performance this could not be distinguished, statistically, from somewhat lenient grading."³

This in no way modified the generally encouraging tone of the Report or its positive endorsement of the achievements of the Boards in moving ever closer to absolute comparability:

"These general findings provide reassurance to a number of bodies. The general equivalence of Boards and syllabuses will be welcomed by schools and colleges who wish to choose syllabuses on the basis of their educational content without the worry of disadvantaging their students by the risk of choosing a severely graded syllabus. It is also a finding which is reassuring to those who have to interpret grades, such as careers officers, admissions officers and employers: they need not try to make adjustments for Boards or syllabuses."⁴

The concluding paragraph of the Report provides a final encomium, even as it warns against complacency:

"As assessment systems continue to change, with modular courses, vocational awards and innovative syllabuses, it is important that the developments are carefully and efficiently monitored. Such monitoring can assist in maintaining the confidence which is accorded, rightly it seems, to the Examination Boards by the public, business and industry."⁵

How far that general conviction can survive the increasing pressure of future developments is an interesting speculation: the survey of GCSE grading committees recently carried out by a Nottingham University team under Professor Roger Murphy⁶

¹ Op.cit. p 5

² Ibid. p 7

³ Ibid p 8

⁴ Ibid p 9

⁵ Ibid p 16

⁶ *The Dynamics of GCSE Awarding* - A report of a project commissioned by SCAA, 1996.

suggests that problems may arise in the form of clashes between those with a 'feel' for examination standards and the less flexible approaches of SCAA observers, by which they feel themselves devalued; but whether this is so or not, such clashes can have no retrospective impact. For the period between 1944 and 1988, or at least that part of it in which GCE examining boards had an independent role in the setting and maintaining of educational standards, they carried it out, and can be shown to have carried it out, with commendable consistency and integrity.

Of course, as we were twice reminded in the two *Reviews of GCE Board studies*¹, comparability between Boards, even if the most likely to arouse concern, is not the only aspect of the subject to deserve and receive attention. The Schools Council commissioned a variety of research projects during the course of its existence, and one of these, carried out by Willmott and Nuttall, entitled *The Reliability of Examinations at 16+*, and published in 1975, provides the second of the quotations which stand at the head of this chapter. The conclusion, that "the level of reliability is as high as might reasonably be expected", ² is comforting to those of us who are not entirely at home with the terminology of statistical analysis, and even if one bears in mind that "the reasonable expectations" are those of a trained statistician rather than the man in the street, the implication is clearly that the authors found the examinations they studied fairly convincing so far as the awarding of grades was concerned. The purpose of the survey is explained as follows:

"The concept of reliability (the accuracy and consistency of the mark awarded to a candidate) and that of its interpretation are explained....and the report considers the many factors that might cause a candidate's mark to vary had he taken an examination on another occasion or had his script been marked by another examiner. The results of the analysis of 83 CSE examinations held in 1969 and 1970 and 29 GCE O-level examinations held in 1970 and 1971 are presented. In addition to the reliability of the complete examinations, the results include details of the reliabilities of different parts of the examinations and of the relationships between them."³

It is on this basis that the conclusion already quoted is arrived at, and as I have said, the only reaction that can be based upon it in a consideration of standards, is that examination results are sufficiently reliable to be used as a basis for such considerations – which is by no means the same as saying that every examination result is totally

¹ v.sup. pp 187 & 199

² Op.cit. Abstract

³ Ibid.

reliable. Indeed, the gloss which Nuttall and Willmott put upon their rider that "in common with all assessments of human beings, the results from these examinations are far from being perfectly precise" is that

"In terms of a five point grading scale.....the typical margin for error is one grade in either direction from the grade actually awarded; in other words all that can properly be said about a candidate awarded a grade 3 is that his 'true' grade.....lies within the range grade 2 to grade 4." ¹

This finding should be borne in mind when we examine a second School Council Research Study which has more direct bearing upon the topic of this thesis, that conducted by Christie and Forrest into *Standards at GCE A-level: 1963 and 1973*. This work, not published until 1980, set out to explore a comparatively little visited area of educational research:

"Of the aspects of examination comparability that have been studied, comparability of standards in a subject between years is the one which has received least attention. Lack of work is due not so much to lack of interest as to the obvious difficulty in producing reliable answers when neither the examinations, nor the candidates, nor the conditions are held constant. Many are sceptical of the possibility of compensating for changes in the syllabus or for changes in attitude towards a particular subject." ²

This particular survey considered three subjects: maths, chemistry and English Literature, using a team of highly experienced examiners of proven competence and consistency to apply the techniques of 1973 to a bunch of scripts originally submitted and marked in 1963 and subsequently stored in the archive of the Joint Matriculation Board. Of the twelve examiners who worked on each subject, nine were from the 'home' (JMB) board, and the other three from another board, London in the case of both maths and English Literature, Cambridge in the case of chemistry. The twelve were divided into groups of three, with the 'outsiders' forming a discrete group, and each group was given a slightly different focus of concentration in their approach to the 1963 scripts: all groups were, however, given exactly the same starting point:

"Having been sent copies of the 1973 syllabus, the 1973 question papers, the 1973 mark scheme as finally agreed and used, as well as a selection of marked 1973 scripts, the examiners were asked to refamiliarize themselves with the 1973 syllabus and grading standards." ³

In other words, the object of the exercise was for experienced examiners to immerse themselves as fully as possible in the approach to grading currently applied, and then

¹ Op.cit. *Abstract*

² Op.cit. *Preface* p xi

³ Ibid. p 11

to apply that approach to the thirty 1963 scripts provided, all photocopied and with all traces of the original marking and grading processes removed, each of which was marked independently by each of the examiners. As the authors make clear, those thirty scripts were not an ideal cross-section of scripts from ten years previously, nor were they a random selection, but simply what happened to be available. They had been chosen from the archive as being, apart from one or two of the best performances of the year, illustrations of the lowest mark for each of the grades A, B, E, and O* and were thus all borderline scripts from the upper and lower end of the mark range with nothing from the more numerous and more typical middle. Twenty-four of the scripts had been awarded one or other of the pass-grades, and the remaining six had been failed. Unlike the circumstances affecting the survey of maths and chemistry, there had been no change in syllabus for English Literature over the intervening period

"and the type of questions set...remained largely unchanged over the period in question, although the nature of the answers required reflects a change in emphasis which has occurred in the teaching of the subject itself; in general there has been a move away from content to questions of form and structure."

The results of the English survey are interesting.

Of the 6 original 'fail' scripts, one 'homebased' group agreed that 1 should pass: the other two JMB groups together with the London examiners' group agreed that all 6 should fail.

On the 24 'pass' scripts, however, there was less unanimity. The group which had found one pass among the original failures found only 19 passes among the historically successful, while the second group and the London group made it 17-7, and the remaining group only 15-9. Of the ninety separate results of the JMB examiners' marking of the 1963 papers, 27 finished at their original grade, 45 were given a lower grade, and 18 were moved up; while the London verdicts on their thirty scripts left 6 unchanged (obviously the original failures), lowered the grades of 19 and raised those of the remaining 5.

Left to my own devices as a layman in the field of statistical analysis, I should have

* Grade O meant "allowed an O level pass. It was replaced by Grade N in 1988

1 Op.cit. p 9

interpreted these figures as evidence of a slight raising of standards over the period.

The authors, however, are more cautious:

"at the E/O borderline ...we can conclude that there has been a real downward shift in Mathematics. In English Literature the pass-rates suggest a trend towards tightening of standards but the examining is not sufficiently reliable for the average shift....upwards to reach significance.....In Chemistry no final conclusion can be reached." ¹

What they do suspect is that the considerable increase in the number of candidates over the ten year period may well have had an effect upon standards because at this stage A-level was still norm-referenced; that is to say that each grade was allocated a more-or-less fixed proportion of the total candidature, and an increase in the spread of ability of candidates, introducing a significant "tail" of inadequates, would clearly, in such circumstances, lower the level of ability required to obtain a pass-grade.

Even this conclusion, however, is not entirely supported by the evidence of this survey.

The actual change in entry numbers is charted as follows:

	1963	1973
English Literature	7730	15913
Mathematics	8137	10062
Chemistry	8252	8823

and the authors comment:

"At face value, then, the evidence can be held to support the general notion that there is now a 'tail' in the sixth form which has its effects on A-level standards through the guidelines provided for the boards of passing something in the region of eighty per cent of candidates. One non-JMB examiner suggested that because there had been little change in the numbers of candidates offering mathematics he would not expect there to be a decline in standards. Were the 'tail' hypothesis to hold good, then of the three subjects English Literature should have shown the most massive downgrading of the E/O borderline. It is the only subject of the three which has benefited to the full from the increased size of the sixth-form population. And yet it is the only subject which shows any evidence of a tightening of E/O standards. We would conclude that between 1963 and 1973 more does not mean worse in English Literature." ²

What may be, I believe, of more value to the examination of standards in A level English examination performance over this period than some rather uncertain statistical evidence, is the response of some of the individual examiners engaged in the project to the ten year old scripts which they had been asked to re-evaluate:

¹ Op.cit. p 61

² Ibid. pp 61-62

"There was no consensus of opinion as to whether there was a difference in standard between the years 1963 and 1973. Although examiner A, group 1, reported that '1973 candidates may have had more sophisticated demands made on them but the 1963 paper now looks rather cruel!', he went on to say 'Anyway in looking at marks for response to what was asked for no actual pattern or comparison emerged; the main impression was that there seemed to have been no radical change one way or another.'" ¹

Other examiners are reported to have commented, not entirely consistently:

"the standard of questions set in Paper I and Paper II [of 1973] seemed the same as that of the 1963 papers"

"Within the limits of the question papers set in 1963, the performance of the candidates whose scripts were remarked seemed to me not to vary much from the performances (over the ranges) of candidates in 1973.I think the 1973 type of papers to be at once more interesting, more demanding and probably more rewarding for candidates to do."

"I felt the 1963 candidates were not being tested as rigorously as those of 1973, and certain questions could gain quite high marks for a kind of answer which was not available to the 1973 candidates."

"The 1963 Paper I was an extremely demanding physical exercise by modern standards, and one can hardly divorce from it the intellectual strain." ²

The pattern which begins to emerge from these encapsulated observations is clarified by longer extracts from examiners' reports on the exercise:

"The great difference lies in the opportunities offered in 1973 not available in 1963, particularly in Paper I, where the practical criticism gave only limited opportunities both in scope and in time-allowance, compared with the equivalent 1973 Paper III. In particular, the 1973 Practical Criticism laid much less stress on comprehension, directing the attention of candidates more to the consideration of aims and techniques of writing.The omission of the 'paraphrase' exercise from the 1973 paper enabled much greater stress to be laid upon the dramatic purposes and the literary interest of the passages set, and the addition of the Shakespeare 'extract' question had much the same effect of causing candidates to look at specific passages in much greater depth than was possible in 1963.All in all, in 1963, the questions seemed to me to be less open-ended, less precise in their requirements, more susceptible to treatment via learning rather than thinking, than their 1973 equivalents." ³

"It was clear enough from my marks that I was not over-impressed by the candidates, but I found it not easy to decide where possibly acceptable material in 1963 became unacceptable by 1973 standards. What chiefly seemed to be missing was evidence of critical acumen - though the questions did not demand this on the same scale as the present papers."

"It seemed clear to me.....that the examination now requires more (or perhaps merely something different) from the candidates, and that this something else is a gain in so far as genuine literary appreciation is now expected and that candidates can get away even less than they could in the past with mere rote-learning and hazy ideas." ⁴

¹ Op.cit. pp 65-66

² Ibid. p 66

³ Ibid pp 66-67

⁴ Ibid p 67

Only one examiner seemed to feel even a possibility that the change of 'standard' in the sense of 'exercise of required abilities' might not have been entirely in a positive, or 'improved' direction:

"In 1963 questions often assumed knowledge of technicalities and of textual details that are not, on the whole, nowadays thought to be vital. The writers seem to be conscious of the value of precision, though it was difficult to be sure that they were as at home as some of those in 1973 in dealing with larger issues. A change in attitudes was apparent. It is fairly certain that 1973 candidates could not tackle some of the requirements of the 1963 papers; but there was no chance of trying the matter the other way round."¹

This suggestion that in an unspecified area something may have been lost is obviously important, but apart from "technicalities and textual details not nowadays thought to be vital" the only hint is that the earlier candidates were "conscious of the value of precision." This seems to me almost certainly to tie in with the passing observation² recorded above "the 1963 paper now looks rather cruel", and is effectively amplified by the joint report of the team of London examiners, who, having no connection with the board which had produced them, clearly felt less inhibited about saying what they thought of the JMB's 1963 papers:

"Paper I seemed to us to be very badly balanced. Good candidates are penalized by a five-question paper; they cannot organize five clearly developed answers in the time at their disposal. A five-question paper is especially bad when three questions may be chosen which require careful preliminary study and analysis. Candidates are forced to produce their answers before they have had adequate time to digest the material before them; we had many examples of incomplete or obviously rushed scripts."³

Clearly candidates were likely to develop a sense of the value of precision in such circumstances, and the necessity will have been enjoined upon them. What is clear is that the London examiners have remained entirely '1973-based' in their thinking, and have not made adequate allowance for the change of ethos, as illustrated in another of the passing remarks already quoted, that 1963 questions were designed to test learning rather than thinking. This observation reflects some of the comments of serving teachers reported in the first chapter of this thesis, and the general tenor of development which those comments illustrate; which is turn reflected by the London examiners in this research project, when they observe:

"We found the general standards of expression – grammar, spelling and

¹ Op.cit. p 67

² v.sup. p 211

³ Op.cit. pp 169-170

matters of technique as a whole – rather higher than those of today. Originality of thought was not so evident. This may be partly the fault of the question papers.....or it may be because there is rather more enlightened teaching in the better schools today than there was in 1963." ¹

The matter of a decline in "matters of technique as a whole" – grammar, spelling and punctuation – is that aspect of "standards" most frequently seized upon by the lay critic of educational achievements, and Christie and Forrest highlight the reaction of the examiners generally to this aspect of their survey:

"Of the four examiners [apart from the three members of the London group] who commented on the differences between 1963 and 1973 scripts in terms of punctuation, spelling etc. only one felt that there had been little change.....The other three were definitely of the opinion that there had been a deterioration over the period:

'Though there were some aberrations in spelling, my impression was that these scripts suffered less from complete disregard of punctuation and construction than those of recent years, and that there was a better command of normal vocabulary and less confusion as to the meaning of the key-words than we have become accustomed to of late'

'I found that bad spelling and badly shaped English were rare in the 1963 scripts. The general level of literacy, even amongst those whose work was poor in other respects, was pretty high.'

In comparison with scripts of 1973 the 1963 papers were generally superior in presentation and were remarkable for absence of errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar.'" ²

These views, combined with those of the London group writing collectively, mean that half the total of twelve examiners recognised a decline in the general level of grasp of the technicalities of English usage, one believed that there was no great change, and five did not feel the subject warranted comment. One suspects that this would be precisely the result that my hypothetical lay critic might have expected. "The decline in standards is unquestionably there, but half the English specialists do not even notice it" one can imagine him saying, and it is at this point that the real implication of the increase in the number of A level English candidates becomes apparent. Correctness in spoken and written English is not just a matter for schools and teachers, but is very considerably affected by social background. The candidates in 1963 would have been very substantially drawn from grammar schools, and one of the functions of the grammar school in those days was pointed out to me early in my career as an English teacher by a parent of a new entrant at the end of the first term for both of us –

"I'm not bothered about exams and such, so long as you learn him to speak proper."

¹ Op.cit p 169

² Ibid. pp 67-68

It was by no means uncommon at that time for children to become bilingual in received standard English (for classroom use and subsequently for interviews and 'where it mattered') and in the local dialect (at home, in the playground, and when relaxed.) It was, indeed, a kind of compliment when a youngster felt sufficiently at ease with a member of staff to drop the more formal locutions. By 1973, far fewer pupils bothered to acquire the more polished approach, and the comprehensive system was becoming widespread. I shall deal with the sociological implications of this transition in more detail in my final chapter; here it is sufficient to say that the increase of more than 100% in the candidate entry is a clear indication of a very substantial increase in the number of candidates who would not have been accustomed to hearing the received standard speech forms from their infancy, and who would not have grown up taking the company of books for granted. The London examiners do not regard the influx of the new type of candidate with a great deal of sympathy, but at least they acknowledge the change in a comment which follows on directly from the observation that teaching was more enlightened in 1973 than in 1963:

" - although against this must be set the vastly greater amount of bad teaching that has resulted from the unnatural increase in the numbers of A-level candidates. It is perhaps relevant to mention also the somewhat changed climate in the classrooms of many schools, where the pupil is less inclined than formerly to accept standard critical judgements and is more anxious to develop his own. At its best, this produces lively and individual criticism; at its worst, mere rubbish. As a general comment, we felt that there were very few questions that invited a fresh personal response; too many that invited mere narration or the regurgitation of prepared material." ¹

There are elements in this which grate on the sensibilities somewhat - the dismissive 'mere rubbish' is unfortunately typical of examiner reports² in the first two decades of the GCE exam, and we are probably better off not knowing what aspect, precisely, of the increase in A level candidates seemed to them to deserve the description 'unnatural'. Nevertheless, they summarise very neatly why an increase in the number of technical corrections to a script is not synonymous with a decline in standards, and why, despite these flaws, the examiners are generally satisfied that the later papers are nearer to what the teaching and examining of English ought to be about. There is no longer much reward for the slavish reproduction of carefully prepared material, or demand for the

¹ Op.cit. p 169

² eg., v.inf p 419

kind of question carefully designed to elicit it. The only additional comment from the authors is that

"Clearly it is always going to be difficult to monitor standards in English Literature. As one increases the number of examiners, the calibre of additional individual examiners may well drop." ¹

which illustrates appropriately enough the very real concern of academic statisticians that no unforeseen variable should be allowed to contaminate their conclusions: and perhaps also illustrates why politicians in search of a sound-bite become impatient with statisticians. I am still inclined to hold to my personal interpretation that what is established here is a raising of the prevailing standard of English teaching, reflected in a transition from the kind of question that demanded a good memory (together, of course, with the sensitivity to select appropriately from the memory bank) to the kind of question which demands a personal response and involvement. That this raising of standard is not invalidated by a concomitant decline in technical accuracy among weaker candidates (described by the London examiners as 'a tail of candidates who should never have been allowed to sit A-level English papers' ²) is a personal opinion and is open to dispute: what is not open to dispute is the fact that there is nothing here which gives realistic support to the contention that an actual lowering of standards took place between 1963 and 1973.

A final thread of information from this particular piece of research comes from an examination of the spread of grades actually awarded by the four teams of examiners to each of the thirty 1963 scripts. In only two cases did all four teams give the same grade as that originally awarded; both were Grade A and conjecturally the two "best scripts" which we were told this particular archive contained. That all four groups of examiners unanimously recognised a quality which they felt that the papers were ill-designed to elicit demonstrates, I think, that the ability to rise beyond the limits of the examination question is one which has always characterised students of real quality, and one that even bad teaching cannot entirely suppress. A third original Grade A was allocated AABB by the examiners, and may well also have been an original 'prize' script. The three remaining original A grade scripts (presumably just above the 1963

¹ Op.cit. p 48

² Ibid. p 168

A/B borderline) were allocated BBBB; BCDD; and CCDE respectively, which seems to me to suggest fairly clearly that the original A grades had been earned by sheer slog and accurate deployment of well-drilled information rather than by any sort of flair or feeling for the subject which later examiners would associate inalienably with the top grade. There were six original Grade B scripts, all by definition just above the B/C borderline. To these, the examining groups awarded respectively AAAB; AABB; ABBC; BCCD; BDDO; and DDDD. In the absence of the scripts themselves there is room for almost limitless speculation on the possible grounds for this wide variety of response from experienced and competent examiners. Within the given context, and knowing what we do of the examiners' reactions in general, I would hazard a guess that the first two of these showed traces of insight beyond what the questions required and thus ignored by the original examiner; and that the fifth script was from an individual, even idiosyncratic, candidate which required an individual response from the examiners rather than reliance on the circulated mark-scheme. The others are all straightforward instances of a higher level of expectation. There were twelve scripts which had been originally awarded E – doubtless so many at this level were included because the E/O borderline has the added significance of discrimination between pass and fail, and the board wished the archive to have as full a range as possible of scripts indicating a bare pass. Eight of these were conventionally relegated to the O/F area in differing proportions, again a clear indication that work which scraped a pass in 1963 was not regarded as of pass status ten years later, and two of the others were considered to be hovering on the D/E boundary. This leaves only two which were regarded considerably more highly than by the original marker : they were awarded BBCC and CCDE respectively. Again guesswork suggests scripts that showed some signs of individual flair more highly regarded by the later examiners, and possibly also some technical weaknesses more heavily penalised by the earlier. There remain only the six original Grade O scripts, and, as we have already seen, the re-marking allocated a total of 1E grade, 10 O grades and 13 F grades: a remarkably consistent set of reactions.¹ All in all, the trend is consistent – and downwards. And, in so far as it is

¹ Op.cit. p 172 (Appendix G)

possible to relate an examination standard to a marking trend, any change in that standard cannot also be downward.

Another research analysis project examining the standards of English performance over a period of time, and published in 1996, was conducted by A J Massey and G L Elliott, under the auspices of the Research and Evaluation Division of the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate; and deals specifically with the concern that technical competence in the use of the English Language was steadily declining as generation after generation of schoolchildren reached their final examinations and the school-leaving age. Entitled *Aspects of Writing in 16+ English Examinations Between 1980 and 1994*, it has a subtitle which makes its content even more explicit, and focuses directly upon the one area in which there is a legitimate suspicion of a decline in standard, even if that suspicion is complicated by the fact of an ever-widening band of candidates: "Vocabulary, Spelling, Punctuation, Sentence Structure, Non-Standard English and their Implications for comparability of Grading Standards."

The authors' starting point was the common perception of a decline in standards, and the very real difficulty of collecting hard evidence to support, or refute, it:

"Schools critics often declare that 'standards' have fallen since some perceived golden age but usually present only anecdotal evidence if any to back their claims. Teachers of English have faced their fair share of this, including suggestions that recent school leavers lack some 'basic skills' in written English. More objectively, a series of national surveys of the reading performance of 15/16 year olds suggested that reading standards rose slightly between 1948 and 1952, and then held steady until 1979. From 1979 to 1988 a series of Assessment of Performance Unit tests monitored achievements at this age in both reading and writing and suggested that levels of performance in England and Wales were unchanged. APU monitoring also suggested that the quality of spelling by 15-16 year olds was unchanged across the period 1980-1992.

Similarly, suggestions that public examinations have let the standards of their awards slip over the years are difficult to prove or disprove. Here, as in allegations of declining performance in schools, the water is muddied by changing participation rates and the variety of meanings of the concept of 'standards' commonly applied in educational discourse. The proportion of sixteen year olds entering and succeeding in public examinations has increased substantially over the last two decades, and success rates in English are higher than those for any other subject. For some critics 'more' automatically means 'worse', although others, including quasi-governmental bodies, exhort schools to improve standards of teaching and learning: seemingly anticipating higher and higher pass-rates." ¹

It is interesting that the 'more equals worse' concept was also used ² by Christie and

¹ Op.cit. p 5

² v.sup. pp 213-214

Forrest, sixteen years earlier, in the sentence "We would conclude that between 1963 and 1973 more does not mean worse in English Literature". The conviction that it usually does in educational matters has clearly been enshrined in the thinking processes of a category of critics of the educational scene for a long time – and in my opinion is the nucleus or progenitor of much of the debate upon standards which currently so preoccupies educational thinking and research: it will therefore be the underlying theme of the final chapter of this thesis. Massey and Elliott sought to tackle the validity of the idea by a detailed analysis of the linguistic quality of O level/GCSE English Language examination papers completed in 1980, 1993, and 1994. The method adopted may be summarised as follows. For each of the three years they took the scripts of 30 boys and 30 girls who had been awarded each of the grades available to candidates in the year in question, selected so that each of the pupils concerned came from a different school.

This gave them 300* scripts for 1980 (60 each for O level Grades A to E); 420 for 1993 (GCSE added Grades F and G) and 450 for 1994 (the year in which Grade A* was added to the system) In each script the fourth sentence (defined for this purpose as the writing between two consecutive full stops) of the main essay answer was isolated, and then subjected to a variety of tests.

In the first test, the focus was on the complexity of the structure of the sentence thus selected, and of the capacity to employ longer words. The average number of words used by pupils in each grade, together with the average number of letters in the words deployed, is given in the table on page 219.¹ Here I wish to concentrate on the figures for the totality of entries for each year group.

	1980	1993	1994
Grades A-E characters per word	4.2	4.1	4.0
words per sentence	21.3	21.8	21.7
Grades A*-G characters per word		4.0	3.9
words per sentence		23.4	23.7

At first glance, there do not appear to be any significant changes in the figures over

* In practice, 299. Only 29 scripts from boys were available at Grade C

¹ Op.cit. p 18

the twelve year period – certainly no changes which might affect a theory of standards, but the fact that A to C figures indicate a higher number of words per sentence than do those for the more limited A to E range demonstrates just how carefully such information has to be interpreted. The obvious assumption underlying this part of the research is that the ability to write longer sentences, perhaps incorporating qualifying words, phrases and clauses, is a mark of the more competent and fluent writer. Such an assumption receives an initial jar from the realisation that the least able candidates actually increase the average number of words, until it is recalled firstly that the definition of a sentence for this research is not that given in grammar books, but simply the number of words between two consecutive full stops, and secondly that is a mark of the least literate students that they have a tendency to write long rambling constructions pinned together with conjunctions, or, as the authors put it, "many of the long sentences by weak candidates stemmed from their inability to put full stops where required." ¹ The only way to obtain any significant information from this particular aspect of the analysis of 1169 sentences is to study the change over the years on a grade by grade basis:

		1980			1993			1994		
		boys	girls	total	boys	girls	total	boys	girls	total
GRADE A*	(1) Characters per word							4.3	4.1	4.2
	(2) Words per sentence							18.0	19.1	18.6
GRADE A	(1)	4.5	4.2	4.4	4.1	4.1	4.1	4.2	4.3	4.2
	(2)	24.9	20.8	22.9	15.0	18.8	16.9	19.3	16.5	17.9
GRADE B	(1)	4.3	4.3	4.3	4.5	4.3	4.4	4.1	4.0	4.1
	(2)	20.5	20.3	20.4	19.7	24.7	22.2	19.5	18.9	19.2
GRADE C	(1)	4.3	4.1	4.2	4.2	4.2	4.2	4.1	4.0	4.0
	(2)	22.3	19.8	22.1	17.5	17.1	17.3	19.3	20.2	19.8
GRADE D	(1)	4.4	4.0	4.2	3.9	4.0	4.0	3.9	3.9	3.9
	(2)	22.1	23.8	23.0	23.7	23.8	23.8	33.7	24.5	29.1
GRADE E	(1)	4.2	4.1	4.2	4.0	4.0	4.0	3.9	3.8	3.9
	(2)	19.7	20.0	19.9	33.0	24.3	28.7	31.2	19.5	25.4
GRADE F	(1)				3.8	3.8	3.8	3.5	3.8	3.6
	(2)				27.8	27.0	27.4	37.7	30.0	33.6
GRADE G	(1)				3.8	3.8	3.8	3.5	3.8	3.6
	(2)				27.8	17.5	22.7	30.4	30.0	26.3

¹ Op. cit. p 18

Even with this spread of information it is hard to make any great conclusions out of this piece of analysis. It is clearly the case that Grade A candidates in 1980 wrote longer sentences and used longer words than those to whom lower grades were awarded. But if this regarded as a mark of quality until one reaches the lower levels of literacy, then it is difficult to explain why C and D candidates should have scored higher than those who obtained Grade B. The validity of the point that lengthy sentences are an indication of poor grammatical control at the bottom end of the ability spectrum is clearly illustrated by the scores at Grades F and G for GCSE – a category of pupil who would not normally have been considered for O level thirteen years earlier; and it is noticeable that this effect seems to be creeping upwards into Grade E and even (for boys in 1994) Grade D which could be a possible indication of declining standards; and the same point might be made by contrasting the Grade A figures for 1980 with the A and A* figures from the 1990s. Again, however, we notice that GCSE Grade B candidates seem to out-perform in this test their presumably brighter colleagues with Grades A and A*: I would hesitate to draw any solid conclusions from this evidence.

The next test concerned vocabulary. Words were classified from Levels 1 to 7 in accordance with their frequency of use as laid down in the Cambridge English Lexicon, with level 1 containing the commonest 598 words in the language, level 2 the next commonest 617 words, and so on. The figures provided give under the same headings as in the previous table the percentage usages within the sentences studied of words from levels 1–4, words from level 5, and words from levels 6/7. I have amalgamated the last two figures and combined the sexes in the following table.

	A*	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
1980		9.7	8.9	9.4	8.2	8.3		
1993		6.4	8.4	6.8	4.2	4.7	3.4	2.8
1994	7.1	4.8	6.3	4.1	3.0	4.0	2.3	1.9

In these figures, too, there are inconsistencies and anomalies, but what does seem fairly unambiguous is that there has been a decline in familiarity with words in less common usage, and coupled with the vaguer implications of the earlier test, it does

seem possible to conclude that, over the period of thirteen years, the vocabularies, even of the most successful students had been measurably narrowed, to the extent that not even the best students of 1994 have as broad a vocabulary as the weakest O level candidate of 1980. However, the comparison with the figures for 1993 gives a much less damaging picture, and if taken literally, would suggest that the decline in what the Anglo-Saxons would have called the word-hoard is on a very sharply increasing curve. An alternative explanation would, of course, be that a single sentence from each script is too small a sample for reliable measurement.

The third test was on spelling, and all instances of misspelling were counted under two headings, defined by the authors as "straightforward misspellings and wrong meaning errors, where accurately spelled homophones for the word required were used".¹

The pattern here mirrors fairly closely what the researchers had found in respect of vocabulary – that in 1980 candidates had performed better than those of 1993, and much better than those of 1994. Examples, rather than the entire range of figures will suffice here to make the point.

In 1980 the thirty male candidates at Grade A made a total of four spelling mistakes but no uses of the wrong homophone; the thirty girls made no spelling mistakes but did have one wrong homophone:– a grand total of 5, or a total for the group of 0.004 errors per hundred words. In 1993 Grade A boys made a total of two errors and the girls only one: grand total 3 or 0.003 per hundred words; Grade B produced a total of 7 (0.006) in 1980 and 13 (0.010) in 1993; Grade C 10 (0.008) in 1980 and 8 (0.008) in 1993; Grade D 12 (0.009) as against 21 (0.015); and Grade E 16 or 0.013 as against 48 (0.028).

Since the 1993 performance is actually better than that of 1980 at Grades A and C, and only at the bottom grades significantly worse, there would appear to be no great evidence of a serious decline, but once again the 1994 figures fall off much more sharply – from a total of 10 errors at Grade A* to 66 at Grade E and 167 at Grade G. The problem of accounting for the quite remarkable lack of consistency between the two consecutive years of GCSE is beginning to look more important than the fairly

¹ Op.cit p 22

small increase in spelling errors from the standards of 1980 visible in 1993. Certainly 1994 appears far more typical of the public perception of a decreasing competence – but that is by no means the same thing as saying that 1994 produced more typical results than 1993.

The next tests on the material dealt with punctuation. Since only one 'sentence' from each script was subject to analysis, results dealing with the use of the full stop must be regarded as somewhat artificial. Either the fourth 'sentence' on the script was genuinely a sentence in the strict grammatical sense, or it was not, and only in the latter case did any possibility of misuse of the full-stop arise. The 1980 candidates managed to log 43 such misusages between them, while the 1993 group at the comparable Grades A to E totalled 87, and the 1994 group a total of 64 – a rare occasion on which the later GCSE group outperformed the earlier, which perhaps reinforces my view that the test itself is unhelpful. Checks on the use of the comma and apostrophe, however, are legitimate within so small a sample of writing. It was inevitable that in both cases the misuse of both would increase dramatically as one worked down the grades, and it comes as no great surprise that the researchers abandoned the attempt to record misusages of the comma among GCSE candidates at Grades F and G. From A to E, however, the figures were as follows, with correct usages preceding misplaced and omitted commas in each pair¹:

	1980	1993	1994
A*			55/3
A	50/13	29/9	51/8
B	50/18	42/20	37/11
C	38/15	17/18	38/13
D	41/24	24/30	33/25
E	33/16	20/21	14/16

At Grades A, B and C there is very little to choose between the three year groups, but from Grade D downwards it is clear that facility in the use of the commonest of punctuation marks has deteriorated over the period. A similar exercise was carried out in respect of the use of the apostrophe, though it is probably true that schoolchildren generally are far more likely to see examples of apostrophe misuse on public display

¹ Op.cit. p 28

than any other form of usage error, which may have some influence upon their performance. The actual results obtained, similarly abbreviated from the original table,¹ and again with correct usages of the apostrophe preceding the total of incorrect insertions and omissions, appear as follows:

	1980	1993	1994
A *			24/2
A	3/2	10/2	27/6
B	10/5	12/4	22/7
C	6/4	14/3	20/7
D	6/3	25/1	15/11
E	4/2	19/15	7/10
A-E totals	29/18	80/25	91/40

Perhaps the first thing to strike the eye is the very substantial increase in usage of the apostrophe among the GCSE candidates, a factor explained by the fact that the original tables break down the figures for apostrophe usage into type. The overwhelming majority of the 1993/1994 instances of usage were to indicate an abbreviation rather than possession, as in "that's a pity". It is quite clear that this form of informality in essay writing had become perfectly acceptable, whereas in 1980 there were doubtless still many teachers who discouraged such usages as a hang-over from the days in which O level Examiners' Reports actively condemned them (except, reluctantly, in instances of reported speech). This differentiation having been made, it is still reasonably clear that the candidates from the later years handle the apostrophe more confidently than their predecessors, though there is the usual falling-off as one reaches the lower grades. Yet again, however, one's eye is drawn to the fact that not only do the better 1993 candidates appear to handle (or mishandle) the apostrophe less confidently than their parallels in the following year but that they seem to write sentences which offer fewer opportunities for its deployment whether correctly or incorrectly. The inconsistency between the apparent performances of two groups from consecutive years, based upon these tests, is given no explanation and is presumably a legitimate statistical variation within so limited a sample as is represented here. But it does suggest that if the experiment had dealt with the whole essay from each script, or even the whole first paragraph, rather than the fourth sentence, the disparities

¹ Op.cit. p 31

between 1993 and 1994 might just as well have been reversed or have disappeared altogether. And if we cannot rely upon the 1993/4 comparison, doubt must be cast upon the validity of the comparison between 1980 and either or both later years.

The final test on the correctness of punctuation lay in the usage of capital letters. Errors in such usage, whether in the failure to provide them at the beginning of a sentence or of a proper noun, or in their deployment when uncalled for, were tabulated, and I have compressed the original table ¹ as follows:

	1980	1993	1994
A*			2
A	3	0	2
B	6	3	5
C	2	2	4
D	3	13	46
E	4	14	30
Total errors	18	32	87

Once again, there seems to be no significant discrepancy between 1980 and 1993 at the top three grades, and an increasingly unsatisfactory performance among candidates who in earlier years would probably not have been examination candidates at all. And, yet again, there are discrepancies between 1993 and 1994 which must suggest that the whole test sequence is not entirely to be trusted as an indicator.

The final area of survey dealt with the grammatical construction of sentences, and produced a set of figures showing the proportion of correctly constructed sentences of different type. In conclusion there was a final check on these sentences to record the number of totally error-free sentences – that is a kind of summary of the capacity to avoid all the types of error considered separately. Apart from omitting the figures for the sexes separately, I reproduce the summary tables as printed.²

SENTENCE TYPE	1980	1993	1994
(1) No. of simple and compound used	131	121	141
(2) Proportion correctly constructed	73%	60%	80%
(3) No. of complex and multiple used	165	171	156
(4) Percentage correctly constructed	72%	50%	60%
(5) Total sentences used	300	300	300
(6) Percentage correctly constructed	71%	53%	69%

¹ Op.cit. p 31

² Ibid. pp 38 & 42

complex sentence structures. Certainly, in this aspect of ability to use the language correctly, it would be very difficult to be certain about a decline on the strength of these figures. Once again, however, the disparity between 1993 and 1994 seems to be a greater problem and one which casts doubt on the survey as a whole.

The final table lists simply the number of error-free sentences for each year group, and also expresses the total across Grades A to E as a percentage of the total of 300 scripts in those grades for each year.

	1980	1993	1994
A*			47
A	53	48	46
B	44	37	36
C	47	35	35
D	38	17	16
E	36	12	8
A - E Totals	218(73%)	149(50%)	141(47%)

It is doubtless a coincidence that this test is the only one in which 1993 and 1994 have the kind of statistical similarity that one would have expected and that has been conspicuous by its absence hitherto. This circumstance focuses attention on the fact that, throughout the entire range of ability, 1980 candidates were less likely to make mistakes of one sort or another and is, as the authors point out, very possibly "the kind of criterion the 'man in the street' would use."¹ On face value, it would be difficult to resist the conclusion that if he were to use it, the 'man in the street' would also be saying triumphantly "I told you so!" Yet face value is all it would be. The implications cannot be discounted, but doubts about the validity of the test cannot adhere only to those results which seem most obviously aberrant. I think there is a high probability that there has been some falling off in standards of linguistic accuracy at all levels, and a virtual certainty that this has been particularly marked at the bottom end of the ability range. But I am not convinced that we have an even passably accurate measure of the degree of this decline. The authors's own conclusions include the following points, under the heading "Comparing 1980 with 1993/1994."²

¹ Op.cit. p 41

² Ibid. p 48

*Grade for grade comparisons between writing samples from different years suggested

- that the candidates of 1980 tended to use the most adventurous vocabulary and sentence structures.
- Despite this they were just as likely to be judged grammatically adequate as those of 1994 and made less than half the number of spelling mistakes.
- Abler candidates (graded A–C) in 1980 were also at least as good at punctuation as their counterparts in 1994, and those graded D–E were much better.
- Using the number of sentences wholly free of error as an overall criterion confirmed that in 1980 abler candidates were consistently better than those awarded equivalent grades in 1993 or 1994 and that the gap between the years was greater still for candidates graded D or E.
- In some respects the candidates awarded D and E grades in 1980 seemed not unlike many of those reaching C and above in more recent years, but the choice between GCE and CSE entry available in 1980 may have given rise to selection effects which exaggerate differences between the years in these lower grades. In 1980 many pupils who did not enter the GCE examination would have achieved CSE grades 2 and 3, which were ostensibly equivalent to grades D and E. Pupils may have been selected for GCE because they could write accurately and without equivalent data we have no means of knowing how CSE candidates in this grade range compared.
- The weight of evidence does suggest that candidates awarded a given GCE grade in 1980 were more capable of writing accurately than their counterparts in 1994. But there can be no assurance that this would also hold for the many (potentially compensating) qualities of writing that we were unable to assess in this study (eg content, structure and stylistic qualities).
- We therefore lack sufficient empirical evidence to conclude safely that, overall, writing in 1980 was better, grade for grade, or that grading standards (which involve further judgements about reading, speaking etc.) have changed.

While I entirely concur with the final point of this summary I feel that it is a pity that the research was not taken further. I am inclined to feel that if all the essays had been scrutinised in the same depth throughout their length, it would have been possible to produce an analysis in which both authors and readers would have been entitled to place more confidence.

Nevertheless, this could never have been more than a minor contribution to the limited field of studies of comparison over time. Much more significant, and wider-ranging in several senses, was the 1996 publication *Standards in Public Examinations 1975 to 1995*.¹ As I pointed out early in this chapter² this report was widely proclaimed before its publication as being about to establish beyond doubt that ability levels indicated by O and A level passes had been substantially devalued in the course of

¹ *A Report on English, Mathematics and Chemistry examinations over time*. SCAA.

² v.sup. p 176

the twenty years under consideration. Its actual findings were very different and much less exciting, and the conclusions, as far as English at 16+ are concerned, may be stated in full:

"There have been major structural changes in examinations at 16+ in English over the period studied, and such changes make it difficult to reach firm conclusions about standards over time.

Overall, the need to study whole texts, the requirements of coursework and of speaking and listening have increased the demands made upon candidates. Throughout the period there has also been a steady increase in the duration of the examination.

There is little evidence of any significant change in examination standards over the period. The variation of standards in GCSE examinations between boards may be of greater significance than any changes in standards over the five years."

The 'Conclusions' section of the investigation of English at 18+ is longer, but the salient points are these:

"Throughout the years 1975 to 1995, candidates have been expected to study a range of texts in depth and demonstrate understanding and powers of analysis through a critical and accurately written response.

The qualities of candidates' performances has not changed over this period. At grade A, candidates' scripts in both years display similar strengths. A few losses (such as candidates' confident use of literary terminology and ability to quote at length from set texts) are counterbalanced by a more informed and personal response and better structuring of answers.The demands placed on candidates in 1975, 1985 and 1995 were comparable. The performance of candidates in 1985 and 1995 in meeting the standards set in those years was also comparable."

The comments headed 'Conclusion' are not, of course, the only points of relevance and interest in this report, nor is English the only subject treated; but nowhere in the rest of the document can one find the remotest trace of evidence which would call into question the validity of the obvious interpretation of the statistics which I have so far examined. The nearest that the survey comes to undermining the confidence which we ought to be able to feel in the year-on-year consistency of pass and grade qualifications at GCSE/O level and at A level, is to be found in the Conclusions to the two sections on Mathematics:

at 16+

"There has been an increase in the breadth of syllabuses, and the demands on recall, while different in kind, are about the same level of difficulty. The range of skills required has changed as a consequence. There has been a reduction in the emphasis on some skills – numerical and algebraic

1 Op.cit. p 19

2 Ibid. p 42

3 Ibid. p 43

manipulation – but an increase in others, such as handling data, and in some aspects of algebra." ¹

and at 18+

"The most significant change has been in the style and structure of questions in most examinations. Compared with 1975, and to a lesser extent 1985, pure mathematics and mechanics questions in 1995 were generally shorter and mostly restricted to single topics. The contexts of questions were mostly familiar and the algebraic manipulation required was of a more basic level than in earlier years. Questions were broken down into more steps, with methods often signposted. This has made the examination less demanding but the absence of the choice which was available to candidates in earlier years, coupled with the increased time pressure in some papers, has meant that in the last ten years candidates have needed to be well versed in the whole syllabus to obtain high marks." ²

It does seem that it must be acknowledged that an A level grade A pass in mathematics may be somewhat easier to obtain now than ten or twenty years ago – and this unhappily reflects the position of maths in the United Kingdom *vis-a-vis* that in other countries which has recently received so much publicity.

But a minor reduction in the performance levels required for the award of one grade in some syllabuses of one aspect of a single subject is a very long way from a revelation of a widespread decline in standards, and those who awaited such an assertion with apparent relish will search this report in vain. Why such an outcome might have been welcomed is a matter I will examine in my final chapter – suffice it here to say that what this document does do is to confirm the general tenor of the implication of the available statistics: that there is no significant evidence of a general decline in educational standards as measured by performance in public examinations. So far as English is specifically concerned, the fact of considerable change in the type of questions put by examination papers over the period is clearly acknowledged, but the authors are not tempted into the assumption that all such change is necessarily a movement towards a 'softer' standard.

"The nature of the demand, rather than the level has changed in many ways. A greater variety of texts is featured, and 1995 examinations are characterised by the availability of more content options, open text examinations and coursework. Questions in 1995 were more direct both in their requirements and in the language used. Mark schemes were more detailed and they encouraged examiners to adopt a positive approach. As the range of texts has widened, so the responsibility of the teacher to determine, through selecting from the available options, what constitutes a

¹ Op.cit. p 27

² Ibid. p 49

GCE A level course has increased. However, all candidates have to study at least one Shakespeare play. Candidates are less at ease with poetry; prose is seemingly more popular. Twentieth century works may be studied more than earlier ones but there remains a full choice. Routine 'context' questions have been replaced by demanding questions on extracts. There is a more explicit expectation that candidates will write in clear, accurate English. Candidates achieving grade E have always needed to demonstrate an adequate knowledge of the text and show some ability to make a critical response. However, poorly-written answers, a reliance on narrative and a failure to develop ideas are features of grade E over time"¹

The actual report of the findings is 'more explicit than these extracts from the 'Conclusions', but it says nothing to reinforce the volume of external criticism of innovations such as open-text papers and course-work; and there are no implications anywhere that the change recorded in the statistics for the examination - "Between 1975 and 1995, the pass-rate rose from 70.8% to 89.7% and the proportion of candidates awarded a grade A increased from 8.8% to 13.6%"² - are evidence of a decline in standards. What it actually adds to the picture already created is this:

"Since 1975, a clarification of philosophy and objectives of syllabuses has been accompanied by an increase in the range of content from which choice can be made. The 1995 examinations placed a greater emphasis on appreciation of English literature and on the ability both to respond to it and to write lucidly and cogently about it. This is reflected in increased options for candidates in the form of set books, papers and questions, in the introduction of open texts into some examinations, and in the use, to a limited extent, of coursework assessment.

The range of books set has widened over twenty years to include both twentieth century and contemporary writing from different backgrounds and cultures.Boards have steered a path between the literary canon and modern works.Most candidates are probably less familiar with the English literary tradition than their predecessors but the complexities of twentieth century literature impose their own challenges.

Topic and period papers seemed to offer opportunities for in-depth study of genre or literary history through a range of texts 20 years ago, but although wider reading was indeed recommended, questions rarely covered this study. Prescribed books needed always to be studied in depth; nothing has changed in this respect. Traditional context questions on Shakespeare which demanded identification of characters and circumstance began to be phased out 20 years ago. In their place have come passages for careful analysis and critical comment, dependent on a close knowledge of the play. Chaucer passages similarly were no longer set in 1995 for paraphrasing into modern English but for informed scrutiny. Over the years 1985 to 1995, the practice grew of setting passages from all set books for analysis and comment. This approach has been facilitated of late by the use of open texts in examinations and questions which demand close study and interpretation in depth. Through increasing choice, boards have sought to encourage candidates' enjoyment and appreciation of literature and to stimulate informed personal response. Critical perception and response are at the heart of all English examinations and this remains unchanged by time. Shifts in period, set books and genre alter neither this constant requirement nor the demand placed upon candidates by examiners."³

1 Op.cit. pp 42-43

2 Ibid. p 40

3 Ibid pp 40-41

This seems to me to be a perceptive and accurate summary, but there is an additional area of comment which adds positively to the discomfiture of those who had taken for granted that the Report would establish significant decline. Not only do the 1995 papers get a clean bill of health in so far as their quality of demand is concerned, together with some endorsement of their ability to offer both stimulus and enjoyment, but the survey finds positive and justifiable reasons for the progressive increase in the percentage pass-rate, in an improvement in the performance of candidates near the pass/fail boundary. Specifically writing on candidates at grade E, the Report says that they have:

"benefited from the introduction of open texts which have given their answers more substance and themselves more confidence. On the negative side, quotations have sometimes been too long and not always relevant. The changed style of more direct questions has also benefited these candidates and given them encouragement to marshal and express their ideas.

This confidence has also been evident in their practical criticism responses, particularly where there has been a change in the kind of passage set. Candidates have always found practical criticism daunting, but their responses in 1995 were more spirited. Previously a 'liking or a feeling' has been the only manifestation of a personal response; more detailed comment is now common."¹

The fuller account of the investigation into English at 16+ does not add materially to what is said in the conclusion, and the "SCAA/OFSTED commentary and recommendations" which follows it seems more concerned with the Massey and Elliott Report which I have already quoted at length, than with SCAA's own findings, which were dominated, not unreasonably, by the statement that there had been so much change in English examinations over the period that effective comparability studies were impossible. Essentially, SCAA is asking questions about English teaching at 16+ rather than making pronouncements, and their concerns are crystalised in these two:

- Does the broadening of syllabus requirements represent a genuine increase in demand in that candidates have to demonstrate a wider range of competence whilst maintaining the ability to meet the demands of the original examination? Or, conversely, does it mean that less attention is now given to candidates' ability to write using vocabulary and grammar, punctuation and spelling accurately and effectively?
- Are the various forms of assessment appropriate to the range of skills tested, manageable by candidates and teachers, and reliable in the judgements they provide?²

¹ Op.cit. p 42

² Ibid. p 20

Obviously these are justifiable concerns and further research would be both desirable and useful, but, until we have it, both the degree of the decline in technical competence and the importance of that decline, supposing it to be established, must remain matters of personal opinion and dispute.

In addition to these various observations, *Standards in Public Examinations 1975 to 1995*, together with its companion volumes *GCE Results Analysis* and *GCSE Results Analysis*, contain some illustrative statistics fundamentally material to this thesis.

For example, for many years now, the possession of five or more O level passes, or five or more passes at Grade C or better in GCSE, has been a kind of nationally recognised hallmark of success for students at the age of 16+ – a qualification for employment in places where academic qualifications are required, and a passport to post-compulsory education, whether in the sixth form or elsewhere; and therefore the bottom rung of a ladder that leads to degree or diploma levels of qualification and the opportunity of acquiring professional status. Expressed as percentages of the Fifth Form/Year 11 cohort, the figures for success so understood appear as follows: ¹

Year	%	Year	%	Year	%
1975	22.6	1985	26.9	1995	43.5
1976	22.9	1986	26.7		
1977	23.5	1987	26.4		
1978	23.7	1988*	29.9		
1979	23.7	1989	32.8		
1980	24.0	1990	34.5		
1981	25.0	1991	36.8		
1982	26.1	1992	38.3		
1983	26.2	1993	41.2		
1984	26.7	1994	43.3		
* GCSE replaced GCE Ordinary level after 1987					

I have arranged the figure in columns so that it possible to read the annual change by continuing down the column, and the change over a period of ten years by reading across the columns.

It is immediately apparent that the trend is slowly and steadily upward, with only 1986 and 1987, the last two years of O level, running contrary to the prevailing pattern. It is also immediately apparent that, with the coming of GCSE, the rate of increase was sharply raised. Since the post-1987 period is outside the scope of this thesis, I do

¹ *GCSE Results Analysis*, SCAA, 1996, adapted from Figure 5, Page 9

not propose to spend time or effort on seeking to account for this acceleration: suffice it to say that the conclusions of Massey and Elliott must call into question, at least so far as English is concerned, whether the same grade descriptions as may be assumed for O level actually applied to GCSE.

It is, however, perhaps worth a brief comparison with what happened thirty seven years earlier at the replacement of School Certificate and Higher School Certificate, so far as English is concerned.¹

ENGLISH	1950(SC/HSC)			1951 (GCE)		
	candidates	passes	passrate	candidates	passes	passrate
O level Language	103,165	57,566	55.8%	108,894	67,114	61.6%
O level Literature	97,104	50,785	52.3%	86,901	51,809	59.6%
A level Literature	12,447	9,547	76.3%	12,923	9,858	76.3%

The most cursory glance at the figures for the two years together would suggest that the transition from Higher Certificate to A level had made no significant difference to performance or standards, while that from School certificate to O level had brought about considerable change. In point of fact, as I shall demonstrate in the following chapters, changes in the actual papers for all three examinations from the old system to the new were, to all intents and purposes, non-existent. Indeed, one examiner can be shown to have gone on marking A level scripts in accordance with the old Higher Cert. marking scheme for some years without apparently causing any concern to the Chief Examiner or the Board.

What *had* changed, so far as O level was concerned, was that the new system was based upon subjects whereas the old was assessed upon performance on a group of papers. Early O level English Language papers were clearly marked **This is not a compulsory paper**, presumably as a last minute warning to candidates from schools too set in their ways to acknowledge that any change had occurred, and it may seem odd, therefore, that the number of candidates should have gone up. The explanation, I think, is that previously candidates who could not amass from the required groups a total of five subjects in which they had a plausible chance of success were debarred from entry altogether, whereas those who justified entry, but failed to reach the required

¹ These, and all the remaining statistics used in this chapter, are taken, unless otherwise attributed, from *Statistics of Education*, HMSO, published annually.

standard in any one of the five subjects taken, were denied a pass in any. The change which allowed candidates in English language to be entered for, and assessed solely upon performance in, that subject in isolation would, I believe, account perfectly satisfactorily for the increase in the total number of entries and the 6% increase in the pass-rate. It would also account for the decrease in the number of candidates entered for English Literature, since those without any kind of enthusiasm for the subject but compelled to include it among their five school certificate subjects for want of a better prospect, would no longer have been under the same pressure to take it, whereas the reduction in number of entrants to those who been specifically prepared to that end could easily account for the 7% improvement in pass-rate. The explanations are conjectural, and in being so illustrate the point made by Burgess and Adams in the quotation which stands at the head of this chapter, – that statistics very seldom speak clearly and unambiguously for themselves, but require to be interpreted: and thereafter depend upon the plausibility of the interpretation rather than upon the reliability sometimes assigned to numbers rather than words. What is not conjectural is that the results from 1951 give us a new baseline from which assessment of developing standards must begin, and it is interesting to see what in fact happened over the whole spread of the General Certificate of Education era.

Year	O Level Language			O Level Literature			A Level English		
	Entries	Passes	%	Entries	Passes	%	Entries	Passes	%
1955	160,586	102,050	63.5	112,038	68,209	60.9	14,204	10,686	75.2
1960	250,071	141,326	56.5	158,820	94,876	59.7	20,731	14,565	70.3
1965	348,688	190,479	54.6	199,171	122,322	61.4	40,281	29,057	72.1
1970	337,812	206,664	61.2	213,042	135,049	63.4	55,993	41,372	73.9
1975	425,020	260,010	61.2	241,861	145,702	60.2	63,508	44,959	70.8

The statistics provided by SCAA in the *GCSE Results Analysis*¹ for the period 1980 to 1995 are compiled on a different basis – the proportion of the whole Year 11 age-group to achieve an O level or equivalent pass in English, but they nevertheless present a very similar picture:

YEAR →	80	81	82	83	84	85	86	87	88	89	90	91	92	93	94	95
GIRLS%	41	42	42	45	45	46	45	46	48	53	57	58	56	59	59	60
BOYS%	31	30	31	33	33	34	34	34	35	38	40	43	40	42	42	42

¹ Op.cit. p14

SCAA provides no precise equivalent for the later years of A level English, but the Report does give the following information,¹ again based upon the percentage of the entire age-group:

	1975	1985	1995
Entered for A level English	6.6%	5.8%	8.6%
Obtained at least grade E	5.0%	4.6%	8.0%

Yet again, allowing for the unexplained drop in 1985, which would almost certainly look less dramatic had the intervening years been supplied, the trend is upward.

These latter SCAA tables, though perhaps less informative than the earlier information from *Statistics of Education*, have the advantage of being based upon the population of the year group concerned.

With the earlier columns of figures, of course, it is not to be supposed that all of the candidates for each of the O Level examinations had just completed five years of secondary schooling, or, in the case of the A level column, two years in the sixth form. Every year from the introduction of GCE added to the number of those who had failed to pass and were thus eligible to resit in the following, or a subsequent, year – and in addition to those, other late entries from Colleges of Further Education, and other institutions catering for adults seeking to gain qualifications which had been denied them in their youth, are included in the total figures. Even allowing for these progressive inflations, however, it seems impossible to resist the conclusion that over the period the number of pupils in school for whom the GCE examination system was deemed suitable steadily increased, both in absolute terms and considered as a proportion of their year groups. The fact that the pass-rate percentages remained so nearly constant may suggest that the pass standard was held fairly steady by the administering boards – an interpretation reinforced by the observation that in English Language there is a greater degree of variation over the period as a whole, reflecting the fact that the subject has always featured more frequently than any other in lists of qualifications required for those levels of employment which make any specification at all, and for almost every kind of continued education – a fact which not only increases the total number of would-be applicants, but also increases the difficulty of schools

¹ *Standards in Public Examinations 1975 to 1995*, p 12

in discouraging those unlikely to be successful. As 'staying on at school' became the choice of an increasing number of youngsters between 1951 and 1972, and compulsory to age 16 thereafter, so an ever enlarging-number of candidates thought they might as well have a go at English Language, sometimes to the distress of examiners, who reported the shortcomings of the weakest candidates in occasionally scathing terms. The pressure for success in English Language may be further illustrated by direct comparison with the number of entries for English Literature which remained (perhaps even increasingly so) largely the province of those who had some commitment to the subject or, at least, some general academic ability. In 1983, the last year for which *Statistics for Education* published directly comparable figures, there were 528,355 candidates for Language and 256,985 for Literature; which represents an increase over the 1951 figures of very nearly 400% in the former case as against only 185% in the latter. Perhaps the figures for A level English are an even more striking testimony to the way in which educational standards had changed over the period, since, even allowing for a progressive increase in the number of adult and other external entrants included in the total figures, a five-fold increase in the number of candidates cannot be seen as other than evidence of a steady growth in the number of pupils staying on at school and following academic courses which had previously been regarded as the exclusive prerogative of a much smaller segment of society. The general stability of the pass-rate is not absolute evidence of a consistent pass-standard, but it is at least suggestive of such consistency, particularly when reinforced by the figures for the percentage pass-rate of those awarded a grade A, which are available from the introduction of A level grading in 1965 until 1985, with the omission only of the year 1980. In that first year the grade A pass-rate was 8.2%, and 7.9% in 1985. In the intervening period it reached a high of 9.0% and a low of 7.5%, in each case in one year only; in nine of the twenty years it registered between 8.2% and 8.4%.

A further illustration of the general trend towards an increase in the number of pupils leaving school with some recognised qualification is provided by the figures for total entries to the first and second public examinations as a whole, compared with the number of school leavers for the year in question:

Year	Total of School Leavers(all ages)	Total No entered for 1st public exam	Total of Subj entries	Total No entered for 2nd public exam	Total of Subj. entries
1950*	Not available	99,883	809,539	34,364	101,903
1951#	487,090	133,792	738,717	36,667	103,803
1955	487,490	231,422	1,043,864	55,991	137,867
1959	567,140	334,839	1,449,995	83,106	186,973
1965§	615,430	587,339	2,170,019	164,967	370,435
1969	587,170	638,984	2,211,288	212,604	428,927
1975	663,830	864,907	2,591,246	250,523	498,883
1979	751,010	1,130,595	3,052,045	312,531	578,083
*School Cert and Higher Cert. # GCE § Addition of CSE					

Once again the message seems to be clear: the transition from School Certificate produced an immediate increase in the number of pupils being entered, but a significant decrease in the number of subjects per candidate (indeed, an overall decrease in the total number of subject entries) reflecting the distinction between an examination which required success in a group of subjects and one which records performance in each subject separately; whereas a similar, but far less obviously marked, pattern is detectable in comparing the per capita entries for Higher Certificate with A Level. And once the new examination had established itself, the pattern continues with an ever increasing number of candidates concentrating on those subjects in which they had a reasonable chance of success. The same caveat as before of course applies: not all the entries by any means were conventional students marking the completion of their fifth and seventh years of secondary education; (it will be noted, for instance, that by 1969 the total candidature for O level/CSE had outstripped the total number of school leavers); and therefore assumptions about school performance cannot be totally reliable, beyond the single assertion that these figures are not obviously indicative of a decline in standards. One other set of figures, however, used in conjunction with the annual leaving figures, would seem to have a more positive implication, and this concerns the academic qualifications possessed by those leavers, available only intermittently prior to 1973 (the year the school leaving age was raised to its present position) but annually thereafter. Statistics relating to the possession of five O levels have already been provided¹, and should be considered in relation to the two extremes of school pupil performance – those who left with no recognised qualifications at all, and those who left with three or more A levels. In this latter case, the illuminating back-up provided by the

¹ v. sup. p 231

expression of the number of students with a 3 (+) A Level qualification as a percentage of the 17+ age-group comes from SCAA's *GCE Results Analysis*.¹

Year	No. of leavers	No. with no qualifications	No. with 3(+) A level passes	No as % of Yr gp.
1963	657,130	479,430	31,780	N/A
1974	654,550	142,620	45,260	N/A
1975	663,830	134,270	47,070	8.1
1976	680,240	120,010	50,780	8.3
1977	723,250	115,910	52,790	8.5
1978	740,000	114,860	55,310	8.9
1979	751,010	104,930	54,780	8.6
1980	760,340	106,970	63,860*	8.6
1981	732,280	103,870	71,960	8.9
1982	751,920	100,010	75,930	9.2
1983	767,130	93,350	77,190	9.3
1984	752,640	91,660	77,230	9.5
1985	734,420	86,520	77,220	9.6
1986	716,760	88,880	74,400	9.5
1987	715,850	87,910	75,170	9.7
* Estimated figure. <i>Statistics of Education</i> was not issued in 1980				

The figures for 1963 are included for comparison purposes, and demonstrate perhaps more clearly than any words could do, the immediate impact of the long delayed implementation of the Norwood Committee's recommendation to raise the school leaving age to sixteen, and the enormous waste of talent which had annually preceded that implementation. To reduce to less than one third the number of unqualified school leavers in an almost identically sized cohort provides not only an instant justification for the legislation, but an illustration of the degree to which it was belated; while the simultaneous increase of almost 50% in the number obtaining 3 A levels must demonstrate a significant increase in the number staying on voluntarily in the intervenient period, since the effect of the 1973 legislation could not have affected sixth form numbers so soon. Once it did, however, the effect was apparent in a consistent annual increase in the number of sixth form students who were successful at a quite demanding academic level, regardless of the fluctuations in the total number of leavers for the year. And concomitant with this steady increase in the number of students successfully completing a sixth form academic course was a steady decrease

¹ Op.cit. p 13

in the number of sixteen year olds leaving schools with no qualifications at all.

Clearly there was a consensus, even if an unspoken one, between the schools and the vast majority of their new fifth year students, that if the shades of the prison house were to be retained about the growing boy for a further twelve months, the circumstance might as well be put to a profitable use. It is an interesting and rather sad reflection that only in 1986 did this continuous success story at both ends of the academic spectrum stagger in its course; for 1986 was, of course the year of industrial action in schools, the year in which vast numbers of pupils had to undergo a 'stay-at-home rota' and even those whose attendance was continuous could expect to find themselves, for several periods in the course of a week, being supervised by the head or a deputy while the regular class teacher took short-term strike action. With hindsight, it is impossible to argue that anyone gained from this exercise in disruption, but the foregoing figures make it all too apparent who lost. Such distractions apart, however, I find it difficult to understand how such statistics can be represented as anything other than evidence of a steady improvement in standards, unless, of course, one is prepared to argue that recognised qualifications of all sorts, and specifically the A level pass, became progressively easier to obtain on an annual basis. And if this hypothetical slippage were in fact taking place, it is not merely the schools and the examiners who were engaged in a conspiracy of degeneration, but also the universities. One final set of figures contained in *Statistics of Education* is the number of school leavers who proceeded to any form of higher or further education and, separately, the number going on to university. These figures are available on an annual basis throughout the period under review and I list them here at convenient five-year intervals:

Year	No. entering HE or FE (000s)	No. going on to University (000s)
1951	33.10	9.58
1956	43.86	13.33
1961	71.38	18.62
1966	95.43	28.38
1971	117.98	31.90
1976	139.36	42.65
1981	209.83	62.69
1986	220.82	57.86

When one considers that, in 1961 445,150 pupils left school with no qualifications

whatever, whereas only 71,380 continued their education in some way or other, the fact that this gap closed so rapidly that by 1975 the two figures were very nearly equal (134,270 leaving without qualification; 133,550 staying on for additional education) seems to me to provide clear evidence of a general improvement in educational expectation. And, indeed, the trend was to continue to such effect that by 1976 the number of those seeking further education had overtaken the number of the unqualified (139,360 to 120,010); by 1981 the number of those staying on in education was double that of those who left unqualified (209,830 to 103,870), and by 1987 the disparity in favour of continued education as against leaving with no recognised qualification had risen to 223,020 as against 87,910. This cannot quite be called a complete reversal of the original situation in a matter of just twenty-five years, but it is not far from being so. Add to this a sixfold increase in the number actually going on to university between 1951 and 1987, and the statistics combine to produce a picture which must suggest the success of the educational system rather than the reverse, a picture of ever improving standards rather than of decline. If we add to the figures already quoted those which convert the numbers staying on beyond the school leaving-age into the appropriate proportions of the relevant age-groups¹, the impact is even more impressive:

	1955	1975	1985	1995
Staying on into lower sixth	13%	38%	47%	72%
Staying on into upper sixth	10%	26%	32%	59%
Proceeding to Higher Educ.n	4%	14%	14%	31%

I do not suggest that these figures can provide positive proof of any particular contention in the standards debate, but their combined effect must be seen as an endorsement of the contention that standards were improving if other evidence to that end can be provided – and I believe the following chapters of this thesis will prove conclusively that such evidence is available. They cannot readily be seen as endorsement for the contention that standards were declining, unless that contention is accompanied by evidence to show that O and A level passes were substantially devalued over the period – and that evidence I do not believe to exist.

¹ *Standards in Public Examinations 1975 to 1995*, p 9

One source which might have been expected to trumpet such evidence if it were available is the Office for Standards in Education. Twice now, in 1993 and 1996, a report has been issued "from the Office of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools" on AS and A level examinations. On the back cover of each of these is printed a brief summary of the content. That for 1993 reads:

"In the summer of 1993, the seven GCE Boards of England and Wales assessed the product of over five million hours of candidates' GCE AS and A level examinations. Overall, in the sample inspected, they did so with a high degree of reliability, and, in almost every case, appropriate standards were seen to be applied. Schools and colleges had prepared their pupils thoroughly. There are minor problems of comparability between Boards for some subjects and variations in procedures which need to be addressed." ¹

The minor problem mentioned here is to develop into a greater area of concern in the 1996 report, but the passage which I have highlighted speaks for itself, and is to be more or less endorsed three years later.

"Over a two year period leading up to the summer 1996 examinations, OFSTED inspected all aspects of the A-level examining system, from the setting of examination papers to the awarding of grades, and the use of syllabuses in schools. Seven GCE examination boards and 27 subjects and syllabuses were included in the inspection and although some weaknesses were identified in particular syllabuses, generally organisation and procedures were thorough, examinations were suitable for their purpose and assessment was found to be reliable. The report recommends that procedures should be put in place to ensure that standards are maintained over time, and that comparability (sic) of standards between the GCE examination boards should be given a higher priority than at present." ²

The problem of comparability between examining boards is one which has received a good deal of attention over the years and in earlier pages of this chapter. Suffice it here to say that only very recently has it seemed to be a matter of major significance, and the fact that it has become so seems directly related to some aspects and implications of the implementation of the Education Reform Act of 1987 and subsequent legislation, rather than a matter directly relevant to the period which this thesis sets out to study. Before returning to that period, however, it seems to me to be worth giving some attention to the more detailed observations of the OFSTED Reports. Apart from the annexe which lists English, as administered by four of the seven autonomous boards at that time in operation, among the thirty six examinations considered in the course of the investigation, the OFSTED report of 1993 makes very little specific

¹ *GCE Advanced Supplementary and Advanced level Examinations - Quality and Standards 1993*

² *GCE Advanced Supplementary and Advanced Level Examinations 1996*

reference to the subject. It is mentioned as one of the subjects to record a "particularly large rise" in the number of A level entries between 1988 and the date of the survey, and as having a very high proportion of female candidates.¹ It is also mentioned as being a subject which makes no separate assessment or weighting for "knowledge, understanding and skills" in its syllabuses,² and in the case of one Board only, as setting papers which asked "undemanding questions".³ On the other hand, it is also singled out as a subject which, in two of the Boards, provided "outstanding examples of marking schemes."⁴ There is nothing here to concern us, but it does give an indication of the thoroughness of the investigation and the nature of the Inspectors' approach. This, we are told, was at the instigation of the Secretary of State who "stressed that he had seen no evidence which called into question the procedures and standards of AS and A level examinations" but felt that "the legitimate public interest in the....examination process could only be satisfied through a substantial external audit."⁵ Accordingly, the Inspectors surveyed five subject areas from each of the Boards (six from the W J E C), a process which included:

- the analysis of syllabuses, examination papers and marking schemes for the GCE AS and A-level examinations in 1993;
- attendance at meetings of examiners at the start of the marking process...and at awarding and grade review meetings;
- visits to schools and colleges.⁶

This is clearly a thorough and searching approach, and it should therefore not be a matter of any great controversy to put faith in the main findings of the Report which were, in the main, positive and supportive. The Inspectors found, for instance, that

- The demands made on candidates and the standards applied in theA Level examinations in 1993 were, in almost every case, appropriate.
- The professionalism of officers and examiners is a notable feature of the entire examination process, and all GCE Boards place very great reliance on examiners' experience and expertise to ensure the maintenance of standards.⁷

They also found that

"All Boards have thorough and rigorous procedures for the co-ordination of marking.....The monitoring of the quality of marking carried out by assistant examiners was generally thorough.....The standard of marking was generally satisfactory and much of it was good. The Boards' quality control procedures were implemented promptly and effectively in the few cases where initial marking was found to be inconsistent, ensuring that any difficulties were

1 Op.cit. p,12

5 Ibid p.5

2 Ibid. p.17

6 Ibid p.6

3 Ibid. p.18

7 Ibid. p.87

4 Ibid. p.20

resolved.....In most cases, statistical evidence was appropriately used by awarders alongside professional judgements to determine boundary marks for different grades".¹

All these are clear evidence of the Inspectors' satisfaction with the operational methodology of the Boards, and in the case of the last comment, it is pleasing, if a little surprising, to discover what OFSTED's attitude to the appropriate use of statistics actually is. The expansion of this point from the introductory "Main Findings", occurs in that part of the main body of the text dealing with the actual awarding of grades, and reads:

"Most Boards made appropriate use of statistical evidence to inform decision-making processes, but in two Boards there were examples of weak practice in some subjects which resulted in an over-reliance on statistical analysis to the detriment of professional judgements."²

This endorsement of professional judgement is underlined by the conclusion of the Main Findings: "The GCE Boards conduct the process of examining with immense professionalism", perhaps a reflection of the usual immediate reaction of those meeting the award process for the first time; and that conclusion emphasises also the central principle of the whole examining process:

"The procedures adopted by Boards for reviewing the work of candidates whose final marks were near to crucial grade boundaries were thoroughly implemented with a view to fairness to candidates".³

There can be no doubting the fact that the Inspectors were satisfied, perhaps even impressed, by the general standard of what they saw, and the only interpretation which can fairly be put upon that is that the standards of the A level examination system in 1993 were not found wanting. And this is a by no means unimportant point, since by 1993 the candidates would have been those reared on GCSE rather than on O level syllabuses.

In the analysis of statistics which I provided earlier in this chapter I concerned myself, as indeed does the title of this thesis, with the period up to 1987, and ignored the effect of GCSE. To return briefly to statistics, it is notable that the proportion of year 11 pupils gaining five or more O level passes at grades A to C changed significantly when the old combination of GCE and CSE grade 1 gave way to the new GCSE

(1) Op.cit. p.9

(2) Ibid. p.31

(3) Ibid. p.10

examination. I have already drawn attention to the sharp upward curve in the increase to the pass-rate from 1988 onwards, and it would have been surprising if doubts had not been expressed as to whether the new examinations were really quite so much better at allowing pupils to realise their potential than the old, or whether an altogether more plausible explanation might not be a lowering of the pass standard. It was unquestionably such doubts that caused the Secretary of State to institute the new A* top grade for GCSE with effect from the Summer of 1994, and I do not think it to be an unreasonable speculation that it was the same kind of doubt, coupled with concern for the "gold standard" of traditional A levels, which caused him, despite having "seen no evidence which called into question the procedures and standards of A level examinations", to demand the detailed scrutiny which led to the 1993 Report.

If such doubts were indeed in the mind of the Secretary of State the Conclusions of the Report should have allayed them:

"The GCE Boards, through their officers and examiners, exercise due professionalism in their conduct of the GCE AS and A level examinations. Procedures used in 1993 were generally sound and the work of candidates was assessed with a high degree of reliability.

As a result of their scrutiny of syllabuses and examination papers, and attendance at a wide range of co-ordination, awarding and grade review meetings, HMI judged that, in almost every case, the demands made on candidates and the standards of work seen in relation to the grades awarded in 1993 for GCE AS and A level examinations were appropriate. Candidates at the E/N boundary were required to show achievement of subject knowledge, understanding and skills beyond that expected for GCSE. Scripts awarded an 'A' grade almost always showed a suitably assured grasp of the subject and were presented in an appropriate style." ¹

The fact that the OFSTED Inspectors were so generally satisfied, in the context of a specific request from the Secretary of State to "satisfy public interest", and in a year when the candidates would have been brought up on the GCSE examination, is clearly indicative that no evidence could be found supportive of any allegation of a decline in standards, and therefore supportive of my suggestion that no such evidence exists.

It must, however, be admitted that the Inspectors pointed out *en passant*:

"Comparability is a notoriously difficult phenomenon on which to base judgements and this inspection was not intended to include a full comparability study.....HMI were unable to consider in this inspection the comparability of standards over a period of time". ²

¹ Op. cit. p.42

² Ibid pp 34-35

Nor should it be thought that this report is entirely devoid of adverse criticism. There are, in fact, two areas of concern to which the Inspectorate particularly wish to draw attention. One of these is the question of candidate presentation – quality of presentation and linguistic usage, and, in particular, attention to spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Concern is expressed that Boards "do not have clearly stated policies on penalties or rewards for presentation and the quality of English.....used by candidates, and marking schemes vary unduly in the extent to which they include reference to these features"¹; that in the examination rubrics, "guidance to candidates on the presentation of their work and the use of good English was inconsistent both across and within Boards"²; and the penultimate Conclusion of the Report declares:

"the Boards, in conjunction with other agencies, should carefully consider how best to formulate consistent approaches to the quality of expression and use of English alongside the assessment of subject knowledge, understanding and skills"³

The second area of concern is emphasised over and over again throughout the Report, often earning a mention twice or more on a single page – the matter of variation in practice between Boards is referred to under every separate heading which the Report considers, including, as will have been apparent, the matter of quality and accuracy of expression. To cite these in full would be unwarrantably space-consuming, but the flavour can be gauged quite accurately from the observation that within sixty-five consecutive lines between pages 8 and 10, there are successive references to variation in procedures (twice); in demand; in the quality of marking schemes; in practice (twice); in methods; and in approaches. What is never said, it is important to note, is that there is any variation in standards. Nevertheless, there is something approaching an implication of doubt in this endless search for uniformity and the removal of distinguishing characteristics of the various Boards, even if it is never overt: and it therefore comes as no surprise that the two SCAA surveys of 1996, *GCE Results Analysis* and the companion volume on GCSE, concentrate heavily on this question of Board differentiation. Of the 63 coloured charts which constitute the GCE analysis, 22 concern themselves with a comparison between the examining Boards; and of the

¹ Ibid. p.9

² Ibid. p.20

³ Ibid. p.43

86 charts in the GCSE analysis, 45 do so.

This constant re-iteration of variation in the early pages of the 1993 OFSTED Report is summarised on the back cover of that Report in a phrase I have quoted already¹ as "minor problems of comparability", an area which the Inspectorate admit, in another already quoted phrase², to be "a notoriously difficult phenomenon on which to base judgements". They are, however, anxious to emphasise that the topic was treated seriously within the limits of the resources devoted to the Report:

"The final issue, inter-Board comparability, would need a major research project to establish a detailed, overall picture. Nevertheless, HMI were able to see substantial parts of the examination process across a range of Boards, including co-ordination, awarding and grade review meetings. The inspection team had been chosen for its specialist expertise and experience.Using their professional judgement, in much the same way that chief examiners are expected to, they judged that standards were broadly on a par across Boards. However, slight variations in standards between the Boards were seen in Business Studies, English, Design and Technology, Latin, and Biology. The discrepancy was not large, but, exceptionally, it was about one grade in Design and Technology at one Board."³

That one Board should be a whole grade more lenient, or possibly more severe, than the other six in a single subject is not a satisfactory situation, and is in need of immediate rectification, but it is hardly grounds for questioning the security of comparability as a whole. We need have no doubt that the Board in question was made aware of the Inspectors' findings and appropriate steps taken. The Inspectors made a perfectly adequate observation at the end of the Main Findings section of their report:

"The Board's earlier work on comparability of standards between subjects across Boards could also usefully be revived".⁴

and this recommendation was, in fact, acted upon, as witness the investigation conducted by the Curriculum, Evaluation and Management Centre at Newcastle on behalf of the Examination Boards into A level syllabuses in 1994, and the survey of GCSE grading committees carried out by a Nottingham University team led by Professor Roger Murphy in 1996.⁵

Yet the seeds of doubt as to the reliability of the examination system had been sown in the mind of the Secretary of State and were ineradicable. Notwithstanding the clean bill of health in the 1993 Report, further investigatory activity was demanded almost

1 v.sup. p 240

4 Ibid. p.10

2 v.sup. p 243

5 v sup. pp 205-207

3 Op.cit. pp.35-36

immediately.

"The Secretary of State asked OFSTED to carry out a further inspection leading up to the 1996 GCE A level and AS examinations, and she requested that a number of specific areas of interest should be addressed. These were:

- the implementation, operation and effectiveness of the new Code of Practice for GCE A level and AS examinations;
- the consistency of standards for GCE A level and AS examinations over time and, as far as possible, between Boards;
- the quality of language used by GCE A level and AS candidates in both coursework and externally assessed examination papers;
- the effectiveness of the procedures for the assessment of coursework;
- the quality and standards of modular GCE A Level and AS examinations.¹

This seems to me to be dangerously near to sending in the pest control squad to deal with the infestation of bees in the governmental bonnet, with its emphasis on ever more centralised control of examination procedures and on dangers to the system which no-one professionally involved in education supposed to exist; and one suspects that the Inspectors, if they were again chosen, as were their predecessors, for their specialist expertise and experience, must have found parts of the exercise an embarrassment.

Certainly they found nothing of significance to warrant the sudden volume of external interest in the workings of the examination system. Historically, it is unfortunate that one of the things they did find was the startlingly aberrant (and subsequently much publicised) procedures of the English examiners for the Oxford and Cambridge Schools Examination Board – and their generally supportive Report positively bristles with little brackets saying 'except OCSEB English'². Even in this instance, however, the HMI concerned reported that "grade boundaries were set at a broadly appropriate level"; and there is little elsewhere in the Report to cause concern. Standards were found, again, to be broadly comparable across the Boards, with the inevitable minor variation; they were also found to be consistent over the three years 1994 to 1996 "with small variations in mathematics and, to a lesser extent, in physics"³. The only real criticism in this section of the 'Main Findings' was that grade award meetings frequently do not concern themselves directly with the standards of other boards⁴, which, if it were to be implemented, would require a substantial expansion of the archive material currently available to such committees, a factor of

(1) GCE Advanced Supplementary and Advanced Level Examinations, The Stationery Office, 1996

(2) eg. v. §§ 25, 38, 42, 43, 44, 45, 48, 49, 52

(3) Op.cit. p.4

(4) Ibid. p.5

which the Inspectors are clearly aware.

So far as other sections of 'Main Findings' are concerned, the Inspectors found:

"The introduction and implementation of the Code of Practice had resulted in a greater measure of consistency in procedures between the examination boards"¹; "The quality of A level coursework was mostly good and in some cases excellent"²; "The quality of language used by students was satisfactory in most of the ...scripts observed, and good in many. It was weak in a small minority, almost invariably at grade E"³; and, finally, "no discernible difference in the standards set at grade boundaries, or in the overall level of demand of papers, between those 1996 modular and linear syllabuses that were considered in this inspection."⁴

This might be thought sufficient to have set at rest the Secretary of State's concerns, but such a reaction would be to misunderstand the nature of political dogma. Such matters are not to be resolved by evidence, not even that which derives from ad hoc investigations, but by legislating for change – and before this survey could be completed the government's apparent conviction that A level was no longer the "gold standard" but in urgent need of major review, had been handed over to Sir Ron Dearing for consideration and recommendation. Sir Ron's Report : "Review of Qualifications for 16–19 Year Olds: Quality and Rigour in A Level Examinations" is dated March 1996, and recommends wholesale changes – the OFSTED Report must have been presented to the Secretary of State in the summer of 1996, but was not published until early 1997, so that its findings could not possibly be used by the Boards, or anyone else who might have been so minded, to resist the sweeping changes that the Dearing report has set in motion. In the intervening period the die had been well and truly cast: there was to be an enormous reduction in the variety of A level syllabuses offered; the externally dictated prescriptions within which the new syllabuses were to be constructed will limit examining in the same way as the National Curriculum limits teaching; and the number of Boards which will offer the new syllabuses has been effectively reduced from eight to three. The 1997 election resulted in a pause for breath, so that the new, substantially reconstructed, and now compulsory AS papers will no longer face their first candidates in the summer of 1999; and, as yet, none of the projected new papers has received approval from the new regulatory authority. It is, therefore, pointless to speculate further as to the impact on standards which the new examination

¹ Op.cit. p 4

² Ibid. p 6

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid. p 7

structure will bring about. However, to suggest that the change will be of a wholly different order of magnitude from that occasioned by the change from Higher School Certificate is not a speculation but an inevitability.

So far, the change of government in May 1997 has brought about no fundamental change in educational philosophy, nor does such a change seem in any way probable.

It seems likely, therefore, that the maintenance of comparability of standards between examining boards, and even between subjects, will cease to be a problem for the surviving boards themselves and will become inherent in the increasing centralisation of the system and the regimentation of the parameters within which all future papers must be constructed. If so, some of the concerns of this thesis will become an irrelevance in the new millenium. Scope will remain, however, for those who are both interested in standards and aware that legislating variety out of existence does not equate to ensuring uniformity. As a final quotation from the OFSTED 1996 Report I would choose this passage as a touchstone:

"The setting of standards in Advanced level examinations is a complex and difficult process, which depends to a large extent on professional judgement; it can never be completely precise. Similarly, there are no particular measures which can be applied to compare these standards, particularly where examinations in a subject may have some quite different features."

Examinations in a subject will not for much longer be permitted to retain quite different features, and the maximum possible number of English syllabus options, inclusive of Language, Literature and combined courses will be nine, fewer than the number of alternatives currently offered by some of the existing boards. Nor will there be room for the present generous number of optional papers within a given syllabus. But all those restrictions will achieve is to delete the qualification "particularly" from the Inspectors' analysis of the situation. The main force of the quotation will remain valid, and the establishment and assessment of standards will never be a precise science. It is for this reason that statistics, however thoroughly collected and collated, can never give us the whole picture about standards, though they can and do indicate general truths and suggest areas for professional judgement to assess; and so far such assessments, if they do not prove conclusively that standards have improved, at least, as Professor Roger

Murphy puts it, "They do, however, present a substantial obstacle in the way of those who wish us to believe that standards are falling year on year".¹ It is an interesting by-product of the impact of such people that the business of assessment, and the task of refining its procedures ever more nicely, has come to occupy an ever-growing segment of research time among academics working in education. Books with titles such as *Beyond Testing – Towards a theory of educational assessment* by Caroline Gipps; *A Fair Test? Assessment, achievement and equity* by Caroline Gipps and Patricia Murphy; and *Enhancing Quality in Assessment* by Wynne Harlen are but a small selection from a growing body of work on the subject; and the Centre for Formative Assessment Studies at Manchester University but one of a growing number of university research units devoting themselves to this area of study. It was at a Conference on European Research in Education at CFAS in September 1994 that Professor Roger Murphy of the Nottingham University Faculty of Education presented a paper entitled *Firsts Among Equals : The Case of British University Degrees* which concerned itself, *inter alia*, with the question of whether all first class degrees from the then 92 independent universities could be regarded as equal, when "Students entering some universities in 1991/92 were five times more likely to get a first class honours degree than those entering others." More materially to our purposes, Professor Murphy began his address with the words "Comparability of standards has been a major pre-occupation for researchers and policy-makers alike for at least 25 years. The late Desmond Nuttall referred to this obsession with comparability as the 'British disease.' He also quoted at some length a passage from *Measurement and Assessment in Education and Psychology* of 1987 by Robert Wood:

"The trouble was, you kept on looking and found nothing. Some thought they had the answer (subject pairs, the use of an aptitude test as a control) and stopped looking; the more fastidious among us simply thought the problem insoluble. There were always far too many reasons why results which purported to show comparability, or lack of it, might be invalid.Towards the end, my ambitions were no higher than looking for signs of a kind of 'relaxed' comparability – i.e nothing grotesquely out of true."²

while Desmond Nuttall, Professor Murphy tells us, "eventually threw in the towel and expressed his misgivings in an article entitled 'the myth of comparability'."

¹ *Are Standards in Secondary Schools really Falling?* Paper presented to BERA Conference at York, September 1997

² Op.cit. p 37

The possibility that the entire edifice of comparability studies is a kind of parallel to *The Hunting of the Snark* can never be entirely pushed out of one's mind, but it has not deterred scholars, including Roger Murphy himself, from seeking to advance the skill and accuracy with which comparabilities between boards, between subjects, and between years can be placed under a microscope, or, indeed, from finding hitherto unexplored areas in which a lack of comparability might be significant. For instance, in 1993 the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate's Research and Evaluation Division published an article entitled "A Study of Comparability between Options in A-Level English (9000*)" and followed it a year later with a continuation document – "the 1994 Update". In the latter year the Research and Evaluation Division of UCLES also published a research report entitled 'A' level Literature : A Reliability Study" which "set out to assess the reliability of assessments of students's essays made by examiners of English A level"¹; in other words, an attempt to evaluate the skill which I compared in the Preface to this thesis to that of the whisky blender. The proper place to review both studies is in the chapter devoted to the development of A level English examinations, rather than here, where they are introduced only to illustrate a final point. After twenty-five or more years of earnest endeavour to improve the analysis of pupil performance, and to hone ever more sharply the investigatory scalpel – an effort which some scholars have made the main pillar of their careers – has yet come up with any convincing evidence of a decline in standards over a given period in general terms, and the arguments indicating the probability of such declines in specific limited areas are few and, with the possible exception of mathematics, inconclusive. The question which Professor Murphy put to the conference at York, "Are Standards in secondary schools really falling?", seems to me eminently justified; and, as I shall hope to show in the following chapters dealing in some detail with examination papers in O level English Language, O level English literature, and A level English, in some aspects of this subject at least, standards have, in fact, considerably improved.

* 9000 is the generic code number for UCLES A level English. Individual papers are denoted by an individual number after an oblique stroke, eg. 9000/4

¹ Op.cit. p 2

ENDPIECE TO SECTION ONE

In the course of the first section of this thesis I have surveyed in the first chapter the methodology of teaching in general, and of the teaching of English in particular, from the Victorian era to the Education Reform Act of 1988, with specific reference to key educational events and to sociological changes in the course of that period; and I have sought to point out and to illustrate the ways in which expectations of the educational process developed and changed over the period of roughly a century among parents, politicians, pupils, and, not least, among teachers themselves.

It is my contention that at no time prior to the 1944 Education Act can there be found any evidence which points to a higher standard of achievement among the generality of school pupils, or of practical competence among the generality of teachers, than came to obtain after the provisions of that Act came into force; and also that it is impossible to establish within the period between the 1944 and 1988 Acts any high-point of such achievement and competence from which there was a subsequent decline.

The works to which substantial reference is made in this chapter are, in chronological order of appearance:

Arnold, M (ed. Marvin)	<i>Reports on Elementary Schools 1852-1882</i>	HMSO	1908
The Newbolt Report	<i>The Teaching of English in England</i>	HMSO	1921
Potter, S	<i>The Muse in Chains</i>	Cape	1937
The Norwood Report	<i>Curriculum and Examinations in Secondary Schools</i>	HMSO	1943
Blamires, H	<i>English in Education</i>	Bles	1951
Highet, G	<i>The Art of Teaching</i>	Methuen	1951
The Newsome Report	<i>Half Our Future</i>	HMSO	1963
Whitehead, F	<i>The Disappearing Dais</i>	Chatto & Windus	1966
Inglis, F	<i>The Englishness of English Teaching</i>	Longmans	1969
Owens & Marland (eds)	<i>The Practice of English Teaching</i>	Blackie	1970
Shayer, D	<i>The Teaching of English in Schools 1900-1970</i>	Routledge & Kegan Paul	1972
The Bullock Report	<i>A Language for Life</i>	HMSO	1975

In the second chapter I have studied the relationship between the teaching and examining of English, on the ground that, while the examination system is undoubtedly imperfect in its assessment of pupil response to the stimulus of English teaching, it

remains impossible to devise any other method by which any reliable estimate of comparative standards might be achieved. It is also my contention that this study shows that, for all its acknowledged shortcomings, the public examination system moved progressively nearer to the spirit of literature and to the atmosphere of good English teaching over the period under scrutiny; and that relations between examination boards and their clients steadily improved to the general benefit of both pupils and of the examination system itself. Again, my argument is that there is no evidence in the change of attitude of teachers toward examinations or in the change in approach of the examinations themselves which points to any decline in standards.

The principal additional works to which reference is made in this chapter are:

Jeffery, C.B.	<i>External Examinations in Secondary Schools</i>	Harrap	1958
Bruce, C	<i>Secondary School Examinations</i>	Pergamon	1969
Pearce, J	<i>School Examinations</i>	Collier Macmillan	1972
Paffard, M	<i>Thinking about English</i>	Ward Lock Educational	1978
Protherough, R	<i>Teaching Literature for Examinations</i>	Open University Press	1986
Protherough, R, Atkinson, J, & Fawcett, J,	<i>The Effective Teaching of English</i>	Longmans	1989

In the third chapter I have examined the statistics relating to educational performance and a variety of works on the comparability of examinations over the period under review; and again my conclusions are that no consistent evidence is to be found of a decline in standards of performance, or of unreliability in the forms of measurement which record those standards. The additional source materials introduced in this chapter are principally the publications of government departments, and of the examination boards themselves.

An additional function of this chapter is to establish that the general record of comparability between the examination boards is sufficiently reliable to justify my concentration in the second section of this thesis upon the work of those two of the original nine examination boards – the Oxford Delegacy of Local Examinations and the Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate – whose materials are most readily accessible to me.

The remaining chapters will examine in detail the one remaining area in which evidence of a decline in standards might subsist – the possibility that examination

papers became slowly but surely less demanding over a substantial period of time, thus providing a lowering of the levels required for success more or less imperceptible to a 'year-on-year' study, but apparent over a wider time scope. Accordingly I have examined sequentially the actual papers set over the period in O level English Language, O level English Literature, and A level English; together with the official Examiners' Reports and such unofficial or internal material (eg marking schemes and individual examiner comment on scripts) as may have been retained in the archives. As it was the occasional practice of the Cambridge syndicate to print excerpts from actual scripts in official reports (the one aspect of comparability over a period unavailable to the recent SCAA scrutiny) it is also possible intermittently to relate specific performance to examiner comment. In this way I intend to demonstrate conclusively that it is simply not plausible to base a theory of declining standards on the premise that the actual demands on candidates were reduced over the period from 1944 to 1988.

CHAPTER FOUR

'O' Level English Language Examinations

"Mediocre compositions show the corresponding defects; monotonous sentences with the use of only one kind of subordinate clause or of none at all; poverty of vocabulary and inability to use pronouns, resulting in the constant repetition of the same words; compound sentences made up of unrelated parts; excessive use of the passive voice; inability to select the right preposition; misuse of such conjunctive words as 'however' and 'so'; awkward order of words phrases and clauses in the sentence; finally, and most important of all, ignorance of the difference between comma and full stop."

Examiners' Report, Oxford Local Examinations, 1958

"There is no doubt that the new methods in English teaching have led to much more lively and interesting writing than we used to get in years gone by. This examiners welcome and enjoy. But the more relaxed and uninhibited style has brought with it a lowering of the old standards of accuracy in grammar, spelling, punctuation, choice of words and sentence construction."

Examiners' Report, Oxford Local Examinations, 1970

When standards are mentioned in connection with the study of English, outsiders unquestionably think first of language, and the literacy levels of school-leavers, whereas those who are professionally concerned with teaching the subject are perhaps more inclined to think first of literature, and the critical faculty of pupils. This dichotomy of interest undoubtedly has something to do with the problem of standards that has confronted those who busy themselves at intervals (uncomfortably frequent intervals at the present time) in educational reform; and with their recurrent inability to solve it; but it is extremely difficult to identify precisely what that something is, or to find a practicable way of eradicating it.

However, I am far from seeking to imply that correctness, in matters of spelling, punctuation or grammar, is unimportant; and still less that English teachers are, in the main, indifferent to these things. The problem lies in the fact that they present a distinct resistance to the teaching process as conventionally understood – and, by and large, it is those whose understanding of these matters is conventional at best who are most likely to be talking in public about standards. There are innumerable people who are convinced that a pupil who writes the word 'seperate' or 'dissapear' can be cured of this shortcoming by being made to copy out the correct spelling three, or five, or six, or ten times, whichever numeral happened to be the mantra of their own school experience; and who regard the assurances of teachers that doing so has a very uncertain effect upon the probability of the correct spelling appearing the next time the pupil is writing something that he wants to say rather than competing in a spelling test,

as melancholy evidence of the fatuousness and unreliability of the professionals with their blind faith in trendy methods. It is possible to convert some of these people to an understanding that if you can persuade a pupil to visualise a rat sitting in the middle of the word separate, twitching its tail and whiskers, he may be less ready to introduce a medial e in future; and that emphasis on the double pp in appear, together with the common usage of dis- as a negative prefix is a better way of ensuring that 'disappear' is correctly spelt than simply copying the word *n* times, but the external critic remains convinced of the need for a universal method, and the teacher of the impossibility of finding one.

Certainly I am all in favour of using both etymology where it should be comprehensible and mnemonics where they are sufficiently memorable, but this will hardly serve for all the ills which afflict the average Englishman when writing his own language. Even if I could think of a memorable way of setting in concrete for schoolchildren the appropriate distribution of c and s in 'necessary' or c and m in 'accommodation', I could hardly hope to go on to do so for every frequent misspelling in the trainee teacher's handbook.

Nor, in any case, is spelling the worst feature of the violence done to English by those to whom its niceties do not come naturally and *never will*. It is still common enough to see jokes at the expense of the 'greengrocer's apostrophe' (as in 'potatoe's') or the houseagent's 'comprising of'; but there are other areas of equal distortion and far greater frequency which do not attract patronising humour, because the number of those who might enjoy the sense of feeling superior to their fellow man, but who are not entirely certain themselves of the correct usage, increases almost geometrically when we move away from 'schoolboy howlers' into the realms of common usage among the reasonably educated. After all, even when the distinction has been explained, people are inclined to feel that *it's ought* to be a possessive pronoun – the logical parallel with 'John's' is staring you in the face; so it is somewhat less common to find teachers being blamed for their failure to deal with this one: and those who are minded to castigate them for their incompetence are just as likely to say "Between you and I..." or "The reason is because.....", or to confuse *infer* with *imply* as anyone else; and

perhaps even more likely to confuse *refute* with *deny*, because 'refute' is a word not only abused but also much beloved by those given to laying down the law. And these days, even the BBC and the *Guardian* are more likely to say *may* instead of *might* than to get it right.

In some respects, therefore, I might seem to be arguing for an irretrievable decline in standards. This is not, in fact, the case. To start with, I do not think there has been any decrease in the number of people justly confident of getting these things right, and while there has undoubtedly been an increase in the number of people getting them wrong, I am far from convinced that this is an indication of declining standards. Can it be a decline to have a substantial improvement in the number of people familiar with the words 'imply', 'infer', 'refute' and so on, even if they are sometimes misapplied; and can it be a decline in standards to have widened enormously the pool from which the BBC and the *Guardian* recruit, even if some of their new employees are uncertain about the subjunctive?

Writer after writer on the subject of English teaching has underlined one inescapable but unpopular truth. The difficulty of teaching correct English usage is the difficulty of making the topic seem in any way relevant and material to the practical and everyday lives of the students. It is possible to add a sociological slant to this, for those who will find it plausible, and to blame the routine abuse of linguistic accuracy which seems to characterise advertising – on billboards, in newspapers, in shops and on the TV screen; one can also, and with obvious credibility, blame the prevalence of TV in the lives for our pupils for the widespread presumption that many of them read less than is commonly supposed to have been the norm for earlier generations, and therefore are less exposed to good practice; but these are distractors from the real and unpalatable truth, that you can teach accuracy in language usage only by inculcating a real love of language and its applications, and never by indoctrination to rules of practice. Making pupils learn lists of words for a spelling test does not necessarily improve their competence at spelling those words in the context of, for example, an essay. In the early days of my teaching career, I found it easy to teach Clause Analysis, in the sense that my pupils could perform the task of analysis and explication perfectly satisfactorily

either at the blackboard or in examination conditions. What very, very few of them (and those few not always, by any means, predictable) could do, was to apply that theoretical knowledge in the form of writing fluent complex sentences in their essay, comprehension or precis work, or in their literature evaluations; and I have a strong suspicion that those who could do so effectively would have been just as competent if I had spent no time on clause analysis at all. Certainly the number of my pupils who could write fluently and well did not decrease after clause analysis made its unlamented disappearance from 'O' Level language examination papers.

This is, perhaps, an unacceptably long preamble to a chapter on those examinations, so I will not further extend it by lengthy quotation from a number of sources on the fallacy of seeking to produce 'good' English by drill methods – particularly since by 'good' English I do not mean merely 'correct' but lively, vital, fluent, persuasive, enthusiastic, communicative, and a host of other things that will be instinctively understood by anyone who does not hold 'correctness' as an end in itself, but as a necessary tool in the task of effective and unambiguous communication. The most material quotation would be one which I have already cited, from Patrick Creber's *Sense and Sensitivity*, in which he reinforces this basic theme by quoting the hilarious "I write a textbook" by A.D.Winterburn, which makes the point perfectly.¹

The point that I seek to make, or to allow Creber and Winterburn to make for me, is that it is against this background of essential futility that a detailed survey of examination papers in English language has to be conducted, and that any resultant conclusion on standards has to be considered.

My interest in the subject of comparative standards, and my own first direct experience of the old School Certificate Examination came, quite coincidentally, in 1980, when the 1930 London Board English Language paper came into my possession; and inspired by the mystic significance that we tend to attach to centuries and half-centuries, and by the fortuitous circumstance that my fourth year class was expecting an end of year examination, I set them the relic rather than the conventional 'O' level paper from a from the previous year. The paper in question is appended on the next two pages.

¹ v.sup. p 67

TEXT BOUND INTO THE SPINE

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2

UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

GENERAL SCHOOL EXAMINATION

MIDSUMMER, 1930

ENGLISH

Examiners { A. V. HOUGHTON, Esq., B.A.
T. A. STEPHENS, Esq., B.A.

WEDNESDAY, June 18.—Morning, 9.30 to 12

PART II.—10.30 to 12

THREE questions only are to be answered in this section,
and ONE of these should be Question 2.]

2. Summarise, in reported speech, to about one-third
the length of the original, the following passage. Begin
précis with the words :—

writer said that—

A flagrant instance of the worship of false ideals is
found in the fierce competition of luxury and osten-
sion which characterises the more wealthy cities of
Europe and America. It is no exaggeration to say that
single festival in London or New York sums are often
expended in the idlest and most ephemeral ostentation
which might have revived industry, or extinguished
poverty, or alleviated suffering over a vast area. The
question of expenditure on luxuries is no doubt a question
of degree which cannot be reduced to strict rule, and
there are many who will try to justify the most ostentatious
expenditure on the ground of the employment it gives and
other incidental advantages it is supposed to produce.
Nothing in political economy is more certain than that

5/480 2/2.17,000 24/3/30

[TURN OVER

the vast and ever-increasing expenditure on the luxury of ostentation in modern societies, by withdrawing great masses of capital from productive labour, is a grave economical evil, and there is probably no other form of expenditure which, in proportion to its amount, gives so little real pleasure and confers so little real good. Its evil in setting up material and base standards of excellence, in stimulating the worst passions that grow out of an immoderate love of wealth, in ruining many who are tempted into a competition which they are unable to support, can hardly be overrated. It is felt in every rank in raising the standard of conventional expenses, excluding from much social intercourse many who are admirably fitted to adorn it, and introducing into all society a lower and more material tone. Nor are these its only consequences. Wealth which is expended in multiplying and elaborating real comforts, or even in pleasures which produce enjoyment at all proportionate to their cost, will never excite serious indignation. It is the colossal waste of the means of human happiness in the most selfish and most vulgar forms of social advertisement and competition that gives a force and almost a justification to anarchical passions which menace the whole future of our civilisation. It is such things that stimulate class hatreds and deepen class divisions, and, if the law of opinion does not interfere to check them, they will one day bring down upon the society that encourages them a signal and well-merited retribution.

3 Choose any six of the following phrases. Show that you understand the meaning and use of each phrase chosen: contemporary writers—discordant views—effective action—fallacious argument—miscellaneous knowledge—moral obligation—official memoranda—reciprocal courtesies—testamentary bequest.

4. Copy the following passage, writing it in metrical form and inserting the necessary capitals and the marks of punctuation :—

high matter thou enjoinst me o prime of men sad
task and hard for how shall i relate to human sense the
invisible exploits of warring spirits how without remorse
the ruin of so many glorious once and perfect while they

3

How last unfold the secrets of another world perhaps
lawful to reveal yet for thy good this is dispensed and
surmounts the reach of human sense i shall
create so by likening spiritual to corporal forms as may
press them best though what if earth be but the shadow
heaven and things therein each to other like more than
earth is thought.

(a) Analyse the following passage into sentences
clauses :—

While the commissioners were enjoying a prosperous
age to their native land, the camp of Cortes was the
of so dangerous a conspiracy that all his hopes
it well be shipwrecked. It was impossible for Cortes
doubt that if the conspirators once accomplished their
nothing could prevent the contagion from spreading
larger number. Fearing, therefore, lest, if he let slip
opportunity, he might be too late in parrying so fatal a
he ordered the parties indicated to be at once seized.

(b) Choose any THREE of the following words. Explain
By the several grammatical functions of each of the
words chosen, illustrating your answer by sentences :
—better—but—except—since.

(c) Comment on any points that you think noteworthy,
respect of grammar, form, or diction, in any SIX of
following sentences or phrases and rewrite them in
Explanation of your comment :—

(a) Over-pressure on the station staffs, inherent at
day times, is thus relieved.

(b) A country squire or Rector, on landing with his
under his wing in Oxford, finds himself much at sea.

(c) He did not know any girl whom he would not
rather die than marry.

(d) Search for woman strangler.

(e) It was uncertain whether he was actually executed
because a page of the chronicle was missing.

(f) He went in for horse-racing, thinking he would
succeed as everybody does who backs horses.

(g) Being the best man for the post, I recommend
him.

[TURN OVER

4

(h) You can see that the fish exist by going to the
aquarium where they are in tanks.

(i) The book describes how a young Egyptian, who,
having travelled into Russia, is expelled by the authorities
and returns home.

* The following are two versions of the same theme.
Describe the incident alluded to and comment on the
difference of treatment and expression in the two
versions :—

And her husband had pity to see her, and caressed her
with his hand, and spake and called upon her name :
“Dear one, I pray thee be not of over sorrowful heart;
no man against my fate shall hurl me to Hades; only
destiny, I ween, no man hath escaped, be he coward or be
he valiant, when once he hath been born. But go thou
to thine house and see to thine own tasks, the loom and
distaff, and bid thine handmaidens ply their work; but
for war shall men provide and I in chief of all men that
dwell in Ilios.”

The soften'd chief with kind compassion view'd,
And dried the falling drops, and thus pursued :
“My own dear wife ! my soul's far better part,
Why with untimely sorrows heaves thy heart ?
No hostile hand can antedate my doom,
Till fate condemns me to the silent tomb.
Fix'd is the term to all the race of earth;
And such the hard condition of our birth :
No force can then resist, no flight can save,
All sink alike, the fearful and the brave.
No more—but hasten to thy tasks at home,
There guide the spindle, and direct the loom :
Me glory summons to the martial scene.
The field of combat is the sphere for men.
Where heroes war, the foremost place I claim,
The first in danger as the first in fame.”

80. 561.

Rather to my own surprise, and certainly to theirs, they all passed with flying colours – passed, that is to say, by the standards which I was accustomed to apply, and which related to twenty years of teaching for GCE. It struck me almost immediately that I had no real idea how their efforts would have struck A.V Houghton, Esq., B.A. and T.A. Stephens, Esq. B.A., to whom the London Board kindly attributed the paper; but I was equally struck by the reaction of the class, who had been convinced that they would fail miserably because they had been brainwashed into believing that educational standards had much declined in the intervening period. It was true that they could not have answered question 5 because they had never been taught clause analysis (the very last lesson on this topic I ever taught was explaining to them, at their request, how the question should have been answered) but questions 2, 3 and 6 were all perfectly within their competence, though a small handful varied this by attempting 4 or 7. They were, in any case, unused to having such a choice on a language paper, and being effectively constrained to answer three fixed questions did not strike them as a handicap. Within those limits I satisfied myself, (I think justly), that the standards required for success could not have changed very significantly: either the sense of the original passage for précis had been effectively conveyed in one third of the length of the original or it had not, and answers to any six options from questions 3 and 6 were either wrong or right. Most of the class, including those few who had attempted questions 4 and 7, reckoned that, by comparison, 3 and 6 were soft options; so these were remarked more severely to discount any possible ambiguities or clumsinesses of expression.

The original mark stood, of course, for school records purposes – but in point of fact it made very little difference: nobody failed. The class concluded that there was very little substance in the persistent emphasis on declining standards, and that this was yet another instance of finding fault with modern youth; and I resolved that when time and opportunity served I would investigate the matter in greater depth. This thesis results from that resolution.

In 1950, the last School Certificate paper in English Language set by the Oxford University Delegacy of Local Examinations consisted of two papers.

The first, coded S1(a), allowed the candidates one hour in which to:

Write a composition on one of the following
 A school harvest camp;
 Bicycles;
 Some interesting wild animals of our countryside;
 Do you think boys should be taught Domestic Science?
 The day when everything seems to go right.

The second paper, coded S1(b) allowed its candidates one and threequarter hours and had the rubric:

Answer ALL questions. Question 4 carries high marks and candidates are advised to allow plenty of time for it.

The questions which followed were four in number, the first of which had two sections:

1a) Define the following pairs of words so as to show how the words in each pair differ from each other:

uninterested/disinterested; annoy/aggravate; discussion/debate

1b) In each of the following sentences replace the words in italics by a single word. [There were four of these]

Question 2 was a comprehension exercise, in which a passage from Burke was followed by seven questions, testing understanding of parts of the passage or of individual words in context.

Question 3 required the analysis of the seven clauses contained in a two sentence paragraph.

Question 4 was a Précis, requiring a passage of 308 words to be reduced to 100.

Apart from the observation that 'disinterested' is a word that is scarcely ever used except in error for 'uninterested', and that fewer people would be aware of its existence and be tempted to misuse it, were it not for exercises of this kind, there is little to say about this paper, save that it represents the foundation upon which the Ordinary Level of the General Certificate of Education was erected, and that mercifully, the ensuing thirty-seven years were to show considerably more awareness of the limitations of the format than were apparent in; for example, the sister paper in literature. None were, however, manifest in the first GCE paper in 1951, which was modelled as closely as possible on the School Certificate original.

Renumbered O1(a), the essay paper offered marginally more flexibility in that its titles were grouped under three headings:

- Either (a) write a composition on one of the following –
 - (i) A wet summer
 - (ii) The Fun of the Fair
 - (iii) The luxuries of today are the necessities of tomorrow
- Or (b) Describe the most interesting garden you know
- Or (c) A relative has offered you an opening for a career in his business which you do not wish to accept. Write a letter explaining why.

The last of these, which offered a combination of the 'letter' format with the opportunity to deploy some knowledge of 'business English', might have seemed a sop to those employers who complained of the ignorance of school leavers in these matters. It would, however, be remarkably difficult to establish any meaningful change in standards on the strength of differences between the two papers, and in the case of the second paper downright impossible. The rubric for O1(b) was identical to its School Certificate predecessor, and the questions very nearly so.

Question one differed only in a reversal of emphasis when compared with that for the previous year, with the first part offering four sentences to be corrected (the errors in question being the use of 'who' for 'whom', 'like' for 'as', 'will' for 'shall' and the omission of a necessary comma; while the second part had six sentences containing italicised phrases which the candidates were required to replace with a single word. Question 2 asked six very similar comprehension questions on a passage from Macaulay. Question 3 required the clause analysis of a section of the same passage; and the final question was again a précis, this time requiring the reduction of 347 words to 100.

A potentially interesting check upon the impact of the new examination exists in that section of the Oxford University Archives which deals with the records of the former University of Oxford Delegacy of Local Examinations, among which are included the proceedings of The Standing Joint Committee for Oxford Examinations of the 'Joint Four' – the four unions which at that time represented Headmasters, Headmistresses, Assistant Masters and Assistant Mistresses in independent and grammar schools, and which became in the course of time SHA and AMMA (now ATL). This Standing Joint Committee was responsible for collecting complaints and other comments from members

of the unions concerned and forwarding them to the Delegacy, which would, in due course, minute both comment and reply and publish them in the agenda for the annual meeting between members of the Committee and the Delegacy at which there could be further discussion. It will be noted that I said that these papers provided a potentially interesting check – unfortunately, in point of fact, little of real interest emerges from a study of such comments and replies as have survived. I have been unable to trace any record of the proceedings of the final year of School and Higher School Certificates in 1950; and 1951, first year of the new examination or not, illustrates little more than the barren pedantry which is typical of these proceedings. The only objection listed to the Ordinary Level Language paper relates to question three and reads as follows:

"The revival of the obsolete and unsatisfactory term 'a compound sentence' is generally condemned.....the term disappeared from most of our schools 20 or 30 years ago. I do not think [it] has been used in a School Certificate paper during that period. Its use in the first language paper of the new GCE is unfortunate.There have been several complaints that both the adverbial clause of condition and the noun clause are of a very unusual variety – some critics go so far as to deny that they are valid examples."

to which the Delegacy replied:

"It is not agreed that the 'compound sentence' has fallen out of use but we will not use it in future." and "Agreed that they proved difficult."¹

The papers of 1952 offered a little more in the way of change and development. The somewhat unnecessary complication of the essay paper rubric was abandoned and the old School Cert. a) to f) format was restored, though the GCE insistence on one specifically descriptive title and one letter option was maintained. On the second paper, the rather odd insistence on warning the candidates to leave plenty of time for the last question was abandoned, and the highly marked précis was moved to the question 1 slot. Clause analysis moved up to question 2. The third question was again centred on vocabulary, on this occasion in the form of a passage containing eight blanks, each of which was to be filled by the "most suitable word". The conventional comprehension question took up the final position as question 4. As it is clearly easier to do part of a comprehension exercise with a series of separate questions, than it is to do part of a précis, the change should have given a better chance of obtaining a just assessment to

¹ Oxford University Archive Ref. LE 10/1

those candidates who had difficulty in completing the paper within the permitted time, and this was presumably the reason for the change: superficially cosmetic but in fact a potential contribution to improving the number of candidates who finished just above the initial pass mark of 45% instead of just below; and thereby an indication of just how arbitrary pass-rate percentages can be, and how careful we must be to scrutinise judgements on standards which are based on such statistics. Another possibly relevant factor in this question of improving the chances of candidates arises not so much from this year's exchange between the Joint Four Standing Committee and the Delegacy, but in the contrast between one element of that exchange and a response from the pre-GCE era of 1949. In 1952, the Joint Four protested that, on the essay paper, "the reflective pupil, able to develop an argument, or the pupil with wider general interests, had no scope" to which the Delegacy responded:

"It has been found necessary to be extremely cautious with questions designed for the reflective or better than average candidate, because the weaker candidate is lured by the superficial attraction of such questions....and fails badly." ¹

This might be dismissed as a conventional illustration of 'the Delegacy is always right' response referred to in Chapter Two² were it not for the coincidence of an answer three years earlier to a complaint on Paper 2, that one of the grammatical questions was "definitely too hard for the average candidate" to which the Delegacy had responded:

"Admittedly it is too hard for the average candidate, but a paper must give opportunity for the better candidate to shine." ³

Now it is entirely possible that the apparent radical change of attitude is nothing of the kind, and that the two answers are a splendid collective instance of an Examination Board refusing to accept that it could ever be in the wrong, whatever knots it must tie itself into in the process; but if what we see here is a genuine change of stance, then it is clearly deserving of comment. I am inclined personally not to take the more cynical view, and to see this as one of the factors of differentiation between School Certificate and GCE, along with the removal of the merit and distinction grades of assessment, and the emphasis on single subject entry. At this stage, those candidates

^{1,3} Oxford University Archive Ref. LE 10/1

² v.sup. pp 157-159

who were deemed to have merited an entry in English Language could achieve only pass or fail in that subject, irrespective of their performance in any other area – and the examiners may well have felt that in those circumstances there was no longer the old justification for providing specific hoops for the more graceful candidates to jump through. The GCE pass mark had, as we have seen, already been set at the old School Cert. merit level; and providing stumbling blocks for otherwise satisfactory candidates in the important essay paper might easily have seemed to the examiners an attitude to avoid, which would explain the 1952 essay response as against that on the 1949 clause analysis question. But even if there were that change of approach which I suggest here, it cannot legitimately be regarded as a lowering of standards. As the examples of School Certificate Essay papers already quoted demonstrate, the titles on offer were by no means exclusively designed for "the reflective pupil, able to develop an argument", and the vast majority of School Certificate successes must have been awarded on the kind of pedestrian material that the standard titles of both examinations would encourage. To demand material that would effectively discriminate between categories of candidate in an examination which does not allow for such categories would seem pointless, and the Delegacy's rejection of the demand is in step with the new thinking behind GCE.

The next two years showed some continued tampering with the rubric for the essay paper, 1953 using the instruction:

"Write a composition (which may be in the form of an essay, a straightforward account, a speech or a letter) on one only of the following subjects"

while 1954 simplified this to

"Write a composition on one only of the following subjects",

a format which was then to remain unchanged, as indeed was the range of titles offered, until the paper was remodelled in 1966. Other changes almost too minor to be worth noticing were that the examination codes changed from O1(a) and O1(b) to O1A and O1B in 1952, and to O1/I and O1/II in 1953, remaining with this notation until 1962 when they became O1-I and O1-II instead!

Fortunately, the contents of the second paper over the same period do offer us a little more in the way of developmental variety.

In 1953, the question on clause analysis moved from second to third position, and, for the first time, invited candidates to compose sentences containing specified types of clause, while the new question 2 required the rewriting of passages containing jargon and misusages. There was thus a perceptible move, even if a small one, in the direction of encouraging the candidate to create rather than merely to react.

In 1954, Question 2 required candidates to write a formal reply to a formal invitation, and also to pair off Dear X, Y and Z with 'Yours faithfully, sincerely, etc.; while question 3 required the rewriting of sentences so as to replace phrases with clauses and vice versa. There is, again, a measurable element of emphasis on the creative rather than reactive, though the concern for formal correctness, as in the case of the third person letter and in the properly matched heads and tails for correspondence, can hardly have corresponded very closely to the actual experience or practice of the candidates before or after they received the necessary tuition in etiquette.

The following year followed its predecessor very closely, asking for a second paragraph to complete the formal letter provided, for the rewriting of a paragraph without the clichés with which the examiners had generously provided it, and for the construction of sentences each to contain a specified type of subordinate clause.

In 1956, the clause analysis question returned to the second slot on the paper, but this was simply to facilitate the decision to use the *précis* passage as a quarry for the location of designated clauses; while question 3 required the creation of metaphors or similes on the basis of given nouns, and the creation of a sentence illustrating understatement.

In 1957, the paper resumed the older order of the paper, question 2 requiring the formation of cognate adjectives from given nouns and their insertion in sentences provided with convenient blanks; and also the formation of nouns from given verbs.

Again there are useful elements here indicating, if anything, an improvement in the standards expected of the candidates since the demise of School Cert., but the fact that the list of provided verbs referred to immediately above included 'absolve' suggests that

the paper had still not outgrown a tendency to test candidates on knowledge acquired for its own sake as a mark of having received an education, rather than for any use to which it is likely to be put. At least, though, so far as can be discovered, there were no complaints that such a question discriminated in favour of Roman Catholics. Oddly enough, question 3 on the same paper specifically set out to disadvantage candidates who had learned (or been taught) by rote, by requiring candidates to analyse clauses all of which began with 'when', and then to create three clauses of different types each of which was to begin with 'where'. Predictably, this did attract a complaint about unfairness from the Joint Four Standing Committee, to which the Delegacy replied:

"If analysis means anything, candidates should be prepared to consider any piece of English on its merits. The marking of analysis is extremely flexible, as indeed it must beIf the exercise is only one of doing stereotyped processes with passages of stereotyped character, it seems of little value."¹

It was in 1957 that the Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate produced the first of a series of Intermittent Examiners' Reports on 'O' Level English Language, based on the performance of candidates the previous summer. Three years earlier it had produced a similar report on 'A' level English Literature: so far as I have been able to discover, the first such official report on GCE examination performance from any examination board. What distinguishes many of the Cambridge Reports from those which Oxford was subsequently to introduce was that they included excerpts from actual papers produced in the year under review – they thus provide virtually the only direct evidence we have of the correlation between marks or grades and actual performance in the course of the GCE, since, as the SCAA Report *Standards in Public Examinations 1975 to 1995* points out:

"The archiving practices of the examining boards vary considerably in the amounts of evidence, particularly scripts and grade boundary marks, retained year upon year. No board was able to provide scripts from the specified examinations from the 1970s, some had a few from the 1980s, and there was no coursework available from any board from 1990 or earlier. As a consequence, there is insufficient evidence available to enable firm conclusions to be drawn about some aspects of grade standards going back more than ten years at 18+ or five years at 16+."²

This is a situation which has now been rectified, and the selection of appropriately exemplary archive scripts at all grades is now an additional requirement for all

¹Oxford University Archive Ref. LE 10/1

² Op.cit. p 2

grading committees, a fact which will make life considerably easier for anyone wishing to research standards over the next half-century. For the purposes of the SCAA Report, however, the conclusion was absolutely accurate. Nevertheless, having regard to the constant findings of comparability between the boards to which I refer in Chapter Three, I believe that the occasional quotation from the scripts singled out by the Cambridge examiners for their reports can legitimately illustrate material on standards largely derived from the archives of the old Oxford board, particularly at A level, where relevant comparative material of a more recent date is available to me.

The Cambridge Report on the 1956 examination in English Language is, however, more significant for its general comment, in particular upon the essay paper which is clearly directly comparable with that of Oxford:

"Work of high quality was obviously lacking and there were few examples of sustained merit: even candidates obviously endowed with intelligence and sensitivity, and capable of adequate self-expression, would often lapse into elementary mistakes of grammar and punctuation."¹

The use of 'even' in that final sentence should give us pause, since it clearly implies that candidates unable to show evidence of intelligence, sensitivity and the capacity for self-expression were by no means absent from the entry list, and were very possibly in the majority. Yet at this early stage in the history of GCE the overwhelming majority of candidates were from grammar schools or the independent sector. If there is any truth at all in the allegations that standards have declined, it is important that we have a clear understanding of what they have declined *from*; and the picture drawn by the Cambridge examiners is far from suggesting a lofty plateau of ability. When they move from the general to the isolation of particular faults in essay writing, the problem of visualising a higher standard than English teachers are accustomed to today becomes even more difficult.

"Irrelevance.

Irrelevancy took several forms from the reproduction of narratives not even remotely connected with the title to the distortion of the theme by long and pointless digressions.....The examination seeks primarily to test ability to write English rather than knowledge of a particular subject, but if candidates evade the subject set, it is impossible to make an objective appraisal of the work.

¹ Op.cit. *Introduction*.

"Subject Treatment

.....examiners have been disturbed by the lightness and superficiality of subject matter. The range of ideas in a composition, of course, cannot do more than reflect a candidate's reading and experience, but it is distressing that so many never attempt to amplify their ideas.obvious and threadbare material.....frequent instances of the reproduction of prepared material..... Ideas were left in their bleakness without comment or amplification or any attempt to develop a relevant example.lack of observation and detail in descriptive writing. Far too many candidates are satisfied with vague general references instead of precisely observed detail.

Paragraphing

.....still haphazard. Many paragraphs were completely lacking in coherence and unity.

Sentence Construction

While there has been some improvement in sentence structure in recent years, many candidates still make no attempt to vary their construction and show little understanding of the logical order of the sentence. The scripts of 1956 fully illustrated the practice of stringing together a number of simple sentences by 'and', 'but', 'so', and even 'then'.Examiners feel that over the last few years there has been a notable decrease in the examples of false concord. However, inconsistency in the use of pronouns, tense or numberare still common faults.

Punctuation

Most examiners think that from year to year there is little sign of any firm improvement in punctuation. Candidates at this stage should be able to distinguish the use of the comma from that of the full stop but all examiners reported widespread misuse. Few candidates were successful in punctuating direct speech.

Expression and Vocabulary

The work of many candidates in this respect is very satisfactory. The 1956 compositions showed that some candidates were not afraid to use words boldly, imaginatively and even humorously." ¹

It will have been noted that nowhere in this catalogue of shortcomings do the Cambridge examiners speak of, or even imply, any decline or falling off in standards of performance. On the contrary, improvement is specifically referred to in some areas and its absence lamented in others. As I commented earlier² on the general impact of the 1944 Act, the mood seems to be of disappointment that standards are so slow to improve substantially rather than that things are getting worse.

The following year, Cambridge issued a Report which reprinted the English Language papers for the examination of summer 1957, together with reproductions of sample scripts and commentaries on the performance of candidates. The Essay paper required candidates to write a composition on one of the listed subjects, of which there were nine, three of which were subdivided into either/or alternatives. The rubric laid down that *Your composition should be of reasonable length; marks will be given particularly*

¹ Op.cit. *Detailed Comments*

² v.sup. p 108

for style, subject matter and arrangement. It is a pity from the researcher's point of view, though entirely understandable from that of the examiners, that the examples of varying levels of ability should also have illustrated treatment of different titles. However, the qualities of writing are sufficiently distinct to illustrate effectively the standards of assessment which inform the examiners' accompanying comment. Since there can be no dispute over genuine quality I will omit the illustrations of really good work and concentrate on examples of "credible pass", borderline script and failure. The first category is illustrated by an essay on the "The force of habit", and the opening paragraph reads as follows:

"I am very subject to the force of habit. If I become used to having any particular object about me I find, after a time, that I begin to regard it as essential to myself and the longer I keep it, the more necessary it becomes. If I am in the habit of walking to school by one particular route and then, one morning, decide to go by another, I am disturbed all day and have an unpleasant feeling that something is wrong. Though in theory the idea of change and new things appeals to me, in practice I dislike it intensely and prefer to keep my methods of doing things the same over long periods. Of course I do occasionally change my habits, but it is not until I have persevered for some time that I become really happy in my new state. Then, of course, I find it impossible to think how I could ever have managed any other way." ¹

The examiners comment that

"The content of the composition is an adequate interpretation of the subject and is communicated with economy and directness, with a vigour and lack of digression which are highly satisfactory. The first paragraph with its personal appeal arrest the attention and fairly launches the theme....." ²

and goes on to comment upon the ability of the writer to use compound and complex sentences, with few errors of spelling and punctuation and without excessive use of colloquialism. I find it difficult to believe that anyone would quarrel with this verdict. The 'borderline' example which follows was written on the subject of "Parks and Public Gardens", and I quote about one third of the entire text:

"Parks and public gardens are situated mainly in large residential areas, for example, London or Manchester. They are areas of land set aside for use by the public, who wish to get away from the busy and noisy streets. Parks and public gardens may be of any size but they all have the same peaceful atmosphere. The parks are grassy, tree-shaded areas, with footpaths traversing them in all directions. Along the footpaths are situated seats for those who wish to rest.

¹ Op.cit. p 14

² Ibid. pp 15-16

Parks usually have football, cricket and hockey pitches, as well as hard and grass tennis courts, inside their perimeters. The parks are usually cared for by the local council and are kept in very good order; the grass is always short and the games pitches are always well prepared.

Many people go into the parks to sit and rest and transfer their thoughts from the city life to that of the countryside, for that is what the parks are reminiscent of. There are many people who fall asleep, and as one wanders through a park at least a dozen people may be found to be dozing. Dogs are taken in parks for exercise. " 1

The commentary on the essay from which this extract is taken reads as follows:

"After an hour and a half's writing the candidate has achieved little of interest in matter or style. The work quoted is comparatively short but others of this category have been long tedious efforts. Such compositions may be free from the more obvious mechanical errors: for example they may not abound in grammatical errors such as unrelated participles, confusion of concord, etc. nor may they contain glaring absurdities of punctuation and sentence structure; but as exercises in written communication they are very poor. The subject matter is dull and pedestrian and is little more than a list of facts selected at random. Without any argument, emotional slant or point of view such a composition can have no shape or point of interest. All of this is reflected in the sentence structure which is excessively dull and repetitive.This wooden quality....reinforces the general expression of utter triviality. The vocabulary is narrowly limited: indeed there is scarcely a descriptive epithet or expressive adverb in the whole piece. there is an insipidity of expression in this composition which does not suggest that this candidate has any control of language." 2

While it is impossible to quarrel with any part of this analysis, I suspect that it might seem to many teachers a little heavy handed. It is true that the piece is regarded as borderline rather than as an outright failure, but it is clearly not in any way guilty of the illiteracy which examiners are sometimes accused of endorsing with pass grades. It would be very difficult, I think, to convict a board which reacts in this way to such a composition, written in examination conditions, of any deficiency in standards; though it might awaken interest in what they would have to say about a piece that clearly failed, such as this essay entitled "The winds". Their comment is, in fact, much briefer:

"All examiners agreed that this composition was of a quality that could never be seriously considered in relation to a pass mark. The eccentricity of thought as it is presented here is matched by the poverty of the expression. On all counts – grammar, vocabulary, spelling, sentence structure and punctuation – this script could only be regarded as most inferior." 3

"Winds have been and still are a source of trouble to mankind. they blow down the crops the wip up the sea in fact they seem to do every thing in their powers to hinder man. The only real use they have had was in days of sailing ships, but now they have none except bringing rain when we want sun and sun when we want rain.

It is about time science made an effort to control this rebelous eliment.

1 Op.cit. p 16

2 Ibid. p 17

3 Ibid. p 18

The obvious method is to use a very large seize electric fan. This fan could be faced toward the wind and turned on, making a flow of air in the opposite direction to that of wind. The fan would be automaticly controlled so as it could produce a flow of air equal in speed to that of the wind.

The main use of this machine would be at holiday resorts were it could be used to keep clouds at a distance of five or six miles. At first this sounds a very good idea but when you examin it further you will find such a machine would not be suitable for holiday resorts near large towns. These resorts do a large trade in day trippers but if you were going out for day and about ten miles from your desturnation you came across a large blake sheet of the thundery clouds from which rain was coning down in sheets it is likely that you will turn back and go home. But this fret of rain washing out a day would not put you off if you had travelled a hundred miles and were going to stay for a week at this same resort.

The building up of clouds at the distance were the wind machine fails to take effect would be unavoidable, this could be very dangerous and could cause flooding. The farmers in that area would not be very pleased with wind machine and if the machine broke down at the wrong time it would mean the flooding of the poor town.

The wind machine could be used to bring rain to the deserts of world but for some unknown reason I think a wind machine would inpractical, unsafe, and unrelible. On the whole I think at this moment of time we better leave are efforts in wind making to the film industry, besides on the whole I do not think we really get such a bad deal from the wind as I first made out although it often brings the wrong things at the wrong time." ¹

Again there is little room for doubt about the justice of the examiners' verdict: nevertheless, for all its many inadequacies, this composition is hardly quite so near illiteracy as the chorus of complaints about the quality of school leaver command of language might have led us to suppose. It is disappointing that, after some eleven years of education, a pupil can still write like this, and also that, at a time when comparatively few students were entered for GCE, such a pupil had been regarded as suitable for entry; but the fate of this particular script gives no grounds for doubting the standards of the examination.

The commentary in this Report on the second paper adds very little to what was to be said over and over again in similar documents throughout the life of the GCE examination, but the observations on *The inclusion of 'Formal Grammar'* are perhaps sufficiently indicative of the differences between teacher and examiner reaction, and of the current philosophy of the examination to justify quotation here:

"Teachers have complained that the inclusion of questions on formal grammar, as in parts of questions 3 and 4, penalises those schools where formal grammar teaching is finished in the Third Form. In order to insure against the risk that candidates may have forgotten what they knew two years previously, these critics argue, it is necessary to devote to 'Revision'

time which can ill be spared from other aspects of the teaching of English. In support of the inclusion of these questions the examiners would point out that:

(i) The questions are devised to test, not the work covered at any particular stage of the curriculum in any particular group of schools but the knowledge of the subject which should be part of the normal equipment of the average boy and girl who has reached the age and standard at which this examination is taken.

(ii) The examiners are careful to avoid setting questions involving a knowledge of the minutiae of grammatical studies, as contained in many text-books on the subject, or a familiarity with more than a minimum of what may be called 'grammatical jargon'. The qualities required in answering these questions are commonsense and clear thinking rather than the ability to reproduce the subject-matter of formal lessons, whether oral or printed, on grammar. " 1

The use at this stage of the phrase "the age and standard at which this examination is taken" is a useful reminder that GCE was initially visualised as an examination appropriate only for the top 20% of intellectual ability in each year group, or a number approximately equal to those selected for grammar school education, and that the growth of comprehensive schools, starting in the course of the next decade and becoming the norm within twenty years, was to involve a considerable revision in the thinking of those involved in education as to the validity of many of the arbitrary barriers which were still taken for granted in 1957. It is, therefore, also useful to be reminded of exactly what abilities "should be part of the normal equipment of the average boy or girl" so far as the examiners were concerned but regarded by some teachers as an unfair test, though it an interesting sidelight to be informed that such teachers took for granted that grammar would not stick in their pupils' minds and was taught for no other purpose than to fulfill the school curriculum and to be tested in internal examinations accordingly.

The actual questions referred to in questions 3 and 4 of the 1957 Paper 2 are reproduced below:

"Q3 Both parts of the question are to be answered.

(a) Rewrite the following passage so that it contains only two principal clauses without using 'and' more than once. Make alterations which are rendered necessary by your particular constructions, but otherwise preserve the wording of the original as well as the sense.

The sun broke through the clouds and it dried the roofs and Laura cut short her essay and it was on Bismark's foreign policy and Florence was lighthearted and she threw her books into a drawer and they were destined to lie there for some time and shortly afterwards Robert saw them and he

1 Op.cit. p 23

was their brother and they were pedalling furiously and they had their racquets and they were going to the tennis club and it lay at the other end of the village.

(b) Give (1) the literal, (2) the metaphorical meaning of four of the following phrases and sentences. Do not compose sentences to illustrate their use.

- (i) A stitch in time saves nine
- (ii) Off the beaten track
- (iii) Look before you leap
- (iv) Don't count your chickens before they're hatched
- (v) Against the grain
- (vi) Turning a blind eye
- (vii) Any port in a storm
- (viii) Putting the cart before the horse.

Q4 Both parts of the question are to be answered

(a) Each of the phrases printed in italics in the following passage might be replaced by a subordinate clause with the same meaning and function. For example, (iv) *before publication*, might be replaced by 'before the magazine is due to be published' (an adverbial clause). Write down a clause which might replace each of the other numbered phrases, adding in brackets after each clause what kind it is. Do not rewrite the passage.

Will you please send me an article on (i) *your impressions of Sports day*? The article can be either humorous or serious (ii) *according to your wish*. I must ask you to send it by Saturday as (iii) *owing to various unavoidable delays*, we now have only three weeks (iv) *before publication*. (v) *Despite the many difficulties* we are trying to keep to the timetable (vi) *drawn up earlier in the year*.

(b) Below are words spoken by an engine-driver to some journalists during a recent strike. Give an accurate version of them in reported (indirect) speech, beginning: The engine driver told the journalists that....

'I should like you to understand the life I lead. Conditions are terrible. How would you enjoy driving on a foggy night like last night? I have to have my eyes strained every minute. Let the Minister of Transport try this job for a time. He will soon find out what it's like. If the pay isn't raised next month, there won't be any engine drivers.' " 1

It is not easy after the interval of forty years to understand why some parts of this paper were regarded as knowledge "which should be part of the normal equipment of the average boy and girl" for whom GCE at O level was an appropriate test of acquired abilities; but granted that such questions were regularly set, it seems just as hard to justify the attitude of teachers who felt that their time was being wasted in revising such techniques, and relatively easy to identify with examiners who supposed that, once taught, such skills should become part of a permanent linguistic ability. There seems here to be some support for my contention that teaching English was regarded, by some at least of its practitioners, as far more a sequence of formulaic preparations for an examination the demands of which could be predicted with

accuracy, than the training of pupils in the nuances of their own language and in the skills required to manipulate them effectively – and there seem also to be some echoes of the kind of attitude ascribed to the bulk of teachers in the books studied by Robert Protherough and referred to in my first chapter.

To return to the Oxford Delegacy as an exemplar of the slow rate of change in the English Language papers, it should perhaps be emphasised that there had so far been no alteration of any significance to the questions dealing with comprehension and précis; and in 1958 there was something of a backwards movement, in that clause analysis was back to identifying subordinate clauses and phrases in given sentences, and the vocabulary question was based on an understanding of prefixes and suffixes.

1958 was, however, the year of the first Oxford Examiners' Report, and possibly not the time to provoke unrest with anything innovative. The section of that Report dealing with 'O' Level English Language is quite lengthy and gives a very clear impression of what was expected and of the most typical shortcomings among those who failed to provide it; not surprisingly, a list of faults almost identical with that provided by their colleagues in the Cambridge Syndicate:

"The aim ofthe essay paper is to test the candidate's ability to express himself in clear accurate and pleasing English, not to discover his knowledge of any of the subjects set. It is therefore very rarely indeed that subject matter alone, apart from the quality of the English, is the cause of failure. When such a failure does occur, it is due to one of two causes. The first is total irrelevance.The second cause is vulgarity and sheer bad taste, into which attempted humour sometimes degenerates. Though subject matter is very seldom the cause of failure, it is important in differentiating between mediocre and good work. Failure in this paper is almost always caused by a lack of command of the mechanics of written English – syntax, grammar, punctuation and spelling. A reasonable grasp of sentence structure and of logical connexion between sentences will secure a pass. For the highest excellence examiners look for variety of sentence structure, width and appropriate use of vocabulary, and muscular writing full of substance. Mediocre compositions show the corresponding defects; monotonous sentences.....poverty of vocabulary and inability to use pronouns.....awkward order of words, phrases, or clauses in the sentence; finally, and most important of all, ignorance of the difference between comma and full stop." ¹

Apart from vague doubts about examiners having the power to fail candidates on the grounds of bad taste, it would be difficult to find much fault with this as a paradigm for the successful candidate, to argue that there has been anything other than

¹ Op.cit. p 33

determined adherence to the standards of linguistic correctness, or to suggest much that would improve upon it as guidance to English teachers in their task of preparing candidates.

Nevertheless, it is possible to see here something of that dichotomy of approach, that problem of presentation, to which I referred at the beginning of this paper.

Apart from the emphasis on 'pleasing' English in the opening sentence, there is minimal reference here to good, as opposed to correct, writing, and certainly no evidence that a barely literate but highly imaginative and intelligent candidate, such as figures in Emlyn Williams' *The Corn is Green*, would be likely to receive recognition or acknowledgement. I personally believe that it would be a harsh judgement, but I would not be unsympathetic to a teacher, perhaps in a secondary modern school, who found such a summary prescriptive, arid, and profoundly discouraging, in its apparent conviction that strait is the gate and narrow is the way to grammatical accuracy and few there be that find it; and that there were teachers who responded in this way is evidenced by the references to examinations as straightjackets in the educational writings of the period examined in Chapter Two of this thesis.

"Examinations produce a new sense of what English is. Their power, their concern for the markable is a chief reason for the continuance of that other version of 'English' whose constituent parts are grammar, précis, spelling, comprehension, exercises, etc. These formal and linguistically analytical parts have.....a place in English truly seen. By themselves they are at the best wasteful, at the worst stunting."¹

It does not take an enormous effort of imagination to suppose the author's response to the remainder of this Report, devoting itself, as it does, to the second paper.

The concluding sentence of the Report reads as follows:

"The purpose of the paper is to test the candidates' ability to read English closely and accurately, and to write it neatly and carefully, with due regard for the conventions. There has recently been some improvement on the very low standards in spelling and punctuation that have been all too common, but there is room for further improvement along these lines. There are candidates who know the right answer to a question but make gratuitous errors in writing it down: they omit full stops, fail to insert necessary quotation marks, or misspell words that are in front of their eyes on the question paper. This kind of gross carelessness will always be penalized."²

¹ Jackson, *English versus Examinations*, 1965, p 15

² Op.cit. pp 34-35

There is an unfortunate emphasis here which reinforces the tendency of the opposition to public examinations to demonise examiners, and helps to justify the kind of cartoon which illustrated and enlivened the language textbooks about at the beginning of my teaching career. One I remember (by O'Malley and Thompson, I think) showed an examiner as an aquiline figure in a dark suit. It was only at a second glance that one noticed the tiny horns and the forked tail casually draped over the wrist thrust into the trouser pocket. For candidates able to see the funny side of that, and teachers accustomed to teach them, the exam. would have held few terrors and no enormous degree of challenge – but for those uncertain of what was required, and for whom preparation for the exam. had turned their own language into a minefield; and for those teachers whose classes contained a majority of pupils in this category, ending on a note which castigates 'gratuitous errors' and penalizes 'gross carelessness' must, inevitably, seem like a threat issued across the border of an unfamiliar but hostile country.

In a very real sense, the conclusion of the English Language section of the Examiners' Report, issued, so we are told in its Introduction, because "examiners of long experience must have much to say that might be of value to teachers and candidates" is erecting a large board inscribed "Trespassers will be Prosecuted", and establishing a distinction between those entitled to the benevolent attention of the examiners, and lesser breeds without the law. Again, I do not believe for one moment that such was the intention, or that the idea that their words could be so read crossed the minds of the Delegacy spokesmen, but there is unquestionably an insensitivity here that jars. Nor is this confined to the final sentence. The very first sentence of the concluding paragraph with its unfortunate emphasis on writing *neatly* and on *due regard for the conventions* suggests a preoccupation with appearances and proprieties which can all too readily be interpreted as indifference to those who have not been trained to jump through hoops, and raises questions as to the scope which the examiners might allow themselves in the matter of failing candidates for "vulgarity or sheer bad taste". Indeed, there is, throughout the commentary on Paper II, a patronising and abrasive note which totally fails to give any concession whatever to the anxieties of the candidates.

In this paper , the Report tells us:

"the most important question is the one calling for a summary of a passage of about 300 words; and there is no doubt that the average candidate finds this the most difficult question on the paper. Some scripts contain such extraordinary misrepresentations of quite simple statements in the original passage that it leads to doubt whether the writers have read the passage at all. A good summary requires not only sound understanding of the original passage, but ability to render the ideas briefly, *in good English*. The quality of the English is important. Too many candidates are content with finding the ideas in the original passage and reproducing them, one by one, in brief, disjointed sentences. While sentences in the summary should be reasonably short, there must be some attempt to use connectives such as 'but', 'because', and 'although' if the summary is to be coherent."

What has been stated so far, is, of course, a perfectly reasonable recipe for the production of a précis that will satisfy the examiners, and I have very clear memories of paraphrasing such directions on a regular basis for year-group after year-group of 'O' Level students, and, perhaps more memorably, of groups of Lower Sixth failures in English Language (usually from the Science side) to whom these lessons were a weekly nightmare of tedious irrelevance but whose chances of a university place depended absolutely upon mastering the necessary techniques. What I did not then think to question, as I tried to inculcate the required skills, was the underlying purpose of the exercise, *beyond* that of simply satisfying the examiners. And as I look back on those lessons now, I am compelled to wonder whether I have derived any benefit at all from those skills which I first acquired, then taught.

The ability to summarise came in useful during my undergraduate days for taking notes in lectures, and subsequently in excerpting vast tracts of reading for the purposes of quotation in academic writings such as this thesis; but surely 'O' level examinations were not designed principally to assist those in pursuit of degrees. And outside such purely academic functions, the only use I can think of to which such skills have been adapted is that of producing the minutes of meetings. Now this is a by no means inconsiderable skill, but like the academic uses previously recorded, it does not correspond particularly closely with the expectations of the Oxford examiners that candidates should reduce passages to one third of their original length. In practical terms, such applications of the art of summary as I have adduced require either a much

more rigorous abbreviation, or they require concentration on tiny nuggets of the original to be retained in their entirety – and the total omission of the rest. In both cases, and particularly the first, the ability to perform well in an 'O' level précis exercise is as much a handicap as an advantage.

Perhaps more important is that passage from the Report which speaks of

"such extraordinary misrepresentations of quite simple statements.....that it leads to doubt whether the writers have read the passage at all." ¹

Unless we assume that this statement is mere hyperbole for effect, and I see no warrant whatever for so discreditable an interpretation, this is a very frightening observation. Presumably the candidates concerned were able to read and write with reasonable competence for the rest of the paper, or one would expect a more general castigation of the practice of entering semi-literates for the examination in the first place. And if they were so able, and again we must remind ourselves that, in 1958, the vast majority of the candidates would have come from selective grammar or independent schools, then a more reasonable assumption than that they attempted to summarise a passage without having read it would be that the whole exercise inspired in them a reaction not far short of blind panic. That "the average candidate finds this the most difficult question on the paper" is a warning that the demands that it makes appear arbitrary or irrational, or at least removed by some distance from any normal activity, and that teachers are signally failing to overcome such reactions. And this is the response of the *average* candidate!

One hardly needs to have joined those waving Brian Jackson's banner to feel that this cannot be the most appropriate way to test the ability of candidates to read closely and accurately, or that requiring the content of a passage to be re-expressed within a specific word-limit is unlikely to improve the quality of their written expression, particularly when there are also other less easily defined rules to observe.

"It is not enough to produce a summary consisting of lengthy transcriptions from the original passage, unconvincingly connected with 'ands' and 'buts'. What is wanted is a summary in the candidate's own words. On the other hand, there will be words, and even phrases, in the original passage which the candidate can only avoid by using less-accurate words or falling into long-winded paraphrase; and in such cases he must exercise his judgement and not distort for the sake of change." ²

¹ Op.cit. p 33

² Ibid. p 34

The degree of sophistication necessary to cope with the instruction "Rewrite in your own words except where it is impossible to improve on the original" seems likely to be beyond the average sixteen year old, who may well feel that it is impossible for him to improve on *any* of it, since the original passage is written throughout with a fluency, breadth of vocabulary and variety of sentence structure which he cannot hope to match, least of all when working to a tight time schedule and a strict word limit.

What was always likely to result is exactly what the examiners tell us of the performances produced by the less competent candidates – that they:

"spend eighty or ninety of their one hundred words in getting only one-half or two-thirds of the way through the passage. This leads to hasty over-compression towards the end, with mangled ideas expressed in wretched English, or to the use of words in excess of the word limit; and the word limit is important. Candidates should state, at the end of their summary, the exact number of words they have used. candidates who hope to profit from a dishonest statement should know that every summary is checked for length, and that dishonesty is likely to count against those guilty of it."

Again the examiners sound a minatory note. There is, of course, no point whatever in having a word limit if it can be exceeded with impunity, but a Report which emphasises words like 'dishonesty' and 'guilty' seems to me to be establishing a profoundly "user-unfriendly" attitude towards its candidates, and not even on grounds of material importance. The insistence on the *exact* number of words for instance: would anyone really feel that a competent reduction of a passage to one third of its original length had become significantly less meritorious because the author had used 103 words, or even 108, instead of the specified 100. And how much time were candidates supposed to spend in counting the words of their attempts at *précis*, as opposed to going on to the other questions on the paper? Not that the examiners themselves pay much attention to them: in a Report which occupies fifteen column inches of print, the remainder of the paper is disposed of in less than two. On the comprehension exercise, which might have been supposed to be of some importance in testing "candidates' ability to read English closely and accurately" the only observation is:

"Candidates are paying more attention to the rubric instructing them to answer the parts of this question *as briefly as possible* but there are still some long-winded candidates who take eight lines to say what could perfectly well be said in four words."

¹ Op.cit. p 34

² Ibid

Assuming again that this is not mere hyperbole, (and this time it is not quite so automatic an assumption as it ought to be) it is certainly patronising – and it also gives rise to questions as to why candidates feel driven to adopt so circuitous an approach. Is it legitimate to surmise that they simply do not believe that four words can possibly be adequate to earn marks in this examination, and are convinced that a laborious exclusion of any possible ambiguity is necessary to satisfy those who administer it? Has that emphasis, quoted earlier, that candidates should write carefully "with due regard for the conventions" been interpreted for them as "always answer in complete self-explanatory sentences", which effectively means rewriting the question before you start to answer it?

There may perhaps be a clue to the answer to such rhetorical questions in the Report's commentary on the grammar question:

"Sounder knowledge of basic grammatical facts, and more intelligent adaptability in the use of them, would be welcome. There are some candidates, for example, who, being asked to find and write out an adverbial clause of condition, or to state briefly the relationship between two clauses, seem incapable of doing these things without also laboriously writing out and defining all the other clauses in the sentence."

Here the answer is surely obvious: we are dealing with candidates who have been taught to master a technique, rather than any understanding of what that technique is intended to achieve. As a schoolboy, my dissatisfaction with science lessons was that the answer to questions which began "Why....?" was invariably "You don't need to know that, just learn the formula" ; and as a teacher I remember the 'backward' class in a primary school who had, with enormous patience and effort on the part of their devoted teacher, (a regular exemplar for students on observation), been taught their tables which they could, indeed, eagerly recite in chorus, but who, if asked individually, for example, "What is six eights?", could reply only by reciting the whole thing from "one eight is eight" until the desired point in the sequence was reached.

There can be no justification, in my opinion, for teaching anything in this way, and to find it applied to English is peculiarly abhorrent. Not, of course, that I suppose that this was the intention of the examiners, but for many candidates it was the result of the

teaching methods designed to get candidates through the examination, and for that the examiners cannot avoid some part of the responsibility. "Standards" so far as they applied to the reading and writing of English had become associated, if not identified, with a series of practical skills which had little if any relevance to every day usages or to practical deployment, and teaching had reacted to the inevitable boredom occasioned by this fact by the creation of drill exercises which could be accomplished by formulaic response without involving the understanding of the victims.

It is true that the examiners do observe

"In the grammar question there has been a move away from the old style of formal analysis question, in search of a more flexible technique"

and I have already cited the question of 1957, requiring the construction of three different types of clause, each beginning with 'where', as evidence of this move, but this is tackling the symptoms of the disease, not the cause; and it was to be three years before the format of the examination underwent its first change.

In 1959 the paper was so much 'the mixture as before' that it actually repeated the question on differentiating between uninterested/disinterested and imply/infer; and in 1960 the idea of flexibility had been taken no further than the inclusion of a question requiring the correction of six sentences containing errors of grammar, to be accompanied by appropriate justification in two cases of the candidate's own choice. In both years, *précis*, comprehension and clause analysis requirements were entirely in accordance with precedent. In 1961, however, the paper was recognisably different. There were only three questions instead of the traditional four. First, as usual, came the *précis*, though this passage was a mere 265 words to be reduced to the conventional 100; and the last question was a conventional comprehension exercise. Question 2, however, contained three parts of which the candidate was to attempt two, entirely at his own discretion. Part A required the insertion of appropriate words in sentences containing blanks, and the creation of sentences to illustrate the distinction between four pairs of words (from six pairs provided). Part B required the insertion of missing punctuation, or the correction of bad punctuation, in provided sentences. Part C required the identification of parts of speech, and also of two adjectival clauses, in

provided material. In other words, the demand for compulsory clause analysis had been dropped. I can recall, as, doubtless, can many serving teachers of the period, that clause analysis continued to be taught by those who found it a straightforward activity to those who had no great difficulty in coping with it – for such pupils it had a convenient predictability which the new flexibility lacked in terms of preparation – but for the five years which were to elapse before the next, and even more substantial, change in the format of the examination, the threat of an incomprehensible exercise in jumping through linguistic hoops was removed from those who were incapable of seeing the requirement in any other terms. Undoubtedly there were those who saw clause analysis, like cold showers and compulsory cross-country runs, as an essential part of the character-building function of education, and who will have regretted this change as evidence of declining standards and a surrender to sloppy and trendy educational practices, some of them among the ranks of English teachers; but in general this will have been regarded as a necessary and long overdue piece of liberalisation, and a first step into making the English Language examination of increasing relevance in the task of inculcating genuine skills of practical validity into its candidates.

A further, if very minor, change occurred in the following year, when Paper I reduced the choice of essay titles to five, but ceased to divide them into quite such predictable categories. The 1962 list of "Christmas Decorations", "Describe the sort of party you enjoy", "Watching school games", "The story of something lost and found", and "Floods" has a somewhat less ponderous touch than formerly – it gives an opportunity for the use of imagination, a light-hearted approach and genuine self-expression; and it suggests that the examiners were a little less inhibited than formerly about the prospect of "vulgarity and sheer bad taste into which attempted humour sometimes degenerates".

The papers of 1963, 1964 and 1965 corresponded closely with the new approach, though it is worth noting that, among the alternative parts of the new question 2, there were requirements to convert direct to indirect speech, to write a formal letter, and to provide definitions of recent additions to the language suitable for inclusion in a modern dictionary, as evidence of a wide sweep of expectation and approach.

It was, however, in 1963 that a survey was conducted into the nature and quality of the various 'O' level English Language papers on offer, published the following year as the eighth report of the Secondary Schools Examination Council.

Two years later this was followed by a fairly devastating analysis of the findings of the Council from the National Association for the Teaching of English, though there can be no doubt that the Examining Boards were not only aware of the findings but had already begun to react by the time the NATE document – *English Examined, A Survey of O Level Papers*, – appeared. According to NATE, the SSEC Report, entitled *The Examining of English Language 1964*, sampled schools providing the 300,000 candidates for English Language in the summer of 1963, and discovered that

"of the schools sampled, some 18% felt that their teaching in school had been 'generally hampered by the present English Language papers at Ordinary Level.' A very much higher proportion (30.4%) said that they had been hindered in their teaching in school by the questions 'mainly concerned with other forms of language study than original composition and comprehension of a text'".

The NATE survey then goes on to examine the reasons for such a disturbingly widespread reaction. The essential criteria of a public examination, we are told, are comparability, reliability, and validity. That is to say that the pass level must be constant from year to year, and from Board to Board; that it must measure on the same scale for every candidate; and that it must test what it sets out to test. Unfortunately, in the opinion of the authors,

"reliability is the prior demand. An unreliable examination.....is clearly not valid. An examination, however, can be perfectly reliable and not in the least valid."²

What is happening, we are told, is that the interests of standardisation in the process of administering what "has become a *qualifying* examination"³ have excluded the interests of the subject itself, to the detriment of both teachers and taught.

"Obviously many of the failings analysed stem from this over-riding concern with examinability. There can be no 'objectivity' short of a full-blown set of 'objective' tests with multi-choice questions. There is no successful compromise for, try as hard as some boards do in their questions and marking schemes, the examination remains hopelessly subjective. All that happens is that it becomes a bad exam."⁴

¹ Op.cit. p 1

² Ibid. p 3

³ Ibid. p 5

⁴ Ibid. p 29

"It is also the need for standardisation that has created the elaborate marking schemes used by some Boards. It is necessary to secure the maximum uniformity among large numbers of markers even if this is achieved by an undue emphasis upon the penalisation of errors....[and on] such requirements as the word limit in the précis question.....Examiners' meetings have a peculiar flavour of their own; even with the best will in the world and an enlightened Chief Examiner, the pedant often has a field day. This has meant that the papers have become depressingly stereotyped. It is widely assumed that teachers *expect* absence of change from year to year.....The expectation that essay topics, the type and length of prose extracts, the form of questions etc. will be predictable from year to year, is a major factor in the way the backwash effect works."

This final point is reinforced by the fact that the initial re-action of the Boards to the SSEC Report was markedly defensive, to the extent that the Oxford Board (whose papers have formed the basis of this study so far) issued a circular which

"claimed (unconvincingly to anyone with experience of such procedures) that the Oxford machinery for consultation of teachers ensured, beyond question, that the examination was exactly what teachers wanted."

This, as I have already tried to show, can hardly have been generally the case, though it must be remembered that the consultation referred to will, in the main, have been conducted through the medium of Headteachers and Heads of Department, whose own learning experiences will necessarily have been within the School Certificate structure, and whose reactions to the early years of GCE may well have been less critical than those of junior English teachers more conscious of the growing gap between the expectations of society and of the examination, so far as practical use of English was concerned; and more concerned by the 'backwash effect' referred to above, which is simply a means of describing the way in which the testing technique becomes the teaching methodology.

It must also be remembered that the GCE Boards were generally suspicious at this time of the Schools Council which had just (December 1965) issued a Report from its Joint GCE/CSE Committee which sought to reinstate the proposals of the Norwood Committee with regard to the vesting of control over the the new CSE examination in participating schools; and effectively to restrict the GCE examination at Ordinary and Advanced level to a very significantly reduced clientele. A draft copy of the Report was sent to each examination board for comment, and while this does not seem to have

1 Op.cit p 7

2 Ibid. p 2

survived, some indication of its content can be deduced from the response by J.R. Cummings, Secretary to the Oxford Delegacy, part of which reads:

"I am, however, not content with what is said in paragraphs 46 to 55 inclusive. I know that there are reasons of expediency for leaving 'A' level as it is, with the pass/fail concept. I know also that there was a dilemma for those preparing the document in that they did not wish to base an important decision on considerations of expediency, but wanted to give educational reasons for it. I do not, however, believe that the statements made in the paragraphs referred to are sound, or that they are in accordance with the views of teachers of long experience. It is not true (para 48) that the main demand for grading is coming from the schools themselves. It is also coming very strongly from the users of the results. Those who have long experience of Ordinary Level.....are very well aware that there is a very big difference between those candidates who obtain grade 1 and 2, and possibly 3, and those who obtain grades lower than this or only just achieve a pass performance. That is why if there are to be only seven grades*, they would want at least two of the grades allocated to the Ordinary Level passing band and as necessary to the CSE grade 1 band."¹

He goes on, at some length, to make clear that his main objection is to the idea that O level would have to be redesigned to discriminate validly between lower levels of ability – the document apparently referred to candidates being assessed 'on bad work on unsuitable courses assessed by unsuitable examinations'.

Moreover, at about the same time he produced an undated circular letter, presumably to the secretaries of other examination boards, seeking support for a suggestion that the

"secretaries might put up a scheme of their own to the GCE/CSE Committee of the Schools Council"

including the following proposals

"all results obtained in pre-Advanced Level examinations to be recorded on Certificates of Secondary Education whether the examinations concerned have been held by GCE or CSE boards.....there is a case that above grade 1 there should be one or possibly two grades, at about the present level of grades 1 and 3 as operated now by many of the GCE Boards. Thus there would be Grades 1A, 1B and 1C, Grade 1C being the present CSE Grade 1. Both GCE and CSE Boards would be able to award grades 1A, 1B and 1C but from the anticipated nature of the entry there would presumably be more grades 1A and 1B (and for that matter grades 1C) awarded by the GCE than by CSE, in the initial years at any rate."²

As I observe above, the draft report which triggered this response does not seem to have been preserved, but the Report itself is bound in to the Delegacy's Office Papers for 1965. It is, I think, a reasonable presumption that the expostulations of Cummings and his fellows had little impact on the Schools Council, who were clearly marching

* in a hypothetical new combined GCE/CSE grading system

1 Oxford University Archives, Ref. LE34/53

2 Ibid. Ref LE34/52

to a different drum. Cummings is fighting a rearguard action in favour of the retention of a classification system which clearly identifies the most able for the benefit of college admission tutors, and sees the identification of this élite as an essential part of the Delegacy's function. The Schools Council, on the other hand, is far more concerned with the possibility of encouraging and developing the mass of school pupils who were virtually excluded from 'O' level as Cummings conceived it:

"§24 It is possible to say that GCE courses and examinations are quite clearly intended for those pupils who are capable of the highest levels of attainment, subject by subject. It is also possible to say that CSE courses and examinations are quite clearly suitable for pupils of average and rather above average attainment. But in between these two groups of pupils there is a continuous distribution of capacity for attainment. The two groups do not meet at a clearly defined dividing line.

§25 It was with these considerations in mind that the SSEC defined Grade 1 of the CSE examinations by reference to the ordinary level pass standard. Our predecessors sought to recognise those performances assessed by the CSE system which suggested that the candidates were of ordinary level calibre.The arrangements for educational assessment were not to be permitted to close doors which should be open to all who show, by any method of assessment, that they have the capacity to enter the next room."¹

The 'Proposals and Recommendations' which comprise the next section of the Report begin with what is very much a restatement of Norwood – it is a salutary reminder of things past to find a government-supported body still enthusiastically making these comments only thirty years ago:

"§29 We believe that the long term objective for the assessment of attainment at the age of 15 or 16 should be to develop the school based mode of examining to the point where it becomes the normal method of assessment.

§30the school based mode of examining offers the schools the opportunity of responding to individual needs, and to the changing needs of the community as a whole, free from the constraints of an external syllabus. In short, the schools would be free to decide how best to organise their work over the whole range of ability, and the pupils would be assessed on the courses of study which the teachers judge most likely to develop their full potentialities.

§34 We consider that the GCE boards should first review, in consultation with the teachers' associations, their own arrangements for enabling teachers to play a major part in controlling the educational content of the ordinary level examinations.We do not, however, suggest that the ordinary level examinations should be under the exclusive control of teachers from the participating schools. Higher and Further education have a legitimate interest in courses of study that lead naturally to the post-school courses for which they are responsible.

§35syllabuses and methods of examining at the ordinary level should be controlled by subject committees of the examining boards on which teachers from the schools actually using the examinations form the majority group"²

¹ Report of the Joint GCE/CSE Committee of the Schools Council, December 1965

² Ibid.

There is clearly plenty here to cause an Examination Board Secretary concern, and we are yet to reach that part of the Report which led Mr. Cummings to seek support for his objections from his fellow Secretaries. It would be interesting to learn whether Mr. Cummings in turn is more moved by educational grounds or by the expediency factor in taking his stand against attitudes which, had they ever been translated into action, would very significantly have reduced the fee income of his Board. The Schools Council had noted the vast increase in the number of candidates over the period of eight years from 1952 to 1964 [from 147,556 candidates at Ordinary Level to 577,923; and from 40,482 candidates at Advanced Level to 141,072 ¹] and were concerned that the benefit to candidates had not increased commensurately and, as I have indicated above, about the focus of the papers themselves:

"§46 We therefore reject the proposal that grading of ordinary level results should be officially recognised and recorded upon certificates.....

§47 The object of an official grading system, with grades permanently recorded on certificates, could only be prediction for the benefit of users outside the educational system. There is no other good reason for announcing to the world the level of performance reached.

§51 Our firm opposition to [graded passes] does not rule out the possibility of recording some of the performances described as failures. It has been put to us that one way out of the difficulties facing the schools would be to award a grade intermediate between.....pass and the weakest performances. (We would note in passing that we should regard the use of a system of grading common to CSE and ordinary level examinations as very desirable.....)

§56 The change of policy required on the part of the schools is to enter fewer candidates for the ordinary level examinations. In particular, all candidates who are not clearly in one or other of the following two groups should, in our view, now be diverted to CSE courses and examinations.

(a) those likely to remain in full time education beyond the age of 16, to pursue successfully courses of advanced level calibre.

(b) those judged capable by their teachers of following successfully, without undue strain, courses in particular subjects similar to (a) above, even though the pupils may leave school at 16.

If this were done the failure rate in ordinary level examinations would fall dramatically. ...We see no reason why a rate of 5% should not be achieved. This, we believe, is the aim which each school should now set itself.

§58 It cannot be right to prolong a situation in which, as revealed by this year's monitoring of the CSE examinations:

(a) the range of ability for entry for ordinary level examinations was almost as wide as for CSE

(b) at the time when entry forms for ordinary level and CSE were being sent to the boards, the teachers of ordinary level candidates were *already* predicting that 30% would fail. " ²

¹ Op.cit. §17

² Op.cit.

How things might have developed had the Schools Council prevailed in this matter is yet another fascinating but pointless speculation. Here at least Cummings might have had a point in arguing that Ordinary Level was what the schools wanted, and most teachers whose memories stretch back to the "dual system" will recall parents who insisted upon GCE entry for pupils who would inevitably contribute to a forecast 30% failure rate, in preference to a CSE entry which was bound to produce a grade of some sort, even if not the 'O level equivalent' grade 1. Yet some movement by the GCE boards was clearly inevitable. The observation of Michael Paffard remained disturbingly apposite:

"A candidate of 1960 would hardly have been put out if confronted by a paper of 1920 or vice versa. It is difficult to apportion blame or distinguish cause from effect: was the *rigor mortis* in which the subject was locked for forty years in grammar and public schools the result of or the reason for the extreme conservatism of the examiners?"¹

By 1965 the answer to the question scarcely mattered any longer. What did matter was that the situation had endured too long, and the reactions of the Schools Council were well overdue. When to the disturbance that their Report must have occasioned was added the detailed criticism of individual sections of the typical English language paper, to which the NATE survey devoted several chapters, it became apparent that it was no longer possible to take refuge in the feeble claim of providing what the clients requested, even if, at one level of interpretation, this was probably true.

The NATE analysis was scathing but carefully considered – and more or less irrefutable. To take first those areas of examination which almost a third of schools had found an active hindrance in the task of teaching English, the authors of *English Examined* gave short shrift to those dealt with in the chapter appropriately titled "Grammatical and other Minutiae":

".....success in performing these standard peripheral tricks is no guarantee of overall English ability.....The candidates' marks for the short questions show little correlation with those for the essay. The short questions have several harmful effects on teaching.....preparation for them takes up an excessive amount of teaching time.....the inflated value of these marks (the reward for hours of concentration on the predictable rigmaroles) is due to the tendency of examiners to mark the essays within too narrow a band. Examiners protect themselves against the charge of being too subjective in

¹ *Thinking About English*, 1978, pp 15-16

their essay marking by keeping (sometimes on official instructions) too close to the centre of the allotted mark-range." ¹

Précis, predictably, fared no better; and the Comprehension exercise, although specifically described as legitimate, at least in principle, by those who had voiced complaints to SSEC, was deliberately joined with it for condemnation:

"It has long been the custom to separate précis and comprehension questions in the examinations. As a result the notion that these are two different and distinct activities has become fixed in the minds of too many teachers and text book writers. if we aim to test total response (Sense, Feeling, Tone, Intention) then we require writing of some density of texture and of some quality..... the passage should be long enough to have some emotional unity; it should not be a mutilated fragment. ...The traditional exercise of précis is, in itself, highly artificial, a testing device far removed from any of the real life situations in which the skill of summarising may be called for." ²

and the authors go on to enquire why the reduction is invariably to one-third the original length, since the result is to make examiners look for passages which can be reduced in this way, and in consequence expose candidates to some fairly awful writing. In all questions designed to test reading, they assert, there is a need for material of some quality, since only good writing can evoke a good response.

The problem, as they see it, is that:

"There are few signs as yet that Boards have thought out properly the nature of the skills they seek to test. Certainly upon the evidence there can be little confidence that examiners can be consistent in the choice of extracts of quality for any of these tests. Nor can we feel that examiners know what questions they they should be asking." ³

Even the essay paper does not escape unscathed:

"The range of stimuli employed in GCE is intolerably narrow.....It is, for example, a common practice in Art examinations to present the candidate with one of the National Gallery postcard reproductions. What objection is there to the occasional use of such a reproduction as the starting point for a composition? Most serious of all was the lack of any subjects with a genuinely urban or industrial bias, and the predominantly middle-class tone of all the subjects set." ⁴

It must, however, not be assumed, despite the curt assertion that "Examination Boards put candidates off by stilted rubrics" that NATE was going overboard for a populist approach. On the contrary, attempts to enter the teen-age world are dismissed with ignominy:

¹ Op.cit. p 31

² Ibid. pp 19-21

³ Ibid. p29

⁴ Ibid. pp 15-17

"Both Oxford ('My kind of Music') and London ('What makes a popular song popular?') have ventured into this field of adolescent taste.....no doubt the floodgates were opened to quantities of enthusiastic, almost hysterical, bad writing, incoherent and irrational." ¹

Here, as elsewhere in the document, the NATE survey is demanding quality of response as well as quality of stimulus, and it is pleasing to note that, in its concluding chapters, the authors feel some confidence that the SSEC Report has not fallen entirely on deaf ears. The London Board, we are told, invited Professor Quirk to comment upon their standard marking scheme and

"The result, in itself, could be described as a major reform in which the accumulated pedantry of the years was swept away..... More important is perhaps a change of attitudeleading not only to a greater emphasis upon the positive, but also resulting in a greater awareness that differing treatments of composition subjects imply differing styles each with their own criteria of correctness. London markers are now sternly warned that it is not the job of the examiner to wage the wars of the grammarians over the words of the candidates." ²

The Oxford Board, despite its initial defensive stance, was the first to announce a new approach, in a Circular to schools which clearly met with NATE's strong approval.

"Clearly this is a major reform of the syllabus. The fact that it is being introduced so rapidly compares interestingly with the more leisurely attitude of all the other boards.The Oxford specimen paper is as encouraging as the syllabus. The imaginative compositions, despite the uniform brevity of their titles, all invite writing from experience. The invitations to objective writing, are, in the main, well conceived..... Paper II confirms the genuineness of the Oxford revolution. There is little doubt that this new examination will be a genuine test of literacy if the marking is as well done as the setting. Particularly welcome is the disappearance of the short, isolated questions which were often, in the case of Oxford, at a level lower in relevance and quality and higher in unconscious humour than, with the best will in the world, any other board could achieve. The provision about grammar seems to be a concession to the die-hards, but no such question appears in the specimen." ³

and this final point of approbation, almost a cry of victory at the end of a long fought battle, is reinforced a little later:

"The Oxford Board make their grammar optional; a few spare parts in case anyone still runs a Model T. There is no such option in London: teaching time will still be wasted for the sake of two or three marks" ⁴

After such an encomium, it is interesting to return to the study of Oxford GCE English Language papers in order to observe the new reality, as it appeared for the first time in the summer of 1966. The new Paper O1-I allowed candidates ninety minutes, and now contained two compulsory questions.

¹ Op.cit. p 13

² Ibid. p 44

³ Ibid. pp 45-47

⁴ Ibid. p 53

The first of these was the conventional composition for which candidates were given a choice of four titles; the second was described as an exercise in Practical English, and candidates were informed that "This is particularly an exercise in care and accuracy." Candidates had a choice of approach: either to expand a set of rough notes into a continuous narrative, or to provide a guide to the intending purchaser of some mechanical or electrical device.

Paper O1-II was now allocated one and threequarter hours, and again contained only two questions, each based upon a fairly lengthy prose passage, the second of these from a literary source. In question one, there were four exercises to be completed, two of comprehension and two which amounted to short précis. On the second passage, there were seven detailed questions, which collectively demanded some insight as well as more conventional understanding.

This was, indeed, reform of a fairly substantial nature – which is in fact just as well, since the new format was to survive virtually unchanged to the end of GCE in 1987. Before examining the minor changes which occurred over the last twenty years, however, it is important to study the Examiners' Report for 1966, which came hot on the heels of the revolutionary new paper from which NATE expected so much. The commentary on Paper I begins, reasonably enough, "It is not possible yet to generalise about the effect on the candidates of setting two subjects for composition instead of one" and continues with the assurance that examiners found the new style improved their confidence in their assessments of candidates, with performance in Part II acting as a check on the marks awarded for Part I.

"But for candidates the double exercise did not seem always to be an advantage. Some very good candidates who scored a high mark in Part I came down in Part II, sometimes for lack of time, or perhaps for lack of interest."¹

It is interesting to speculate at this point on the terms of reference by which the students referred to here are described as 'very good candidates'. The standards of the writer are clearly based on the previous format of the paper, within which the ability to produce an effective piece of creative writing ranked high, and there is a barely

¹ Op.cit p 3

concealed implication that the new emphasis on practical exercises is fit only for 'hewers of wood and drawers of water' rather than for those of superior imaginative powers, an implication which becomes even more blatant when the passage continues:

"Those who gained were the able but unimaginative children who were in difficulties when thrown upon their own resources but who could handle facts with ease and confidence."¹

Old habits die hard, and the preference is familiar and excusable, but it does serve to illustrate the point with which I began this chapter as to the meaning of standards. Can there be any doubt that those who are most voluble in their disapprobation of the achievements of modern education would place a higher premium on the production of students who could handle facts with ease and confidence than on the fostering of those gifted at writing from the heart? And similarly, can there be any doubt that the vast majority of English teachers, thinking more of their literature lessons, would place a greater value on those pupils with an instinctive feel for words and a flair for their creative deployment?

As to the actual performance of candidates in the new practical exercise, the Report is not entirely encouraging:

"It was disturbing to find how few candidates could get the facts right. A single script would have three or four mistakes, any one of which would have made the result useless as a practical piece of work. Goldfinches, or Chaffinches, or Greenfinches, or Goldcrests, or Goldfish were variously estimated as five centimetres, five inches, five feet or five miles long. Few candidates seem to have understood quite clearly what they had to do, namely to produce a piece of clear, accurate, and polished English. One of the purposes in having this second question was to test just this ability. In Part I, where imagination and feeling come in and where a candidate is writing with fervour and haste with little chance for revision, possibly we might relax the demands for technical correctness. The Delegates insist, however, that in order to pass in English Language a candidate must show that he can write correct English. This is what we wanted to see in Part II. Here, everything is given; All that is demanded is clear, accurate presentation. In fact there was little evidence that candidates had tried any harder than in Part I to clarify and polish their writing."²

Again there seems to be an inequality here. Candidates whose writing lacks clarity and 'polish' are seldom being wilfully indifferent to the desirability of these qualities: rather they may be assumed to be incapable of accuracy and stylistic grace or forced into error by lack of time. Those capable of correcting their own errors and with time in hand to do so have surely no excuse or justification whatever for devoting their efforts

¹ Op.cit. p 3

² Ibid. pp 3-4

more to the second question than the first. The expectation is arbitrary, and the assumption that errors might possibly be forgiven in fervid rather than factual writing is the result of prejudice. I am inclined to suppose that the same prejudice, the same assumption that the weakest candidates are total idiots, lies behind the Report's claim that candidates referred to goldfinches five miles long. One does not have to have advanced very far in the study of palaeography to become aware of the readiness with which words beginning with minims can be confused, and reading a badly written "inches" as "miles" in a script that one has already decided to fail is, I suspect, a case in point. The Report unquestionably reflects the stance of examiners upholding standards, though as usual we are left contemplating the precise definition of standards in this context, and the concluding paragraph of this section of the Report is not entirely conducive to the most generous of interpretations.

"Examiners know well enough that they must not demand from all candidates an outstandingly good English style, though they are delighted when they find it, but they are right to expect care and clarity, as they are right to penalise slovenly, slapdash, anything-will-do scrawls. On the other hand, examiners cannot help being favourably impressed by work that is neatly presented and handwriting which is legible. Perhaps it is worth saying, though it is a very small point, that some examiners feel strongly that in a formal exercise in English writing the ampersand ought not to be used, especially when it is written as a formless squiggle like a letter alpha on its side."

My reaction is that the point in question is not so much very small as infinitesimal, and that it was *not* worth saying – unless, of course, the intention was to counterbalance the good achieved by the reorganisation of the paper. If penalising the candidate who writes *ℓ* instead of & is not quite in the class of imposing immediate execution "for want of well pronouncing shibboleth", it certainly takes us back to the realms of the examiner as arbiter of elegance, with the right and power to discriminate against vulgarity and bad taste; and, in view of the increasing strictures against such arbitrary exercises of examinatorial influence, can serve only to bring the Oxford Board into disrepute.

Fortunately, there are no similar shortcomings in the section of the Report devoted to the new Paper II, which also, incidentally, demonstrates a commendable determination to listen to what the clients have to say. The passage begins:

"Letters from schools suggest that the new style of paper.....has been favourably received. The chief ground for complaint.....was that.....some of the weaker candidates were pressed for time, so that even if they answered all the questions they had no time for the careful revision of their work that their teachers had rightly insisted on. The Delegates accept this criticism. They have no wish to turn the paper into a time-test, and will try to see that in future papers the passages set are slightly shorter." ¹

This creates a much better atmosphere which contrasts even more strongly with the fussy pedantry of the immediately preceding section, but it is important to note that the Board has, by no means, sacrificed its independence and integrity in the interests of achieving a user-friendly reputation. The passage above continues:

"The passage set in question 1 seems to have met with general approval. One or two letters were received complaining that the second passage was too difficult, too remote from the candidate's own experience, or (in one case) 'too specifically literary'. The last criticism is one which the examiners are not prepared to accept; they believe that good language teaching is inseparable from the study of literature, and that the more widely candidates are encouraged to read, at least in modern literature, the better." ²

Here the examiners are on much safer ground, (though they might possibly have laid themselves open to the question as to why their literature paper was so reluctant to embrace modern texts), and the complainant was presumably not a member of NATE, which had expressed itself strongly on precisely the same theme. The Survey of 1966, which welcomed the new syllabus and the specimen paper for the revised Oxford examination also contained the following observation:

"Let us remind ourselves.....of what was said at our First Annual Conference at Leeds. English teaching is concerned not with separate skills but with the pupil's whole command of language.....Punctuation, spelling, knowledge of word meanings should not be treated in isolation..... English is one subject not two; 'O' level Language and Literature papers perpetuate an unreal division." ³

It is, therefore, possible to argue that the new examination, which is, after all, the form in which it will be remembered by the vast majority of those who can still recall GCE 'O' Level at all, had by no means lowered standards, but had changed the approach and methodology by which they were assessed. Formal précis and exercises in grammatical nit-picking had gone for ever; but good, accurate writing, practical use of language, and the effective skill of summary as well as the retention of the opportunity for an imaginative and creative response to an open-ended stimulus provide tests are,

1 Op.cit. p 4

2 Ibid.

3 Op.cit. pp 8-9

at the same time, closer to the expectations of prospective employers and to the requirements of the teaching profession. Only lovers of the white elephant could really denounce the change, and a few of those seem to have survived among Paper 1 examiners, albeit briefly.

A final aspect of the Report of 1966 is the inclusion of the first official reference to the new practice of asking schools to give the expected grade of all the students they entered for the examination. Under the heading of *School Estimates: Summer 1996*, the examiners have this significant comment to make:

"The Awarders found the school estimates of great value, and made full use of them. Whenever there was a serious difference between the school assessment and the mark of the original examiner, the Awarders re-read the candidate's work and were glad to have this opportunity to reconsider it. The Awarders looked carefully at the scripts of all candidates whom the schools had estimated at 'A' or 'B' but to whom the examiners had not been able to award a pass. Some of these candidates the Awarders were able to raise above pass level, but in no case did the Awarders find evidence to support a school's very high opinion of such candidates. But again, these candidates were a mere handful compared with those whom the schools had graded at 'D' but whom the examiners had put in a class far above pass level.

In no case did the Awarders use a school's estimate to reduce the marks already given to a candidate by the examiners. This included candidates who had passed even though the school had estimated failure."

These are encouraging observations, despite the obvious discrepancies between school estimate and final result. Clearly schools, in the main, had been encouraged, or had felt it politic, to adopt a pessimistic stance in arriving at their estimates, which may not say a great deal for previous relationships with the Board; but the painstaking exercise in correlations in which the Board had clearly been engaging is both guidance to schools and a clear indicator of a potentially much improved relationship in the future.

I have already observed that the format of 1966 was to all intents and purposes to last until the demise of the 'O' Level examination in 1987, and it is probably more sensible to list all the remaining changes at this point than to insist on a rigorously chronological approach. In 1969 the choice of essay titles on Paper I was extended to include a specific invitation to write fiction; the *précis* type questions on the opening passage of Paper II were omitted in 1970 but restored the following year; in 1972 the range of

¹ Op.cit. pp 4-5

choice of title for the essay question was expanded to five; from 1978 candidates were given a little more guidance by the provision of breakdown marks for questions and sub-sections; from 1981 the papers were renumbered to 1801/1 and 1801/2; and in 1984, at long last, there was a movement along the lines requested by NATE towards widening the range of stimuli for Paper I. The Board did not go as far as issuing National Gallery reproductions, but the practical English question did include what purported to be the Agenda of a school debate, with (legibly) scribbled notes all over the margins, from which the candidate (in the role of Secretary of the Debating Society) was required to produce effective minutes. One would imagine NATE to have approved of this innovation, though it is possible that determined critics might see it as conferring benefit on candidates from such schools as actually afforded such opportunities to their pupils. On the whole, the Oxford Board had been not only early but effective in providing a new deal in examining English Language, and while nothing could get the subject away from the implications of being what NATE called "a qualifying examination", at least the qualification now depended upon demonstrating reasonable command of practical skills and competence at relevant tasks in manipulating the language, rather than the ability to perform certain arbitrarily demanded exercises of no apparent connection with the day-to-day experience of candidates.

It may be material at this point to look at the papers being offered by another Board. The Associated Examining Board's English Language paper (code 260) for the summer of 1966 consisted of two papers, of identical length with Oxford's, and similarly divided as to subject matter. The first paper required candidates to write a composition from a choice of seven titles in about an hour, and in the remaining thirty minutes to complete an exercise in directed writing from a choice of four alternatives, three of which were themselves divided into a variety of options. Apart from an almost embarrassing plenitude of choice which may actually have occasioned delay to some candidates in making up their minds, there would appear at first glance to be almost total comparability between the provision of the two Boards. Closer examination, however, reveals some significant distinctions. The range of titles is actually broader on the AEB paper than is customarily the case with Oxford, not merely by virtue of the

alternative titles but because they offer the opportunity for more widely differing styles and methods of approach. There is still no National Gallery reproduction to provide stimulus, but there is a verse quatrain:

"What ideas and impressions are suggested to you by these lines?
 'With ceaseless motion comes and goes the tide
 Flowing, it fills the channel vast and wide;
 Then back to sea with strong majestic sweep
 It rolls, in ebb yet terrible and deep.' "

The second question, however, does not really seem to be covering the same ground as that of the Oxford exercise in practical English; nor is it clearly differentiated, in terms of expectation, from the formal essay. The four questions follow in full:

- (a) A violent storm or blizzard has occurred in the area where you live. Compose a report suitable for a local newspaper about the effects of the storm on transport and communications.
- (b) Describe *one* of the following: a greenhouse; a coffee-bar; the interior of a public swimming bath; a music shop.
- (c) Write a speech supporting or opposing *one* of the following: the lowering to 18 of the age at which people have the right to vote; shorter holidays for schools; the raising of the school leaving age to 16 for all pupils.
- (d) Describe an interesting exhibit or stand at an agricultural or industrial or a hobbies exhibition.

All of these could have appeared on the older Oxford essay paper (though certainly not all at once) and the "debate" type question was for a considerable period an annual event. The other questions all require description, but so does the first of the options for the essay proper: "Describe the changes that occur in any place you know during the period from one hour before to one hour after sunset." Beyond the fact that one task is supposed to take an hour and the other only thirty minutes, there seems to be no clear indication of any specific qualities for which the examiners are seeking, and there is no guidance whatever in the rubric which confines itself to the simple "Answer both questions".

One is forced to conclude that the intention coincides with the principal use to which the Oxford Awarders seem to have put their new Essay Paper Part 2 – to aid with the task of assessment by using the mark awarded to check that given for Part 1.

The second Paper for AEB takes us back to the former Oxford paper beyond any cavil. Divided into four questions, the last two of which had alternative sections, it requires first of all the production of a formal précis, on this occasion of a passage of 346 words to be reduced to 120; secondly the completion of six questions to establish

comprehension of a 30 line extract from an essay by George Orwell; and to complete the paper, two exercises in formal linguistic usage. Question 3 offers the choice of rewriting six sentences, "removing errors, ambiguities and unnecessary words"; or of inserting the word *only* at four different places in the sentence "The Principal can advise first year students about their courses during the first week of term" so as to produce four different meanings. Question four provided seven sentences each containing a colloquial expression, of which the candidate was required to explain six; or a two-part exercise in the correct use of prepositions. There is nothing here to rival what Oxford could achieve in terms of the NATE denunciation of "questions lower in relevance and quality and higher in unconscious humour", but neither is there any sign of the enlightenment which SSEC and NATE were demanding.

1967 offered nothing in the way of material change in either paper; if anything the two concluding questions may perhaps have regressed towards obscurity and unfamiliarity.

The first question required candidates to use three words (from five provided) in two different sentences in order to show that each could have two distinct meanings. The five words on offer were: *alight*, *peer*, *converse*, *entrance* and *prone* – and I do not think I am being particularly patronising in expressing the opinion that the average sixteen year old would not have been familiar with at least six of the ten meanings concerned. The stress of examination conditions is hardly the appropriate environment for teasing out of the memory half-understood definitions and illustrating them effectively in ad hoc sentences.

The alternative was to write a definition of three of the five words *monopoly*, *interlude*, *preface*, *microscope*, *antidote* – then, for each of the words chosen, to find another with the same prefix and use it in a sentence which clearly illustrates the meaning. Again, I do not believe that an inability to perform well in tests like this in examination conditions was (or would be today) any real indicator of a fundamental weakness in English usage, and while the converse, that the ability to do so was a genuine indicator of competence, may well be nearer the truth, I am far from convinced that it was a reliable test.

Question 4 required either clear distinction between the pairs could/should, can/may, will/shall and might/must as used in otherwise identical sentences, (which is a demand not far removed from sheer pedantry in the form in which it is presented); or the rewriting of a remarkably ill-written paragraph "so that the same ideas are expressed clearly in correctly constructed sentences." Opinions differ as to the wisdom of confronting candidates with clumsy and inadequate writing, and NATE's doctrine that only good writing can evoke a good response clearly has no adherents among the examiners for this Board: I will say only that this seems to me much the most useful and effective question on a paper for which I am grateful not to have had to prepare candidates. Clearly, however, the clients of AEB were satisfied with the questions on offer, since the material being tested varied very little for some considerable time, as the following brief extracts will illustrate:

"One word in each of these sentences is misused. Rewrite each sentence substituting the correct word, then write four more sentences using the original words correctly." The four misused words in question are eminent (for imminent), legible (for eligible), invalid (for invaluable), and inedible (for indelible) [1968]

"Write out each of the following sentences twice, correctly punctuated in two different ways to produce two different meanings.

- (i) The bowler said the batsman took an unfair advantage
- (ii) Can you spell father asked the boy
- (iii) What do you expect to be paid for it
- (iv) My friend who lives in Canterbury usually invites me to Cricket Week "[1969]

"Write down each of the following verbs with the preposition that follows it. Then, for each verb and preposition, write a sentence, (*six* sentences in all) that illustrates their meaning and use. (Example: comply with. I shall comply with your wishes.) arise, centre, conform, connive, deprive, dissuade." [1971]

"Explain clearly but briefly the difference in meaning between the two sentences in each of the following pairs.

- (i) There were two assistants beside / besides the manager
- (ii) John Smith, late / lately Headmaster of this school, was widely known
- (iii) A student may well find seasonal / seasonable employment in December as Father Christmas in a large store.
- (iv) The report states that in this branch of employment the wages paid were hard / hardly earned." [1972]

These are clearly bad questions, and it is a salutary experience to uncover them from the past. As NATE observed, teaching time was still being wasted for the sake of two or three marks, and it is in any case dubious that teachers, however much time they

wasted on 'grammatical and other minutiae', will have prepared their pupils for exercises quite as silly as some of these. The last part of the 1969 punctuation exercise is an appallingly bad question which even Oxford at its worst could hardly outdo, and some of the other examples given here are little better. The only conclusion in terms of standards is that whatever bastions the examiners believed themselves to be defending, surrender would have been vastly the better option.

In 1969 The Cambridge Syndicate produced their second Report upon performances in examinations at Ordinary and Advanced level. That part of it dealing with English Language is brief in the extreme, and the only real justification for quoting any part of it is that it provides evidence not only that Cambridge, too, was now collecting, collating and giving consideration to complaints about its papers, but also that Cambridge, at least, had heeded the NATE suggestion and provided a picture as stimulus for an essay. In this report, criticisms are printed first with the examiners' response as a conclusion.

*"Paper 1 Some criticised narrow range of subjects, finding some of them dull, similar, lacking in scope for imaginative or more thoughtful candidates. Several felt that subjects in the main were for younger age-group than the average candidate. Although most welcomed the innovation of a picture, some felt that this particular example might only evoke a cliché response. Noted. The examiners reported that the picture gave rise to a wide variety of answers, some of which were excellent."*¹

Meanwhile, the Oxford Board and its candidates seem to have been consolidating their relationship with each other, and with the new examination format. The Report for 1970 began with the observation that after five years of experience it was possible to say something of the way the new papers had worked out, and continued:

*"Part I of the Paper, with its fairly wide range of subjects (story-telling, description, personal experience, argument) invites candidates to write freely and imaginatively; and there is no doubt that the new methods in English teaching have led to much more lively and interesting writing than we used to get in years gone by. This examiners welcome and enjoy. But the more relaxed and uninhibited style has brought with it a lowering of the old standards of accuracy in grammar, spelling, punctuation, choice of words, and sentence construction."*²

One cannot help wondering at this point whether a spot of nostalgia may not have coloured this observation: one would hardly suppose that the Report for 1958 had inveighed against "monotonous sentences, with the use of only one kind of

¹ Op.cit. p 4

² Op.cit. p 33

subordinate clause or of none at all; poverty of vocabulary and inability to use pronouns, resulting in the constant repetition of the same words; compound sentences made up of unrelated parts; excessive use of the passive voice; inability to select the right proposition; misuse of such conjunctive words as 'however' and 'so'; awkward order of words, phrases, or clauses in the sentence; finally, and most important of all, ignorance of the difference between comma and full stop." ¹

Nevertheless, a point which emerges later in the 1970 Report may cast additional light on this apparent decline in standards of linguistic correctness. The author makes a positive declaration that "there are too many very weak candidates being entered" and explains:

"Some of these candidates present work that is disgraceful in every way; others write reasonably careful and correct English at a 12/13-year-old level, but are utterly defeated by the passages and the questions set on them". ²

The number of candidates entered for the Oxford Board's 'O' Level English Language paper was 16,941 in its initial year of 1951, rising to 48,225 by 1968 (the first year in which such statistics were published) and although it had actually fallen slightly (to 47,335) by the year of the Report we are now studying, it is clear that far more candidates and of a far wider spread of ability, were being entered for the examination than had previously been the case. Doubtless the growing number of comprehensive schools was a material factor in this expansion, which makes it by no means improbable that the attention of the examiners was being caught by the occasional script of a lower level of literacy than anything they had previously encountered. Although the pass-rate actually increased between 1968 and 1970, from 63.2% to 64.3%, this still leaves us with something over 16,000 unsuccessful papers, some of which must unquestionably have been dire; particularly, one suspects, from the male candidates of whom less than 55% managed a pass as against a 72% pass-rate for the girls.

While, then, suggestions of "lowering of the old standards" have to be treated with caution and an awareness of a lack of any real concept of comparability, we must also pay attention to the parameters which the examiners set themselves in determining what did and did not constitute a pass; for while the ways in which those

¹ v.sup p 275

² Op.cit. p 25

parameters were expressed may well have changed quite considerably over a period of twelve years, all the available evidence suggests that the informed body of Awarders are consistent and reliable in their decisions, and that, as I suggested in my Preface, the confident assertion on a particular script "Mr Chairman this is a B", or "This is a pass" is a credible indicator of a standard in which trust can be placed.

The 1970 Report redefined the qualities which a successful paper should possess fairly unambiguously, but it almost certainly did not revise the pass standard to any measurable degree. The new guidance to candidates and their teachers read:

"It is our considered opinion that a candidate cannot be said to be competent in the use of the English Language unless he has attained at least such a mastery of the technique of writing as would pass muster in the world of commerce or social life. Therefore our main aim in Part II of the paper was to set a short exercise which demanded accuracy, alike in the use of language as in interpreting instructions and using material provided. We thought, too, that candidates of average ability, without, perhaps, too much power of invention, ought to be rewarded for careful, though uninspired, writing, and for that attention to accuracy which is the result of patient effort. Such candidates have certainly benefited from the second part of this paper."

There has clearly been a move in spirit towards 'candidates of average ability without much power of invention' and towards an awareness of the expectations of employers, and the note of exclusivity which mars the 1966 Report is mercifully less strident. The 'in-house' definition of the good candidate has not significantly changed:

"Candidates might be reminded that lucidity, coherence, varied sentence-structure and rhythm are the virtues examiners most like to reward."

but the concept of 'the worthy candidate' has now been added to it, the label 'second-best' is now a little less apparent, and the attention of teachers is being drawn to his needs, even if indirectly:

"Candidates were expected to write [letters] in the style appropriate to each occasion, with the ordinary conventions of topping and tailing. Examiners are not pedantic about this. But, after all, there are conventions as candidates will soon learn if they take a secretarial course. It was rather a shock to find how little they knew them.Young people of sixteen ought to know better than to end a letter to an aunt 'Yours faithfully, John Smith'; or to leave out the date on a business letter; or to write their own address on the left of the letter-heading.....Altogether, it is very clear that candidates badly need instruction in the writing of an ordinary, factual business-letter."

The 'O' level English Language papers are still, as NATE described them, 'a qualifying exam', but the qualification is now for employment and a place 'in the world of

1 Op.cit. p 23

2 Ibid. p 24

3 Ibid. pp24-25

commerce and social life' and not, as used implicitly to be the case, simply for the narrow confines of academic preferment.

Ways to ensure that this qualification is gained, rather than withheld, feature far more prominently in this report than had previously been the case, and it can be maintained without dissent, I think, that the material which follows (abbreviated from some three pages of the Report) indicates a more liberal attitude among examiners, and a less remote and patronising manner of conveying their suggestions for improvement, than was to be found in previous years.

"It may be worth while to list here some of the commonest weaknesses in construction.

(1) Skill not rising above the level of making long strings of simple sentences; or the monotonous repetition of '...and...'

(2) Use of connecting words 'and', 'but', 'thus', 'however', 'so', without regard to their meaning.

(3) Repetitious use of 'as' betraying a lack of ear for the sound of language as well as an ignorance of exact usage: 'As I walked to school I called for my friend as I usually did as she lived in the same road as I did'; and so on *ad nauseam*.

(4) The increasing use of 'this' without any demonstrative sense : 'I looked up and saw this face'.

(5) The use of commas for full stops is, alas, always with us. Examiners rejoice when they find semicolons and colons properly used. But they think, rightly, that the use of the full stop ought to be understood by everyone.It has been pointed out to us that this year's paper did not ask for a 'summary'. We could perhaps reply that Question 2 (h) did indeed ask for a summary, in that it required skilful selection and re-presentation of material from every part of the second passage (though it required more than this). But our correspondents were clearly thinking of the more obvious summary that we have previously asked for in Question 1 with a word limit. We should like to assure teachers that we still see this kind of summary as one very useful way of testing comprehension. and that we have every intention of using it again where a passage seems to lend itself to that kind of question."

It may be apposite to insert here the comment that Oxford are now fitting the questions to the passage, rather than as heretofore (and as asserted by NATE) picking passages which co-operated with pre-determined questions, by, for example, possessing the susceptibility for reduction to one third of the original length. At the same time, it must again be noted that some teachers, at least, remained happier with teaching to a formula rather than with imparting general skills, otherwise the assurance would never have been sought. The Report continues:

"Where there is no word limit suggested and where no particular guidance in form of 'briefly' or 'fully' etc., is given, some candidates clearly find themselves in difficulties. We often receive letters from anxious teachers pointing out that some of their rather weaker candidates could well have done better if they had been told more precisely where to spend their time. This argument carries a good deal of weight, we think, and the Delegates have agreed that marks should appear on the question paper. Many examiners have asked that a plea should be made for better handwriting. We do not ask for a beautiful script, but for a legible one.....We try our hardest to read everything; nor is there any automatic deduction of marks for scruffy, ill-written work; but no examiner when he assesses a composition can wipe from his mind the bad impression such papers make. Handwriting which makes real difficulty for the reader is just as much a failure in communication as is bad punctuation. Examiners try to move with the times. No candidate will fail this examination, or even have his mark reduced very much for a few spelling errors, especially when these occur in unusual and difficult words. And on the whole we do not find spelling to be much worse (or better) than it was, say, ten years ago. But they do object to the gross and repeated mis-spelling of simple, everyday words, and of words that are staring at the candidate from the question paper. We notice an increasing tendency to join words together improperly. Some of these compounds are less acceptable than others, as may be seen from a few examples: *alot, infront, foreinstance, moreoless*..... They seem to argue a lack of careful, attentive reading habits. So do *would of* and *might of*, which the examiners still regard as a sign of illiteracy." ¹

In view of the fact that the Report had earlier commented on 'a lowering of the old standards of accuracy in grammar, spelling etc.' it is interesting to find a positive statement that, on the whole, there has been no real change from 1960, and the second context gives added support to the interpretation of the first that I have already offered.² Notwithstanding this qualification, there will have been, I suspect, a number of readers of this Report who felt at the time that the examiners had moved too much with the times and were being less unforgiving than their role demanded: certainly, even today, most people would feel that teachers have a duty to eradicate such blemishes as these, in so far as their powers of correction have any impact. At the same time, however, it is probably the case that a commentator in the nineties would be more inclined to blame slovenly habits of speech than "a lack of careful, attentive, reading habits" for, if the occasional surveys in the *Times Educational Supplement* are to be believed, the proportion of children who read frequently for pleasure has declined over the intervening period.

Finally, the 1970 Report has some further observations on the practice of schools providing estimated grades for their students, which serve not only to illustrate an

¹ Op.cit. pp 25-27

² v.sup. p 302

improvement in communication between Board and clients, but also to provide a very useful if disturbing light on the relationship of the two component papers in the determination of the final grade to be awarded to candidates.

"We should like to repeat much of what we said in the 1966 English Language Report. We still welcome estimates from schools, and find most estimates very modest and sensible. And we do make use of them. On the composite sheet from which the awarders work are three columns, which give (a) the examiner's mark for Paper I, (b) the examiner's mark for Paper II, and (c) the school estimate, where an estimate has been submitted. If a school estimate is considerably better than the examiners' marks, the awarders look at the candidate's work again, in the hope of finding in it some quality which the examiners have missed. We feel sure that, in making their estimates, most schools have in mind probable performance in Paper I and Paper II together; but there do seem to be some teachers who estimate a candidate's performance on composition only, and disregard the different skills required for Paper II. Most candidates in fact perform with reasonable comparability between the two papers; but there are exceptions, and of these some do better in Paper I, others in Paper II. The point we are trying to make may be illustrated by reference to seven candidates in this year's examination all from the same centre, all on the same composite sheet. Each had been estimated at 'C', and this estimating was very sound with regard to performance in Paper I, where the candidates varied only by about seven marks. But the Paper II marks for the same seven candidates varied over a range of nearly fifty marks. We feel that had the estimates been made with both papers in mind, some of these candidates would have been recommended to us as of 'B' quality, others as no better than 'D'."

The opening assurance will go some considerable way to comforting teachers who believe that the examiners are arbitrary in their decisions and indifferent to school assessments: the picture of the awarders hoping to find in some candidates qualities which schools but not the initial examiner have recognised is enheartening. But the statistics for variation among the seven candidates used as an illustration must give us pause. They were clearly 'average' candidates, or they would not have been given the 'C' estimate from their school, by whatever process that estimate was achieved; but despite the conviction with which the Report assures us that, of those candidates who do not perform consistently on the two papers, some do better on the one and some on the other, there is a frightening imbalance between the 7 mark differential between 'B' and 'D' candidates on the essay paper as compared with a 50 mark variation on Paper II. It is very difficult indeed not to read into this a confirmation of the fears expressed in the NATE survey – that "examiners protect themselves against the charge of being too subjective in their essay marking by keeping too close to the centre of the allotted

mark range" and in consequence allow the more objective marking system of the other paper to act, in effect, as a grading determinant. That such a question mark should be raised over the process so soon after the introduction of the welcomed new-style papers is unfortunate, but it may well be an essential concomitant of my observations that the Report had seemed to take on an ethos in which literary skills and creative ability were no longer regarded as the prime factors in the search for excellence. If such an ethos is, in fact, to be detected then it does not seem to have survived throughout the four years until the next Report of 1974, which is characterised by a firm conviction that the experiences of the intervening period can be interpreted in one way only, and a return to a more dismissive style in cataloguing the vices of the less successful candidate.

"In our last Report in 1970 we gave some reasons for having a second question in Paper I. We hoped that a second shorter, factual question might give unimaginative candidates a chance to show what they could do in an ordinary piece of writing where the material was more or less provided for them, and only had to be put together carefully. We hoped also to find out what sort of command over the technique of the language candidates could achieve when they were really trying. After four more years we have come to some conclusions about this second question. There are indeed some – but very few – candidates who do better on Part II than on Part I."

(One wonders at this point why the previous Report sought, not entirely successfully, to obfuscate this fact, assuming, of course, that there was no significant change in performance over the intervening period. Can it be that the finding was apparent but unpalatable in 1970, and that discontent with reformist zeal has grown in the interval?)

"On the other hand, we have been entirely disappointed in our hope of finding in Part II a more careful piece of writing. Candidates make just as many technical mistakes in Part II as they do in Part I. If anything, they make more; perhaps because they are reaching the end of the paper and are in a hurry. In fact we now know that Part I represents a candidate's maximum achievement in technical mastery. We had supposed that some of the errors in Part I were caused by the writer's attention being directed more to the working out of the subject-matter than to accuracy and elegance in English. We now know that he will make these same errors even when he is trying not to. In the Autumn examination of 1973, we noted seventeen words, all in the question, very frequently misspelt in the answers. In this Summer's examination, too, we found the same dreadful carelessness. There seems to be simply no excuse for a candidate who, having been reminded in the rubric that Part II is a test of accuracy puts *Asian* marigold for *African* marigold [or] calls the plant a half-hardy animal."

In view of the conviction with which the Oxford Essay paper second question is here ruthlessly exposed as more or less valueless, it is doubtless part of the natural resistentialism of the education process that the Associated Examining Board should have been slowly moving nearer to the Oxford style in setting its own papers. There was still less prescription than at Oxford, less of the attempt to see "what they could do in an ordinary piece of writing where the material was more or less provided for them", but, equally, less of the scope for a second piece of imaginative and unfettered writing. The questions: "Give a visitor to England an explanation of the decimal currency system recently introduced" and "You are able to have your own study-bedroom. Describe in detail how you would like it to be arranged" from the summer paper of 1971, or "Write an account of the health or library or transport services in your area" (1972), or "Give details of the facilities you would expect to find on a motorway or at a main-line railway station" (1973) give the flavour of the revised approach.

Even so, if the Oxford discoveries are to be taken at face value, the AEB examination may still have provided a better opportunity for candidates to reveal their "maximum achievement in technical mastery". Some examples of failure in this regard are provided in the 1974 Report, and though they do not differ very much in substance from earlier such comments, they seem to me to indicate a further development in the relationship between examiner and client in the change of style.

"There are one or two general matters that experience over the last four years makes us think worth passing on.

Creative writing. This does not trouble us so much as it did a few years ago. Of course, genuinely creative writing troubles no one. It is as delightful as it is rare. What did trouble us – and still sometimes does – is the encouragement given to children to fling on to the paper grandiloquent and emotionally-charged words with no regard either to syntax or to the meaning of the words. The result can only be described as nonsense: a violent misuse of language.

Punctuation. We are not pernicky about punctuation, which is to some extent a matter of personal usage and custom. But there are some faults which crop up very frequently and ought not to crop up at all in a sixteen-year-old's writing. There is the use of commas for full stops throughout long passages. There is the complete inability to punctuate direct speech in conversation. There is the use of the apostrophe after every plural word ending in 's'.

General. It is our job as examiners to be concerned with the proper and exact use of the English language, and we make no excuse for insisting on high standards. We have always believed that no matter what other merits a candidate may have, he cannot pass in English Language unless he can

show a sufficient competence in spelling, grammar, punctuation and the construction of sentences. But we do not wish to leave anyone with the idea, at the end of our report, that correctness is all we look for. Far from it. Anyone who has had the task of scrutinizing thousands of scripts will know with what relief and joy he reads something that rises above the level of mere correctness.

It is good to read this endorsement of the priorities which any competent teacher would regard as axiomatic, and it reinforces the appropriateness of much of the movement toward examination reform. But, understandably enough, it gives no guidance as to how to bring about any increase in the number of students capable of reaching these heights, or any decrease in the number for whom even correctness is an apparently impossible goal. The difficulties of the latter are highlighted when the Report moves on to Paper II. Here, there is but one central point which, as the writer says, "needs to be driven home: that candidates must read every question set upon the passages slowly and carefully till they know exactly what is being asked of them".² The rest of the report elaborates upon the deficiencies of candidates who do not observe this elementary precaution. But guide to the English teacher though it is clearly intended to be, it gives some insight into why the vaunted improvement of the Oxford Board's approach to the examining of English may not have seemed to make an awful lot of difference to weaker candidates, and why a number of schools might well have preferred to stay with the second paper of the AEB exam, which continued with very little change to concentrate on matters of punctuation, definition, ambiguity, and the provision of adjectives from cognate nouns etc., in a traditional series of short ad hoc questions of precise but limited focus. The work done in preparation for attempting such questions may well have hindered practitioners in the task of teaching English, and the results obtained may have had little or nothing to do with demonstrating the skills which the Oxford Report regards as necessary for a pass; nevertheless, short one-off questions do offer the weaker candidate the chance of adding a few extra marks even if these may fairly be described as chance-gained. The requirement to read a whole passage together with a series of questions, with a view to dividing the material in the passage appropriately between the questions before attempting to answer any of them may well have overtaxed the attention span of some candidates; and the control

¹ Op.cit. pp 35-36

² Ibid. p 36

necessary to spend some time in close reading and concentrated thought before actually getting a markable word down on paper may simply have been asking too much. The Report contains the sentence

"We were left wondering how many of them had written their answers after reading only the first few lines of the passage, instead of heeding the advice given to them in the introductory rubric"¹

and while the answer must inevitably be that many of them were guilty of this failure, it does nothing to explain why. One possible interpretation is that the whole process of English Language teaching has a tendency to alienate a number of students: that the material used and the nature of the questions asked about it seems to them to belong to a world quite different from that in which they themselves live; that in consequence they do not expect to be able to understand the passage or to follow the connection which exists in the examiner's mind between one question and the next; and that the synthesis proposed by the rubric has, in consequence, all the impact of a government health warning on a forty-a-day smoker. At all events, the situation is that the examination system seems, for a measurable proportion of our sixteen-year-olds, to have turned English into a unfamiliar tongue in which communication is not a natural process. That there is, in many pupils, a deep indifference to the matters being taught and examined, and even, sometimes, a profound resentment of them, will not, I think be disputed by many people. I do not pretend to be able to offer an answer to this problem but it does seem fairly clear that tinkering about with the nature of the questions is unlikely to provide a solution.

From this standpoint, the questions from AEB papers which I illustrated as manifesting an outmoded and pointless approach, may seem to be no more pointless and no more harmful than any others – and their very brevity and single track approach might encourage a candidate to salvage a few marks from a profitless session in the examination room.

In the February of 1974 the Cambridge Syndicate published a detailed critique of the performance of candidates in the Ordinary level English Language examination the previous summer. Much of it is predictable, in the sense that it makes the same points

¹ Op.cit. p 36

as we have seen in the Report from the Oxford examiners, and with very similar examples; for instance, the complaint that candidates run separate words together. This fault Cambridge lists under 'Modern Heresies', and the comment is:

"In the past year the errors listed below have become so general that they could be classified as the 'usage' of the present day (*and age*).
 The linking of separate words: *infact, infront of, inbetween, incase, alot of*,
 The separation of compounds: *them selves, never the less, there fore, out side, sun shine, any thing, top most*
 False Hyphenation: *un-fit, un-able, out-side, our-selves*
 Word division: Candidates, mesmerised by the right hand margin, will not venture a millimetre over it and will even put a comma on the next line. Word division at the end of a line is haphazard, and the following were noted :
foretol-d, ceme-nted, w-hen."¹

It would be tedious to reproduce more of this section of the Report, but the detail here illustrated is typical of the document as a whole, and thus useful in its longer quotations in illustrating more precisely than is possible through abstract commentary what standards the examiners actually intended to uphold. The most notable example of this, as in 1957, is the quoting of three entire essays at fail, borderline and pass levels – and while, save in the first case, I see no point in transcribing the quotations in full, it does seem to me a sufficiently important point to be worth a lengthy excerpt:

"This composition, which was considered to be below what could be accepted as the Pass standard, has many obvious limitations. The candidate has little to say after the positive statement of the opening paragraph. The second paragraph offers no useful development, the weak opening of the third paragraph leads to two separate ideas – overpopulation and loneliness – and the fourth paragraph is not linked in any way to what precedes or follows it. Three of the last four paragraphs are written as single sentences. The general paucity of information, lack of ambition in sentence structure, poverty of vocabulary and frequent looseness of expression are the principal weaknesses of the composition, which communicates, if with moderate clarity, at a basic level only.

Two to a Family

I believe that it is an extremely good idea that parents should have only two children. If they want more they can adopt them, as there are so many homeless children in the world today.

Of course having two children has its disadvantages as well as its advantages but I think the advantages by far out way the disadvantages.

To begin with there is over population which I believe is one of the biggest factors and one of the best reasons for keeping your number of children to a minimum. Having only one child is not such a good idea as he will then get lonely, but with two there is a companion.

Next there is such a great number of homeless children that need the love and affection, that only loving parents and a family can give them. They also need guidance, understanding and a stable home to live in.

Lastly there is the money matter which I feel is the least important but never the less it is a problem and it is there. To many children and not enough money.

There could be a problem with only two children that they may not get on with each other and as their parents may be too busy and they do not want to bother them, then they would have no-one to confide in and this may cause problems, but this need not happen.

I strongly believe that if parents want more children they should adopt them and if they don't want to then maybe two children is enough for them.

Maybe small families don't all breed happiness but they sure help.

This script was considered to be of borderline quality. A poor impression is gained from the opening paragraph but the composition shows considerable improvement as the candidate warms to the theme. There is some evidence of varied sentence structure although co-ordinate links predominate. The spelling mistakes, the use of clichés and the punctuation errors are the demerits against which must be balanced the virtues of a good coverage of the theme, a well-organised argument and fully developed, unified paragraphs.

*The country life is to be preferred for there we see the works of God,
but in cities little else but the works of man.*

There is never a worse eye-sore than a building site, with its rusting girders, concrete posts and filthy lorries. A building site is part of the busy town life. The huge modern sky-scraper spills the sky line, and the factory chimneys bellow out great clouds of smoke polluting the air. These are all parts of man's latest environment, since the Industrial Revolution. Man has built towns out of brick and stone, and many forgot about the world that God made for us.

Country life is a contrast to town life and to me country life is the better of the two. I love the open fields, the woodlands the hills and the mountains. To me it would be imprisonment to work in a factory, and enjoyment to work the land.

This composition represents a sound pass. The writing is fluent, although there is evidence of the spoken word when at times the sentence structure lacks tautness and control. The reflective approach is interesting and well sustained and there is a creditable range of vocabulary. Although on some occasions the punctuation fails, there are very few other errors.

Escape

The word 'escape' immediately conjures up in my mind, the picture of some impregnable fortress, such as Colditz, surrounded by barbed-wire fences & turrets with search lights sweeping the black skies. But that is only escape in one sense of the word. I find I need to escape everyday (not because I live in a fortress and because my parents won't let me out) but in the rat-race we live in – cars factories and schools – it's necessary to get out of it at some point & have a breathing space.¹

Even allowing for the fact that I have reduced the second and third essays to their opening paragraphs, these essays and the preceding commentaries seem to me to illustrate very effectively the distinction between work that fails to obtain an O level pass, work of such dubious quality that it should be left to the awarders to determine on which side of the pass/fail borderline it actually falls, and work which sits with comfort in the middle of the pass grades. It is probable that purists would object to the reliance of the third candidate upon the ampersand (certainly if the script had been

¹ Op.cit. pp 14-17

marked by Oxford rather than Cambridge examiners) but I suspect that the outright failure of the first passage, (unacceptably brief though it clearly is for what should be an hour's work), and the refusal to give the second a definite pass would come as a surprise to many of those who argue that standards declined over this period. Perhaps more importantly, if the fail and borderline examples are compared with those similarly described in 1957¹, no objective critic could find that the necessary standard for a pass has been lowered; indeed, the selected 'failure' is probably better.

The examiners are themselves inclined to give an unbalanced picture of the quality of the scripts that confront them by concentrating too heavily on the weakest examples when writing their Reports: certainly this Report of 1973 begins on a note suggesting a somewhat gloomier picture than that conveyed by the three essays they printed in full.

"Since the last report was issued in 1966 there seems to have been no marked improvement in the standard of written English; in fact it is the impression of many examiners that there is more looseness of expression and that in a number of schools, perhaps few in number as yet, there is greater attention given to content and ideas than to accuracy and precision. The general principles upon which examiners work have remained constant. They seek to test the ability to write clear, precise English offered in a register appropriate to the chosen question.The work of the best candidates was confident and fluent, with a wide variety of vocabulary and felicity of expression that enhanced the impact of whatever subject matter they chose to offer. At the other end of the scale a large number of candidates presented work which lacked care, thought, and disciplined effort. The great bulk of the entry, between these two extremes, showed a modest degree of competence."²

It is obviously easier to describe in detail what was wrong with the poorer papers than to particularise what was effective about the ablest. It is also a fact that adversely critical language tends to register upon the mind more readily than comments which endorse quality. Nevertheless, it would be perverse to interpret this passage as indicating a general decline in standards. The examiners have unfortunately described the worse scripts as lacking "care, thought and disciplined effort", a choice of words which inevitably brings a moral note into the equation and may thus confuse the issue of standards. Even so, the key sentence must be "The great bulk of the entryshowed a modest degree of competence." And the failed and borderline essays demonstrate what that modest degree of competence looked like. With that evidence, I cannot find that we have uncovered any significant evidence of a decline in standards, even if

1 v.sup. pp 275-276

2 Op.cit. p 3

the change in teaching methods is beginning to register on examiners as more attention being given to content than to accuracy. It must, however, be conceded that earlier evidence from Oxford suggests that most candidates do better on the essay paper than on the second paper devoted to more specifically linguistic questions, and that this alleged tendency might have enhanced precisely that emphasis. It may well have been some such consideration that led the Cambridge Board to change their English Language syllabus in 1974, and to issue a booklet which not only explained the new structure, but also provided specimen papers and a specimen answer sheet. The introduction to this booklet describes the new papers as follows:

Paper 1 Composition (2 hours)

Part One A composition on one of a number of alternative subjects (50 marks)

Part Two A composition based on a situation described in detail. (50 marks)

Part Three Short-answer questions to test grammar, structure and usage.
(40 marks)

It is recommended that in Paper 1 about 50 minutes be spent on Part One, 40 minutes on Part Two, and 30 minutes on Part Three. Supervisors will be asked to inform candidates when these intervals have elapsed.

Paper 2 Comprehension (1 hour)

Multiple-choice questions testing in Section (i) the comprehension of passages and in Section (ii) the understanding of words in sentence contexts (60 marks) ¹

The document then goes on to repeat and elaborate the details for each section. We are told, for instance, that the composition choices for Paper 1 Part One "will normally include narrative, descriptive and discussion topics"² and that

"the main criteria by which compositions will be marked are as follows:

(a) The quality of the language employed; the range and appropriateness of vocabulary and sentence structure; the correctness of grammatical constructions, punctuation and spelling.

(b) The degree to which the candidate has been successful in organising both the competition as a whole and the individual paragraphs."³

and there follows a list of specimen titles, too conventional to merit quotation. Part Two, we are told, will consist of one compulsory question requiring the candidate to write a

"composition based upon the information and ideas provided. A situation and the purpose of of the candidate's composition will be specified. Skills such as selection, amplification, condensing, and re-arrangement may be involved. The candidate's ability in the above skills will be taken into account and above all his ability to handle the language appropriately in the context of the given situation."⁴

The example given is to write a letter advising a younger brother on the points to watch when buying a bicycle, making use of a picture with numbered arrows drawing attention to various key points of importance in cycle construction.

¹ Op.cit. p 3

² Ibid.

³ Ibid. pp 3-4

⁴ Ibid. p 4

In Part Three, we are told that again all the questions will be compulsory and that their number may vary; that the questions will test the same areas of ability as the examples which follow, and that only two or three types of question will be included in any one examination.

The four examples cited occupy four full pages of the document,¹ but may be summarised as follows: the first required candidates provide an appropriate word or phrase to fill a blank in each of eight sentences, two of the examples given being: "The older George gets,....." which would seem to give the candidates almost unlimited scope; and "Alice is said to.....very beautiful when she was a young woman" which gives almost none at all. One can imagine candidates being confused by the contrast. The second and third examples required candidates to write a sentence as similar in meaning as possible to a given sentence, but to use a given word in their version; eg "John returned the book to the shelf" (PUT). The last example consists of a paragraph from which various words and phrases have been omitted and the resultant blanks numbered sequentially. The candidate is required to provide appropriate completions which restores sense not merely in each individual case, but to the paragraph as a whole.

The principal difference which distinguishes the new style from that of Oxford is the inclusion of these "short answer questions" on the same paper as the essay and the exercise in practical English, and separate from the comprehension. Presumably this was done in order to avoid the problem which had clearly confronted the Oxford examiners of determining how to deal with candidates who had clearly passed on the one but failed on the other. By combining disparate elements in this way Cambridge have made a pass mark on Paper 1, if not absolutely dependent upon skills other than those which are displayed in creative writing, at least significantly so – and have also given added weight to the skills involved in comprehension exercises by giving them a paper to themselves. I must admit to being personally unconvinced of the reliability of multiple choice questions as a means of testing the comprehension of a passage, and to have demonstrated my point by giving a class (admittedly an extremely able group)

¹ Op.cit. pp 6-9

just such an exercise *without* the passage on which the questions were based. All of them got at least half the questions right and the best performances were in the 75–85% area. Confronted with this, the examination board in question replied cheerfully that the pupils concerned would doubtless all have scored 100% had they had the passage as well as their own intelligence to guide them, and their ability to dispense with it did nothing to invalidate the use of the method with candidates of average ability. It remains a fact, however, that they did not all obtain Grade A when confronted with the real (and conventional) O level paper a few months later. There is nothing in the Cambridge example multiple choice questions on the comprehension passage to remove my doubts about the technique; and while the specimen provided of the second question seems at least as testing as questions in this form can be:

"The three main (.....) of this drink are sugar, lemon juice and water
(A)contents (B)ingredients (C)parts (D)sections (E)compositions" ¹

I would still regard asking the candidate to use his own vocabulary rather than to exercise a choice as the better and more reliable test. There is, however, no reliable evidence that such techniques do lower the standard required of successful candidates, and I do not advance the Cambridge decision to move over to this method as evidence of such a decline – merely as yet a further instance of the difficulty of establishing comparabilities.

While Oxford and Cambridge seemed to be making efforts to match papers to the growing demand for a rethink about what English examinations should be demanding of candidates, AEB showed no signs of significant changes to their Paper 2. It continued to ask four questions, of which the first was a *précis* exercise requiring the conventional reduction to one-third, (for sixteen marks); the second was a comprehension exercise on which six or seven questions were asked on a passage of some four hundred words (for a total of twenty marks); and the two final questions were the traditional assortment of bits and pieces from punctuation, through grammar, to a kind of lucky dip apparently based on the 'Readers' Digest' philosophy of "It pays to increase your wordpower" which, between them, contributed the remaining fourteen marks.

¹ Op.cit. p 12

In November 1975, these two questions were organised as follows, candidates having, in each case, an either/or choice. In question 3, for eight marks, either a kind of reverse précis, in which some abbreviated notes on the qualities of a packet of weedkiller were to be expanded into a leaflet to be enclosed, hypothetically, in each packet; or eight out of ten familiar expressions (man to man, man of the world, man of letters etc.) were to be used in sentences devised to demonstrate that the candidate understood the meaning and use. In question 4, the candidate was required either to provide a homophone for six words out of eight or to provide the cognate adjective for six from a list of eight nouns. In either case he was then to use each one in a sentence etc. This means that three out of the four exercises depended upon the device of constructing sentences which not only use a given word or phrase correctly, but do so in such a way as to permit someone unfamiliar with the word to deduce the meaning accurately. This is not the easiest of tasks, and one wonders just how demanding the marking scheme was, as well as how much the acquisition of the necessary skill actually contributed to practical ability in manipulating the written word.

In June 1976, the first of the four exercises remained essentially unchanged, but the second and third, though both dealing with familiar expressions, required explanations rather than illustrative usage. The final question required the candidate to choose three words from four, and for each word to write two sentences in which the chosen word is differently stressed. No explanation is given as to what is meant by stress. In June 1977, question 3(a) provides six words of which the candidate has to choose four, then use each in two sentences, one literally and one metaphorically.

The alternative 3(b) is a straightforward exercise of inserting the punctuation into a passage of about 100 words, including some direct speech. 4(a) provides a list of six words: allow, pious, essential, regularity, legal and stable – and all that is required is the provision of the negative form of each, while 4(b) is back to the favourite exercise of dealing with familiar phrases, though in this case the task is to replace each one with a single word.

One cannot help but wonder by what criterion familiarity with the word *impious* is deemed to contribute or deny even so small a fraction as one per cent of the total mark

to an examination in the use of English language, but this random check on breadth of vocabulary is clearly a set part of the AEB approach, and in June 1978 the mixture was very much as before. 3(a) asked for an explanation of four expressions (from six) each using the word 'down' (down and out, down at heel etc.); 3(b) was a punctuation exercise; 4(a) required the candidate to write two sentences for three of five words: (naturally, just, general, fairly and common), so as to illustrate two different meanings in each case; and 4(b) required the construction of sentences to bring out the distinction between three of the pairs laying/lying, rise/raise, sat/seated, born/borne and passed/past.

Again one wonders if any consideration was given to the fact that, in certain parts of the country, the usage 'I was sat' is so universal as to be the locally correct form, and certainly one which the student will have heard on the lips of his teachers. In a very real sense the question seems archaic, and, in Oxford terms, very near akin to pre-reformation examination methodology.

The question of the part played by disparity in the requirements of one Board against another has been examined in Chapter Three; here I would observe only that the two studies in comparability by Forrest and Shoesmith, issued in 1978 and 1985, did not record any particular concern over the matter. It is true that the 1985 edition lists the respective pass-rates for 1978 of Oxford and AEB in 'O' Level English Language as 62.4% and 47.9% respectively,¹ but Oxford's was much the more typical figure, and AEB's was much the lowest of the nine Boards evaluated, in all five of the key subjects (English Language, Maths., History, Physics and French) for which studies had been conducted. The solution here, I believe, is that AEB tended to attract clients from adult education, Secondary Modern schools and new Comprehensives rising from Sec. Mod. foundations; rather than from grammar schools, the old Direct Grant schools and the private sector, which last had an equal tendency to gravitate toward the Oxford and Cambridge Joint Board which usually produced the highest pass-rates. No cross-moderation study in English Language involving Oxford and AEB seems to exist for the relevant period, but in 1975 there was such a study involving the Northern Universities

¹ *A Second Review of GCE Comparability Studies*, 1985, p 15

Joint Matriculation Board, London, Oxford and the Oxford and Cambridge Joint Boards, which concluded that Oxford was slightly lenient and Oxford and Cambridge slightly severe at the C/D borderline.¹ And if the Board with the highest pass-rate was adjudged severe at the point at which pass status is conferred or withheld, it becomes immediately apparent that the wide range of pass-rates is attributable to quality of candidate, rather than quality of marking. By analogy, there is no reason to suppose that AEB's low pass-rate carries the slightest implication of a greater demand upon the candidate; though I would continue to argue that the design of the paper did very few favours for the less academic, less well-read and less socially aware candidate.

The Oxford Board's own Report for 1978 was the next occasion on which the Board dealt in detail with 'O' Level English Language, and the section on statistics reveals that the total number of candidates had risen again, slightly, and now stood at 51,698; and that the pass-rate (now recorded as Grade C or better) was 62.5%, with the usual imbalance in favour of girls apparent both in the number of candidates and in the performance (66.6% as against 57.2%). It is probably worth remark that this imbalance is not so obvious as it had been eight years earlier, and that, although the overall pass-rate has fallen, the total number of candidates achieving pass standard had actually gone up by very nearly 2000.

These factors taken together suggest to me that, if there had been any movement at all in "standards", in the common usage of that word as well as in the specific sense which I suggested at the beginning of this thesis,² it can only have been in an upward direction.

The main part of the 1978 report adds little to our understanding of the evolutionary process of the examination or of the complex series of relationships which underpin it. The authors makes it clear from the outset that it is minutiae rather than matters of significance which will occupy their Report:

"Since our last report there has been no great change in either the question paper or the candidates' work. We shall therefore comment this year on a few matters that might appear to be trivial but which deserve to be noted for their interest and perhaps also for correction."³

These matters include a reference to "fashions in mistakes" which "crop up

¹ *Comparability in GCE*. 1978, p 33

² *v. sup.* p 15

³ *Op.cit.* p 37

everywhere for a season and then disappear" – the running together of two words into one, complained of in the previous report is, apparently, just such a phenomenon. The comment on handwriting is hardly new, but the change in tone is probably worthy of note as indicating a greater degree of approachability and a genuine desire to communicate:

"We make no deductions for bad handwriting. If it is possible to read a script by holding it overhead, twisting it sideways, or peering at it under a powerful lamp, we read it. But to compel examiners to resort to these devices is a type of bad manners which can do candidates no good....."¹

It could be argued that the use of 'bad manners' in this last sentence is a reversion to an earlier and rather intrusive emphasis on morality, but this would, I think be unnecessarily to emphasise a minor flaw in what is generally a continued improvement in approach.

Perhaps more to the point is the conclusion, particularly the strangely prophetic final sentence:

"It is pleasant to be able to mention two improvements we have noticed. We once lamented a widespread ignorance of the conventions governing the beginnings and endings of letters. Happily this has been almost entirely overcome. This year the heads and tails of the letter were hardly ever wrong. The other good thing is that candidates do seem to be learning the value of writing from their own experience. We don't have nearly so many of those dull and laboured compositions which set out fatuous and unreal arguments 'on the one hand' and 'on the other hand'. Since our main task is to see whether candidates can write the English language correctly, we are always glad to reward careful, correct and well set out work from candidates with limited powers of imagination and intellect, as also we are always sad to find real ability wasted because of a failure to use language correctly and effectively. None of us would wish that this report should seem carping and pedantic. Much the most of the work we see comes from candidates who have been well taught and who write with interest and proper respect for the examination. The best work is a delight to read. It often seems to us that the great division is not between grades C, B and A, but between all these and those happy few who can write with real distinction. We wish we could let them know that their work has not passed unnoticed; that we could give an 'A with distinction' to the one or two in a thousand who deserve it."²

Now that such an award is possible, it is of some interest that, in English Language, it is being bestowed upon about 18 in a thousand rather than one or two. It is an interesting speculation whether this discrepancy represents an improvement in the standard of entry, or a decline in the standard of excellence as defined by examiners. Since I have no means of resolving the question, it is as well that it lies outside the

¹ Op.cit. p 37

² Ibid. pp 38-39

terms of reference of my research, but the dilemma remains material in that it illustrates just how difficult it is to be sure like is being compared with like, and not with vague similarity.

Of more immediate importance is the fact that the examiners are going out of their way in this Report to underline the improvement in essay style and to emphasise the concomitant decline "of those dull and laboured compositions". The use of the demonstrative adjective from examiners who have previously castigated its misuse must be significant: the reader is expected to recognise instantly the type of writing to which the Report refers. Yet this must have been a style painstakingly taught and learned at an earlier stage; it cannot have been instinctive. What we have here is a clear acknowledgement that candidates are being taught to write effectively rather than to jump through formulaic hoops, and that the effect of this new teaching is wholly beneficial. This response, coupled with the absence of any evidence which suggests a decline in the standards being asked of candidates by the papers in English Language, or in the expectations of the examiners who marked them, suggests at the very least a modest improvement in the efficiency of the teaching of English. And since there is unquestionable evidence of a very considerable increase in the actual number of successful candidates, I am inclined to believe that, at this stage in the survey of progress, it would not be unfair to express that point more strongly.

GCE at 'O' Level had nine more years to run, in the course of which there was certainly very little change in the format of either the Oxford or the AEB paper, and little more in the annual percentage pass-rates of the candidates considered collectively. It is true that AEB slowly, almost imperceptibly at times, began to close the gap in pass-rate percentages between itself and the other Boards, but this is likely to have been the progressive disappearance of any genuine difference between "grammar school comps." and "sec. mod. comps." rather than evidence of a more lenient approach by the examiners of that particular Board.

The practice of the Cambridge Board in issuing regular statements marked "For Distribution to All Teaching Staff Concerned" containing *Criticisms of the Question Papers Setwith Comments by the Subject Committees* tends, predictably, to be

more informative about literature papers at both Ordinary and Advanced level than is the case with Ordinary level English Language, but if the documents of 1980 and 1981 add little, if anything, to our knowledge of the development of the examination process, they are still not without interest. They follow the earlier format of listing complaints about the papers (printed in italic) followed by responses from the examiners. Some teachers, inevitably, remained critical of the examination, and the disparities between their perceptions and those of the examiners should serve both as a warning that not all complaints can properly be assumed to be justified, and as a reminder that some responses to the Boards' invitations to comment are not only trivial in themselves, but indicative of an unfortunate tendency to generalise from the particular. In 1981, on the essay paper, for example:

"More than half of the eleven schools which sent comments thought the paper satisfactory or fair in the choice of subjects offered.

Those which were critical felt there was little opportunity for descriptive writing; candidates were not able to display wide vocabulary or to write on subjects they had really experienced as there was little scope for description or feeling at which candidates at this age excel.

The examiners found considerable evidence that candidates were able to write well and clearly found titles that were stimulating.

The absence of the quotation question was lamented as it had been successful in stimulating the imagination of candidates.

The setters do not wish the paper to fall into a stereotyped pattern but there is no intention of abandoning the quotation question.

The tone of the subjects was fairly pedestrian. Numbers 3,4,5,7 were all conducive to poor, dull or disorganised essays; 4 was likely to produce childish and predictable responses.

The examiners do not accept this criticism. All the titles produced good as well as poor responses.

Question 7 was criticised as spurious, for what evidence was there in layman's terms that high rise blocks and estates solve social problems?

Q7 left candidates free to accept or reject the title. What was clear was that many candidates lack training in the organisation of material for this kind of essay.

There was little scope for imaginative, mature writing and excessive favouring of essays requiring arguments and facts.

The evidence of work submitted refutes this statement.

Though some welcomed the choice of postcard, others felt yet another Lowry was unnecessary. One school appreciated the choice of postcard, but but felt that the subject 'A Fight' could be interpreted as too close to No 2 "Having an argument", thereby reducing the overall choice of topics. Another school wondered whether a Lowry picture would produce only stock responses, because he is now so well known.

The postcard stimulated a wide variety of responses, which suggests that the candidates did not find Lowry hackneyed. If candidates used the title rather than the picture itself, there was an overlap with No.2. A more serious weakness was that a significant number of candidates wrote answers which had no apparent connection at all with the picture and they were penalised accordingly.

One school complained that there was now no indication as to whether examiners would accept a story answer for 'Cats' or 'Suspicion'. The Report on the 1979 paper shows that a story on 'Delays' was highly praised. Pupils were taught to avoid narrative treatment of single word subjects. Some clarification on this matter was needed.

The examiners will accept a narrative treatment of any topic, provided that it can be made relevant. All but the ablest candidates tend to penalise themselves if they attempt sustained writing of dialogue since technical errors are often high and the content is thin." ¹

Much of this speaks for itself, but there are two points worthy of particular comment.

Firstly, the debate over the chosen postcard reproduction has clearly become an annual event. In 1980 it had been reduced to

"The postcard elicited two approving and one disapproving remark

The picture question this year stimulated a wider variety of approaches than in previous years and appeared to have been very successful" ²

It is interesting to note how quickly after a Board had adopted what was a fairly revolutionary suggestion³ it is taken for granted, assimilated into the stock preparation techniques of English teachers, and becomes the object of carping criticism if its implementation fails to meet expectations, for behind this reaction lies the same problem as informs the querulous concern as to the Board's reaction to "story answers", crystallised in the observation "Pupils were taught to avoid narrative treatment of single word subjects." In other words, teachers are still teaching, not confidence in reading and writing the English language, but what they suppose to be the appropriate techniques for passing an examination; and complaining of unfairness when their suppositions prove to be illfounded. The early answer "The setters do not wish papers to fall into a stereotyped pattern" might perhaps have been more heavily stressed – it is apparent that this is precisely what some teachers do wish, and just as one group of examiners is voicing congratulations on the progressive disappearance of one type of formulaic answer⁴, so another is confronted with teachers frustrated in their attempt to create new formulae.

The document finishes with a brief section, entitled *Notes by the Examiners*, which corresponds more closely to the style of an Oxford Examiners' Report and seeks, very gently, to make not dissimilar points on this matter of appropriate preparation and to underline the principal difficulties which candidates still seemed to find insuperable.

¹ Op.cit., 1981, pp 4-5

² Op.cit., 1980. p 4

³ v.sup. p 290

⁴ v.sup. p 321

"The best candidates made the theme central and significant; the weaker ones introduced the theme incidentally, late or never. If the narrative form must be used (and it is not suitable for all the topics on the question paper) candidates must realise the basic elements of a short story: e.g. the start in medias res, the climax, the rapid finish after it.

It was felt that the examination fulfilled our aims in the comprehension part.....It provided a wide range of marks (0:44), penalising the very weak candidates, giving average candidates a fair chance and stretching the best examinees. The presentation of work in the majority of cases was generally quite good, though there is still that minority of scripts in which illegibility introduces disadvantage. There were many neat and legible scripts, though, sadly spelling and grammatical errors abounded. It is irritating to find, so often, words which appear in the text spelt wrongly, and there was evidence of gross carelessness in too many papers, where, for example, candidates wrote 'the' for 'they', 'should of' for 'should have' etc. There was also evidence of an increase in the appearance of such combinations as 'alot' and 'inbetween'. There were rashes of apostrophes, but they were often in the wrong place, some candidates appearing to use them in almost every plural. It suggests that some teachers are limiting their endeavours to the very simplest stops (full stops and commas were generally used satisfactorily) and few of the subtleties of punctuation were understood at all. The summary revealed, once again, that some candidates failed to read the passage carefully enough and so they had not really understood it. When this failing extends to the other questions, which are not studied sufficiently to 'see the point' or are not related to the test, the results are disastrous and inevitable." ¹

The prospect of a candidate obtaining no marks at all on a comprehension paper for which 60 were available is perhaps less alarming than that the top mark should have been 44 – there are various possible explanations for a hopelessly inadequate student being allowed to sit for a paper which he or she had no chance whatever of passing, but fewer satisfactory ones for there being no candidates at all competent to score 75% or better. Carelessness and time pressure doubtless accounts for a good proportion of the marks lost, (though I cannot accept that 'the' for 'they' is the same sort of mistake as 'should of' for 'should have'), but there is a clear implication that defective teaching is a significant factor; and if this is, in fact, the case, then the tendency to teach for an examination pass rather than to inculcate skills or knowledge is almost certainly a root cause. Throughout the period which earlier chapters of this thesis have examined, the charge that examinations dictate teaching has been levelled as a complaint against examinations – that it can be levelled with equal justice as a defect of teachers must not be overlooked, and this may explain, if it cannot altogether justify, the somewhat dismissive tone which Examiners sometimes take with protests about their papers.

¹ Op.cit. p 7

In 1982, the Oxford Board again returned to English Language at Ordinary level as a key element in its Examiners' Report. The opening paragraph might seem to suggest a foreknowledge that the contents would at some time in the future be quarried for research such as this; it certainly serves as a reminder that the debate about educational standards has been with us for a considerable time:

"Our last report was written in 1978; since then no significant changes have been made in the question papers. On the vexed question of standards we can make no definitive judgement. Certainly the last four years have brought their share of exasperating errors of all kinds, and some of our examiners feel that they are witnessing the continuation of a long-standing trend whereby gains in freshness and originality must be offset against a decline in the bread-and-butter skills of spelling and grammar. We suspect also that there is an increasing tendency on the part of certain centres to enter candidates who are totally unsuited to an examination of this sort and whose chances of achieving a grade of any kind, let alone a grade C, are extremely remote. But these things are notoriously difficult to judge reliably, and there are as ever good centres and bad: those showing careful and imaginative teaching, and those whose candidates show little evidence of any grounding in the basic skills of writing or in the approach to composition. The surest test of good and bad quality in scripts is *sentence-structure*. We would rather candidates wrote briefly and well than at length and carelessly. The best candidates evidently take a pleasure in striving for terseness and elegance. Far too many others are content with an unco-ordinated sprawl of loose, shapeless, and ugly sentences; sentences that ramble on without rhythm and point; sentences that have to be read twice to get the gist of them." ¹

There is much here and in what follows that repeats in essence what the Cambridge examiners said the year before, even to the point of reconciling what seemed a contradiction – the assertion by Cambridge that running words together was on the increase after Oxford had given thanks for the decline of the habit:

"Formal *grammar* is perhaps seldom taught these days. Singular subjects with plural verbs occurred frequently. Prepositions were used excessively, and we noticed even in the work of good candidates the recurrence of a tendency, common some years ago, to write two words as one – 'infront', 'infact', 'alot', 'thankyou', 'anymore' etc." ²

Oxford's explanation is the familiar one – of inadequate experience of reading:

".....candidates' knowledge of the written language is not keeping pace with their knowledge of the spoken language, with the result that many are unaware of the basic meaning and derivation of words. Many spelling mistakes, such as 'must of' continue to spring from slovenly pronunciation.In this age of television, the videotape-recorder, and the computer, it is only reasonable to infer that young people spend less of their leisure in reading books. In some weak centres the effects of this lack of serious reading emerge in the shape of narrow interests, limited vocabulary, and untutored use of English. But although (as we mentioned earlier) too much substandard work is entered, we still find heartwarming good work at

¹ Op.cit. p 55

² Ibid.

the top. Such scripts remind us that excellence is still possible and it is our pleasure to reward such scripts generously." ¹

The comments on Paper 2 consist largely of a series of quotations from the same section of earlier Reports – a sure sign that the principal faults will be those that have been castigated over and over again, rather than some new instances of inadequacy. And indeed, the examiners not only make the point that from these earlier observations

"there emerge two points which will bear repeating. Candidates need to read the passages, and the questions, more closely and accurately, and in answering need to express themselves more briefly and directly" ²;

they make a specific point that things are not getting worse:

"As for standards, we do not find evidence of general deterioration. Over the past four years the work from some centres has improved; from most others it has remained much the same. The best candidates are always very good indeed; at the lower end some centres are still entering those who have no hope even of attaining grade E. But while the examiners on paper 2 agree that the general standard remains much the same, they do complain about growing carelessness in some aspects of punctuation." ³

Predictably, these aspects involve the use of apostrophes and inverted commas. What is at odds with the findings of Cambridge in the latter area is that Oxford specify

".....the failure to use quotation marks when employing words and phrases from the text. We find, for example, 'The impression glowing creates for us is one of...' or 'Here traditional means that....' with no acknowledgement that 'glowing' and 'traditional' are being quoted. Is this grammatical feature no longer used? It seems odd, since in their Paper 1 composition candidates seem to enjoy writing dialogue, and find little difficulty in punctuating it correctly." ⁴

I have quoted at this length in order to provide evidence for two, if not three, specific points. Firstly, and most obviously, there is the direct statement that the examiners do not find evidence of a general deterioration in standards. Secondly, in my opinion, clear evidence that the examiners are actually competent to judge on this matter, and are not guilty of simply failing to notice a slow but constant slide, is provided in the points they choose to emphasise as defects: not merely the comparatively minor matter of failure adequately to denote a quoted word or phrase, but in such grammatical points as "*Adverbial clause* used to define a noun after the verb 'to be' ('Erosion is *when* too many people walk over the same path')"⁵. And the additional point, which arises from the second, is that such faults are clearly the result of inadequate teaching.

¹ Op.cit. pp 55-56

² Ibid. p 58

^{3,4,5} Ibid. p 59

Pupils have to be taught to use inverted commas round words quoted from a source – it is not an instinctive practice, nor is it as likely to be learned from reading as is the similar use in dialogue, partly because, as the examiners have already pointed out, it is a reasonable inference that young school pupils spend less of their time reading books, and partly because modern books tend to use italics or emboldening for the purpose. At school I was actually taught to underline words or phrases used in this way rather than to use inverted commas, and this remains the standard handwritten equivalent for italic print, and one which examiners accept without question. The suggestion by the Cambridge examiners that some teachers "are limiting their endeavours to the very simplest stops"¹ may well be illustrated here, but it remains important to differentiate between a declining standard of performance by candidates and a similar decline on the part of those responsible for teaching them.

In 1983 Cambridge produced a formal Report rather than a statement of criticisms and comments. The foreword says that the latter "will be available shortly", but I have been unable to trace a copy. It is, however, unlikely that it would much have advanced our awareness of the state of affairs in O level English Language since the Report itself adds so very little to previous observations. The conclusion reads:

"Many candidates read the questions with unforgiveable carelessness, or answered them with little consideration of the marks awarded to each sub-question. Not a single candidate gained full marks on the vocabulary question, and very few gained even half marks on it. Too many candidates failed to follow the instructions in the rubric. The main weaknesses in candidates' English were the spelling, the punctuation (the apostrophe was constantly misused or omitted), and the sloppy sentence structure."²

To this must be added the earlier specific comment upon the essay paper:

"The greatest single fault is the use of the comma for the full stop. This seriously impedes communication in many compositions which would otherwise be satisfactory."³

It will be remembered that it was comparatively recently that the Cambridge examiners had commented that use of the comma and full stop was one thing that did seem to be taught effectively,⁴ and therefore this comment must be noted as possible evidence of a decline in standards. The question remains, however, as to whether the fault described is more characteristic than formerly of the *worst* scripts, in which case we

¹ v.sup. p 324

² Op.cit. p 8

³ Ibid p 4

⁴ v.sup p 324

are confronted, yet again, by the problem of the apparently irreducible minimum of students with whom no instruction on technical accuracy in writing seems to make any impact at all; or of the *average* script, in which case there would appear to have been a decline which cannot be ignored.

The final Report on English Language before the demise of O level came from the Oxford Board in 1986. While it does not specifically answer the question as to whether there has been a decline in the ability of the average candidate to handle the basic tools of punctuation, such implications as do emerge reasonably clearly from the examiners' observations seem to point in the opposite direction.

"The number of candidates has remained very large throughout the four-year period; and probably because of this, fluctuations of quality from year to year have not been dramatic. Since 1982, the year of our last report, scripts have ranged in quality each year from those which it is a pleasure for examiners to read to those which fall short of even elementary competence in handling the language." ¹

"We can end by emphasizing the point made in the last report. The best candidates are always very good indeed; at the lower end some centres are still entering those who have no hope of attaining Grade E. As for general standards we find no evidence of any deterioration, but would like to make a number of small technical comments." ²

These comments largely retread old ground, drawing attention to the common use of apostrophes in plurals and the faulty use of 'it's', and to the habit of using hyphens to break up words other than at a syllable division. There is also an echo of the complaint about the failure to use quotation marks round words or phrases borrowed from the passage – but no other reference to punctuation. The main area of complaint is, however, the confusion of words of similar sound (except/accept, effect/affect) which the examiners ascribe to "the growing lack of distinction between the spoken and the written word" ³:

"In life outside the examination room the telephone replaces the letter; in leisure moments we watch television rather than read, watch games rather than play them. How far are we to accept this, delay it, or oppose it? We feel strongly that there is a place for an examination in the written word; after all most people read a newspaper or answer an advertisement so must be able to judge the accuracy, follow the subtleties, and understand the meaning of what they read. More importantly our knowledge of the past, its literary heritage and its accumulated wisdom, relies upon our ability to read and understand books." ⁴

¹ Op.cit. p 43

² Ibid. p 46

³ Ibid. p 43

⁴ Ibid.

This last passage does read rather in the style of an elegy for a lost world, of the defenders of a doomed culture lamenting its departure; and as I have suggested earlier, there is something of a tendency for examiners to stress the worst aspects of the scripts that appear before them, and of the society which they are deemed to reflect. But in those passages which precede it, there is really nothing to warrant this sense of the examiners as the last line of defence against a surging subliterate and philistine tide.

"Fluctuations of quality from year to year have not been dramatic"; "As for general standards we find no evidence of any deterioration"; these are hardly the supporting lines of an argument based on the deterioration in performance from candidates that no longer read for pleasure, even if there is a widespread conviction that this is the case and that it must be having an effect upon standards.

Perhaps, in conclusion, the best quotation from this report to use as the basis for a summary on what happened to standards during the thirty-seven year life of the General Certificate of Education at Ordinary Level, is that with which the report opens: "The number of candidates has remained very large throughout the four year period": there were, in fact, 38,504 candidates for the Oxford Board's English Language examination in 1986,¹ of whom 35,746 (92.8%) obtained at least grade E, and 23,126 (60.1%) obtained grades A, B or C; as compared with the 16,941 who had presented themselves as candidates in the first year of the examination in 1951.² Throughout the intervening period, O level English language had continued as 'a qualifying examination', probably the most important qualifying examination in the history of British education, and year by year, more and more people had qualified.

1 Op.cit. p 33

2 Oxford Delegacy of Local Examinations, *Examiners' Reports*, 1988, p 15

APPENDIX TO CHAPTER FOUR

The statistics below relate to the performance of candidates in English Language at the Ordinary Level of the General Certificate of Education, as administered by the University of Oxford Delegacy of Local Examinations and by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate. The figures are derived from material in the archives of the relevant board.

UODLE

Year	Boys entered	Pass %	Girls entered	Pass %	Total Candidates	Pass %
1951					16941	
1960					40440	
1968	22648	57.2	25577	68.6	48225	63.2
1970	21592	54.8	25743	72.2	47335	64.3
1972	21805	58.3	25253	71.3	47058	65.3
1974	21431	56.0	26557	66.6	47988	61.9
1976*	22334	54.5*	28585	66.3*	50919	61.1*
1978	22468	57.2	29212	66.6	51498	62.5
1980	23337	57.2	30020	61.0	53357	59.3
1982#	21406	55.2	28134	62.8	49540	59.5
1984	18922	62.8§	25735	62.6	44657	62.7
1986	16443	55.0	22061	63.8	38504	60.1

- * From this year onwards the pass-rate percentages given are the figures for those obtaining at least Grade C
- # The decline in the number of candidates from this year onwards is ascribed variously to the increasing popularity of the CSE examination, and to the remarkable growth in the support for the newcomer AEB board.
- § I am unable to offer any explanation for this remarkably atypical performance by male candidates

UCLES

Year	Boys			Girls			Total Candidates		
	Entered	Passed	%Pass	Entered	Passed	%Pass	Entered	Passed	%Pass
1951	5874	3177	54.1	6248	4284	68.6	12122	7461	61.5
1953	8611		58.1	8662		69.5			
1955	9211	5126	55.6	9157	6250	68.3	18368	11378	61.9
1957	10785		59.7	9879		70.5			
1959							25826	14875	57.6
1961							31185	18255	58.5
1964	21116		53.3	19714		61.8	40830		57.4
1966	18794		51.8	19299		64.3	38093		58.1
1968	17961		50.4	18327		72.7	36288		61.6
1970	17449		62.4	18530		72.2	35979		67.4
1972	17194		62.5	18365		70.5	35559		66.6
1975*	16349		62.7*	18484		71.1*	34833		67.2*
1977	17737		59.3	21203		68.8	38940		64.5
1979	17699		59.8	22557		65.5	40256		63.0
1981	18341		63.1	23083		64.6	41424		63.9
1985	16063		62.4	21048		67.7	37111		65.4
1987	14437		58.9	18889		67.8	33326		63.9

- * From this year onwards the pass rate percentages given are the figures for those obtaining at least Grade C.

CHAPTER FIVE

'O' Level English Literature Examinations

An ideal question would permit a candidate to write freely and pleasantly, conveying to the reader the knowledge he has acquired and the pleasure he has derived from his reading.

On some syllabuses.....If the candidates are taught well they do badly in the examination; If they are crammed for the examination they develop a lasting distaste for literature.

English Examined: A Survey of 'O' level Papers, NATE, 1968

If one wished to establish that there had been a decline in the standards of the teaching of English literature, or of the knowledge and appreciation of the subject among pupils, despite the steady increase of examination passes in the subject, it would surely be necessary to maintain at least one of the following contentions, and to provide appropriate evidence: that examinations are shorter or demand less of the candidates in terms of breadth of reading than was formerly the case; that the books specified for study are more readily accessible to the adolescent experience; that the questions set upon those books are less searching; or that the examiners are readier to grant passmarks than formerly and more tolerant of superficial and inadequate answers. A study of the examination papers themselves is sufficient to disprove the validity of the first three of these possibilities – for the last we are dependent upon such researches as the comparability studies to which I referred in Chapter Three, and upon the various reports issued at intervals by the examination boards, which give us clear guidance as to the standards which the examiners themselves were upholding, and illustrate their perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of candidate performance.

If the observation by Michael Paffard¹ that "a candidate of 1960 would hardly have been put out by a paper of 1920 or vice versa" is true of examinations in English Language, it is even more apposite when applied to papers in Literature. Any parent who had taken School Certificate English Literature would have recognised as an old friend its GCE successor in the hands of his children, and not in format and rubric alone. Even the texts repeated themselves with astonishing regularity – two of the set books for the last School Cert. paper of 1950 were set again for the last GCE paper of 1987, and the only surprising thing about that, once one has studied the progress over the intervening period, is that the overlap is confined to two.

¹ v.sup. p 293

Whatever hopes the Norwood Committee, and those who welcomed its recommendations, might have had for their brave new world, the examining of English Literature for sixteen-year-olds did not begin to illustrate them during the effective life of the 1944 Act. But this would, perhaps, only have reinforced their convictions about the dangers which beset teaching the subject – we must not forget that the Norwood Committee actually specifically advised against examining English literature at all.

"We would assert our belief that premature external examination of pupils at school in English Literature is not only beset with every difficulty but is productive of much harm in its influence on the teaching of English literature and eventually upon English as a whole; and for that reason we would advise against any such form of examination."¹

The grounds for this recommendation, but one end-product of a continual and energetic debate on this subject in the first half of the twentieth century, are examined elsewhere in this thesis, as are the reasons for which the recommendation itself proved wholly unacceptable. Here it is sufficient to point out that no significant attempt was made to fight that particular corner, and to reiterate that the transition from School Certificate to General Certificate of Education (Ordinary Level) was virtually seamless.

The last School Certificate paper produced by the Oxford Delegacy of Local Examinations in English Literature was placed before the candidates in the December of 1950. It bore the subject code S2; it was designed to take two and a quarter hours; and it was divided into three sections: Shakespeare, Poetry and Prose.

In the first of these sections candidates (or, more properly, their teachers) had a choice of three plays: *The Tempest*, *Henry IV (Part 1)*, *Macbeth*; and on whichever one they chose, they were required to answer two context questions and to write an essay. There were, in fact, three context passages from which the choice of two had to be made, each from four to eight lines in length, and with absolutely standardised questions: (i) Name the speaker, (ii) name the person or persons addressed, (iii) state briefly the immediate circumstances in which the words were spoken, (iv) answer briefly the question below the context [The questions all called for explanation or interpretation of some segment of the passage]. The essay offered a simple

"either/or" choice and tended to require either an analysis of the importance of a

¹ *Curriculum and Examinations in Secondary Schools* (The Norwood Report) p 96 [and v.sup. p 48]

specific section of the play or a commentary on the contribution of a key character.

In the poetry section the choice was between four books: *Selected poems of Byron*; *Selected Poems of Keats and Shelley*; *Longer Narrative Poems*; *An Anthology of Modern Verse*; and the questions followed very much the previous format. Again there were three context passages for each set book, of which the candidate was required to attempt two, together with a single essay. Again the context passages were of similar length and the questions strictly standardised; three of them for poetry: (i) give the name of the poem from which the extract is taken, (ii) explain briefly the words and phrases italicised, (iii) answer briefly the question printed beneath the extract. [The questions required a relating of the passage to the rest of the excerpted poem].

Again, the single essay was presented as an "Either/or" choice with a tendency to concentrate on what the candidate found "interesting or attractive" in the poet under examination, or, in the case of an anthology, in a key topic within the collection.

The final, prose, section followed a nearly identical path. Again a choice of four texts had been offered: *Pilgrim's Progress (Part 1)*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Travels with a Donkey*, *Modern English Prose*; and the usual requirement of two context questions on one of these, from a choice of three; plus one "either/or" essay completed the paper.

In the prose section there were only two standard questions on each passage: (i) state briefly where in the book each extract that you have chosen occurs, (ii) answer briefly the question printed beneath each extract. The style of question beneath the extracts, as also the general nature of the essay questions, adhered as closely as possible to those for poetry.

If this format is borne in mind, a description of the new 'O' level GCE paper in English Literature can be provided in very little space. Physically, the introductory version from the summer of 1951 looked virtually identical. It now carried the code O2, and it is tempting to describe this as the biggest single change, though to do so would be a slight misrepresentation. Still two hours and a quarter in length, and with minimal alterations to the format of questions, there was no change whatever in the demands made upon the candidate; though it is worthy of note that, in both the Shakespeare and Prose sections, the choice of essay title had been expanded to one

from three rather than one from two.

Where a change of slight significance had occurred was in the choice of poetry texts on offer, the new list providing *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, *Milton's Minor Poems*, *Tennyson & Browning (Selected poems)*, and an anthology – *Poems Old and New*.

Although clearly in no way compulsory, the introduction of a section of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* became an unchanging staple of the 'O' level literature paper throughout its existence, and the introduction of Milton may also have been a signal of a slightly more demanding approach to poetry criticism.

It would, however, be very difficult to read any significance whatever into the changes into the other two sections. The Shakespeare offering in this first year was : *Twelfth Night*, *Henry IV (Part II)*, and *Julius Caesar*; while the prose options were : *Gulliver's Travels (Parts 1&2)*, *Coverly Papers*, *English Essays*, and Masfield's *Lost Endeavour*.

As I have stated above, the resemblance between the old School Certificate and the new General Certificate remained much more striking than any changes throughout the latter's life, and the pattern of text choice and variation became predictable.

In the case of Section A (Shakespeare) for instance, the rotation of what were deemed appropriate texts was little short of automatic. Almost invariably a tragedy, a comedy, and a history in any given year, we observe that, of the final School Certificate collection, *The Tempest* recurred in 1953, 1957, 1962, 1967, 1974, and 1977; *Henry IV (Part I)* in 1955, 1958, 1961, 1964, 1968, 1971, and 1978; and *Macbeth* in 1956, 1960, 1964, 1968, 1971, 1976, 1979, 1983, 1986 and 1987. The introductory group for GCE were, with one exception, equally popular on the merry-go-round: *Henry IV (Part II)* had perhaps been deliberately selected as a sequel as a kind of academic in-joke and was never repeated. Certainly it cannot have had much appeal to teachers or pupils in isolation. But *Twelfth Night* was back in 1955, 1959, 1963, 1967, 1971, 1974, 1983 and 1984, while *Julius Caesar* appeared again in 1954, 1958, 1962, 1965, 1969, 1972, 1975, 1978, 1980, 1984 and 1985. Indeed, so frequent are the repetitions of the five plays mentioned so far as to give the impression that there was little room for alternatives. In fact, the examiners

managed to include a total of fourteen plays in the thirty-eight years under review, including *Henry IV (Part II)* which, as has already been observed, was used only once; *Much Ado About Nothing* (twice); and *Richard III* which occurred five times in all. These apart, the examiners stuck grimly to their treadmill of three history plays: *Richard II*, *Henry IV (Part I)*, *Henry V*; three tragedies: *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, *Romeo and Juliet*; and five comedies: *The Tempest*, *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Merchant of Venice*.

There is, obviously, rather more room to manoeuvre in the selection of verse texts, but the examiners cannot be described as striving to take advantage of it. The Chaucer text, for example, never varied from *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, *The Prologue* and *The Pardoner's Tale*, set in solemn rotation for the entire thirty seven years of 'O' level, save for a brief period at the beginning of the 1970s when, for some reason, the Pardoner's cautionary tale of drunkenness and greed seems to have fallen temporarily out of favour and the other two were left to alternate.

With the solitary exception of 1954, Milton remained as an annual fixture until 1965, then became an irregular: offered in 1967 and alternate years from 1970 to 1978, and appearing finally in 1982 and 1983. On the twenty-two occasions on which a Milton text was set, however, the examiners imposed upon themselves limits as severe as those they applied to their selections from Chaucer: only *Comus*, *Paradise Lost Book I*, and Milton's Shorter Poems, which in practice meant *Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity*, *Lycidas*, *Il Penseroso* and *L'Allegro*, were found suitable for the purposes of 'O' level.

Mercifully, the two remaining slots in the Poetry section did tend to offer a little more variety. Almost invariably (the only exceptions are 1954, 1959, 1964 and 1977) one of these would be an anthology, and on seven occasions two anthologies were offered. There is a perceptible "modernising" of outlook in the choice of these collections of suitable verse over the period, and what began as *Poems Old and New* (1951) and Palgrave's *Golden Treasury (Bk.V)* (1952) moved through *This Half Century* (1953, 1957, 1962); *The Albemarle Book of Modern Verse* (1965, 1966, 1969–1971, 1973) and *Poems of the Sixties* (1975–6) to *Here and Human* (1979–1982) and

The New Dragon Book of Verse (1983–7). Clearly the emphasis of the anthology was intended to be on contemporary verse writing or something very close to it for the greater part of the life of the 'O' level examination.

It is, perhaps, more interesting for our purposes to look briefly at the remaining alternative, or alternatives in those years when Milton was omitted from the list and the even rarer occasions when no anthology was on offer. Inherited from the days of the School Certificate had been a heavy emphasis on the Romantics and Victorians and despite occasional variations this remained much in evidence throughout the thirty-seven year history of the 'O' Level Literature paper. Indeed, the very last appearance of this determinedly imitative successor to School Certificate featured selections from Keats and Hardy as the alternatives to *The New Dragon* or *The Pardoner's Tale*, and this particular pairing of options seems to have been very much a favourite of the examiners who also offered them together in 1954, 1964, 1971, and 1980; as well as including Keats in isolation in 1957, 1968, 1975 and 1981; and Hardy in 1959, 1974, 1979 and 1986. Wordsworth appeared in 1952, 1956, 1961 and 1970; Coleridge in 1967, 1976, 1981 and 1982; Byron in 1965, 1969, 1973, 1978, 1985 and 1986; and Tennyson in 1953, 1959, 1963, 1975, 1977, 1979, 1983 and 1984. Perhaps the only surprises are that Browning was offered only twice (in 1966 and 1972) since initiating the new paper in 1951, and that Shelley, who appeared on the last School Certificate paper, was never selected again. Only four other poets appeared in their own right as opposed to their inclusion in anthologies: and, predictably again, the most popular of these was Pope, whose *Rape of the Lock* was offered in 1954, 1960, 1973 and 1977. The other three appeared once each as though the excitement of breaking new ground had proved too much for the examiners, though the sober probability is that the client schools simply declined to invest in sets of Masfield (1966), Kipling (1968), and Owen (1977). The last comes as a surprise, since he has undoubtedly proved popular with sixteen year olds confronted with anthologies of, or including, poets of the first world war – but the Examiners' Report for the relevant year does not include a section on 'O' level literature, and we are left with the simple fact that he was never selected again, and the monotonous sameness of the approach

by the Oxford Board to the choice of poetic texts continued to the end.

It is, therefore, refreshing to be able to note that the third section of the examination, Prose, did show more signs of a willingness to experiment with the reaction of candidates (and their teachers) to new material, though this tendency was kept well under control. There was even a brief spell when the claim to recognition of playwrights other than Shakespeare was acknowledged with the introduction of a fourth section [Part D, Drama, as a specific alternative to Part C, Prose] but this extravagance lasted only four years.

As has been indicated already, the last School Certificate paper left a legacy of Bunyan and Dickens, and the second of these remained a staple throughout the life of 'O' Level Literature, with *Tale of Two Cities* reappearing in 1955, 1965, 1970, 1979, 1984 and 1985; while *Nicholas Nickleby* was offered in 1952, 1956 and 1974; *Oliver Twist* in 1976, 1980 and 1981; and *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Great Expectations* once each. By comparison with the other two sections of the paper, however, these repetitions are not particularly notable: while *Pilgrim's Progress* and its initial replacement *Gulliver's Travels*, after appearing almost indispensable in the early years, (one or other appeared in 1954, 1955, 1958, 1960, 1962, 1964 and 1967) dropped out completely after a final bow in 1978 and 1973 respectively. The examiners had enough substitutes among the 'classics' to ring the changes effectively and *Pride and Prejudice* and *Silas Marner* (six times each) *Jane Eyre* (four times), *Wuthering Heights* and *Persuasion* (three times each) and *The Mill on the Floss* (twice) are ample evidence of it. Other, less predictable, favourites seem to have been H G Wells whose *War of the Worlds* featured in the last two years of the examination and who had three other titles included between 1967 and 1975; and Rudyard Kipling whose *Kim* was offered on seven separate occasions between 1953 and 1985. On the other hand authors such as Hardy and Trollope, whom one might have expected to complement the list, only achieved one appearance each; and Conrad was offered only three times. Indeed, the more closely one examines the prose list, the more inconsistent the selections become. Examiners who can choose material virtually guaranteed to bore the average class to tears such as, for example, selections from de Quincy or Hakluyt,

Erewhon, *Eothen*, and *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, – and who can produce the splendidly awful grouping of 1960, when candidates were offered the choice of the last two of these together with *Gulliver's Travels (Bks I & II)*, and *The Old Curiosity Shop* – have no business introducing titles such as *The Shetland Bus*, *Animal Farm*, *Cider with Rosie*, *The Sword in the Stone*, *My Family and Other Animals*, or even *Brighton Rock*. Not, of course, that these inclusions are in any way reprehensible – and I would hope and expect that English teachers not wholly constrained by the resources of their stock cupboards would have welcomed them with open arms – but they do seem to exemplify the concept of reading for pleasure and entertainment, whereas the vast bulk of the alternatives seems to be predicated upon the idea of some implicit virtue in struggling through an unsympathetic text for examination purposes. Indeed, I can remember the indignation of a senior member of the department when, as still a comparatively young teacher, I surrendered to what was little short of a collective rebellion among a bright and lively fifth form against *The Mill on the Floss*, and substituted *Cider with Rosie*. Oddly enough, that year (1969) the other options were *Kim* and *My Family and Other Animals* which made the original choice by the Head of Department little short of unforgivable. I was, nevertheless, told that I was spoonfeeding popular rubbish to those to whom I had a duty to teach literature, and that nothing written in the last fifty years had any business on a literature syllabus. My reply that I was aiming to ensure that at least a fair share of the school's brightest pupils should continue with the subject at 'A' level rather than be switched off it for life fell on deaf ears – but the point that I am seeking to make is that they were by no means untypically deaf, and that, by and large, the Oxford Delegacy of Local Examinations seemed resolute in its determination not to unstop them, save by rare and usually unrepeated excursions into good modern writing.

Perhaps more seriously, I am inclined to agree that it is difficult to argue comparability between such disparate texts – the problem to which I seek to draw attention is not that there was some occasionally successful modernising influence at work among the examiners, but that it existed in parallel with a determination to maintain classical values which survived to the end, so that in the last two years of the paper's life

the prose selection from which a single choice had to be made consisted of *She Stoops to Conquer*, *Silas Marner*, and *The War of the Worlds* in both years, together with *Cider with Rosie* and *A Man for All Seasons* in 1986, and *Under Milk Wood* and *Twentieth Century Short Stories* the following year.

The combined effect was to make the prose section of the examination a good deal more varied in its demands on the candidates than either the Shakespeare or Poetry sections, and in consequence a good deal less predictable in terms of its influence on the teaching of English as a subject for personal response, as opposed to the preparation of candidates for examination. Nor was this factor of uncertainty made any the less by the occasional habit of including a dramatic text with novels, short stories and essays. When this happened (in 1953, 1956, 1963) the text in question was initially always Shaw's *St. Joan*, which makes the short-lived development from 1970 to 1972 even odder. As has been observed above, this was the short period when non-Shakespearian drama was given a section of its own. Once again the change made no difference to the demands made upon the candidate: the Shakespeare and Poetry sections remained compulsory, while the new Section D provided a specific alternative to Prose, in effect offering a choice of eight texts from which the third set book had to be selected. In the first year of this system the plays selected were *Dr. Faustus*, *The Rivals*, *St. Joan* and *Roots*; in the second *She Stoops to Conquer*, *The Devil's Disciple*, *The Silver Box* and *Under Milk Wood*; and for the last *School for Scandal*, *Pygmalion*, *Hassan* and *The Winslow Boy*.

Thereafter, the Prose and Drama sections were recombined, but for the rest of the life of the examination there were always five titles in Section C of which two were always dramatic. And for these, while Shaw remained a favourite with the examiners, there was a refreshing tendency to select one play which approached nearer to contemporary writing: I have already drawn attention to the inclusion of Robert Bolt and Dylan Thomas in the final two years of the paper.

Nevertheless, occasional bursts of sympathetic modernity in the Prose section and in the selection of Verse anthologies apart, the general impression of the level of "appropriateness" which the examiners sought to hit with the annual list of set texts

on offer was not materially distinguishable from that of the School Certificate examination. Nor was any significant change from School Certificate days initially apparent in the examination rubric: indeed the first change of any description was the reduction of choice of prose essay titles from three to two in 1965, though this decision was reversed two years later.

It was not until 1968, after the publication of *English Examined: A Survey of 'O' level Papers* by the National Association for the Teachers of English, the work from which the two excerpts which stand at the head of this chapter are taken, that a glance at the paper was sufficient to indicate a change of approach. In that year began a three year process during which the instructions to candidates did change materially in all three sections of the paper, and the passages for context questions became much longer. By 1971, each text was accompanied by the instruction 'Answer any two of the following questions'. In the case of the Shakespeare texts three context passages, each of about thirty five lines were provided, each followed by five questions dealing with meanings, characterisation and relevance to the play as a whole. There was also a single essay question in the usual "either/or" format. This effectively meant that the two questions on which each candidate was required to write had to be chosen from five alternatives, with the option of choosing two context questions or one context question and one essay. In the Poetry section the situation was more or less identical, save that the passages were a little shorter and all the four questions on each were based on the meaning, or the candidate's interpretation, of the text. In both Prose and Drama sections the pattern was repeated, save that the convention of three essay titles in "either/or/or" format was retained. This meant that it was now possible for a candidate to complete the paper without writing a single answer in essay form, not that it would in any way follow that anyone who did so would thereby be taking the easier option. This decision did, however, provoke controversy and was dealt with at some length in the Examiner's Reports over the period. To these Reports, as indeed to the impact of the NATE survey, I shall return later in the course of this chapter.¹

¹ v.lnf. pp 372-378

In 1973, when the Drama section disappeared again, the paper also reverted to having only three questions per book, two context and one essay, though with the minor difference that now the tri-partite essay division was assigned to Shakespeare, and the simple "either/or" structure to the other two sections. In 1977, the number of sub-questions on each Shakespearian context passage was reduced to three, and in 1980 the passages themselves were shortened to an average twenty lines. In other words, after the minor upheavals of the early seventies, the paper had reverted to something even nearer to its School Certificate days; and there were to be no further changes of any kind, save that in 1981 the paper was renumbered as 2802, with the three sections distinguished as 2802/1 for Shakespeare, /2 for Poetry and /3 for Prose.

In terms of standards, however, such a change is purely cosmetic, and it is difficult to argue with any credibility on the basis of text selection or examination paper rubric that any of the other alterations recorded above amount to very much more. What, therefore, remains to be studied with regard to the standards of the examination itself, is the nature of the questions put to candidates over the period of the GCE 'O' level examination; and the practice of the Board in setting the same texts over and over again at intervals during that period lends itself very conveniently to such a study.¹

To take as an initial example one of the texts set for the final School Certificate paper of 1950, Shakespeare's *Henry IV (Part I)*, the questions on that occasion were:

"Give an account of the scene in which Hotspur first meets the King and show how the impression that Hotspur makes here is maintained in any one later scene" and "By reference to any two scenes in which they appear together try to show Prince Hal's real attitude to Falstaff."

In the years in which the text reappeared for GCE 'O' level, the questions were:

"Give an account of the scene in Wales when the conspirators have come together, and show what you learn of Hotspur's character from that scene"

"It has been said that Falstaff is the most interesting character in this play. Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer."

"'The story of a prince learning how to be a King'. Do you think this is a good description of *Henry IV Part I*? Give reasons for your answer." [1955]

"Give an account of the scene in the Boar's Head Tavern after the Gadshill robbery. What impression does it give of Prince Hal?"

"With whom have you the more sympathy in *Henry IV Part I*, the King's men or the rebels' party. Give reasons for your answer." [1958]

¹ All examination papers produced by the University of Oxford Delegacy of Local Examinations are to be found in the University Archive File References LE 48-57

"Give an account of the part played by Hotspur in *Henry IV Part I*, showing its importance in the play."

"'Falstaff steals the play'. Do you agree with this comment on *Henry IV Part I*? Give reasons for your answer."

"What idea of honour do you find in *Henry IV Part I*? Illustrate your answer with close reference to the text." [1961]

"Give an account of the doings in the Boar's Head Tavern after Prince Henry has exposed Falstaff's lies about his exploits at Gadshill."

"With close reference to particular episodes, show how far Prince Henry, as he is depicted in *Henry IV Part I* strikes you as a young man who is likely to make a good king."

"No writer has succeeded better than Shakespeare in giving life to earlier periods of English history. Show, with illustrations, how he does this in *Henry IV Part 1*." [1964]

"Give an account of Falstaff's activities on the battle field of Shrewsbury"

"How far do you admire Prince Hal?"

"How far do you find yourself interested in Shakespeare's presentation of historical persons and events in the play" [1971]

"Give an account of that part of Act II scene iv in which Prince Henry and Poins expose Falstaff's lies about his exploits at Gadshill, and the Prince and Falstaff enact interviews between the Prince and his father."

"A hare-brained Hotspur, governed by a spleen". Is this an adequate description of Hotspur?"

"Show how Shakespeare relieves the gravity of the historical events of the play by means of humour." [1978]

The reliance throughout the whole period upon the "give an account of" question, which requires no more of the candidate than the ability to summarise the plot of a particular segment of the text, hardly testifies to any enormous expectation of pupil reaction to literature at any but the most basic level of having understood the words; and since such questions are invariably included, any apparent change in the quality of the alternatives offered must always be subject to the reminder that comparability both in questions and in marking schemes is a *sine qua non* of examination methodology. Nevertheless, I would suggest that the alternative questions in each year, if they do not demand more than the "give an account" type, at least give the better candidate more scope to demonstrate his feeling for Shakespeare's achievement, and that this additional opportunity was in no way lessened or curtailed by the passing of the years. To reproduce all the questions set on a Chaucer text over the thirty seven years of 'O' level would take up several pages without materially adding to the picture which can be created by a much briefer selection. The *General Prologue* offers the most scope to the examiners to avoid repetition of questions, but as this brief list of examples will

demonstrate, it was not an opportunity of which the examiners were concerned to avail themselves to any significant extent.

"Show with specific reference to three or four of Chaucer's character-sketches, what you have found amusing in the *Prologue*."

"Supposing that you lived in a village or small town in Chaucer's time, give an account of some of your neighbours and your relations with them."

[1952]

"What impressions of rural life in fourteenth century England have you formed from reading the *Prologue*?"

"Speaking in the character of *either* the Knight, *or* the Reeve, *or* the Prioress, *or* the Wife of Bath, describe the impression made on you by any *three* of your fellow pilgrims on the journey to Canterbury." [1955]

"Show with close reference to *three* of the portraits in the *Prologue* how Chaucer uses his humour in describing the characters of pilgrims."

"Show with close reference to the way of life of *three* pilgrims how far people connected with the Church in Chaucer's day lived up to the spirit of their profession." [1961]

"It has been said that Chaucer lavishes his most vivid description on the most repulsive characters. Choose *one* who seems to bear this out and show how Chaucer portrays him or her."

"Choose *three* of the characters described in the *Prologue* and, basing your opinion on what Chaucer says about them, say why you think each of them joined the pilgrimage." [1986].

Once again, I feel that it would be difficult to base any contention that questions became less demanding upon such a sequence, particularly since the standard of demand was never particularly high. Chaucer, of course, is a very special example of poetic writing in that it is always possible to base questions on plot and character, and virtually to ignore the fact that he was writing in verse. Since poetry is clearly acknowledged as the most difficult genre to teach and the most prone to cause an adverse reaction in classes from *Lark Rise* onwards¹ it is perhaps necessary to examine the sequence of questions on a writer whose skills as a poet can be ignored in neither question nor answer. Keats has the distinction of having figured on both the last School Certificate paper of 1950 and the last 'O' level literature paper of 1987 as well as on a number of occasions in between, sometimes in isolation and at others in combination with fellow poets from the romantic period. The sequence of questions which the Oxford examiners produced to test the impact of Keats' poetical style on sixteen year olds over a period of thirty eight years is as follows:

¹ v.sup. p 22

"Choose one of the longer poems you have enjoyed reading. Give full reasons for your choice and illustrate your answer with quotations and references."

Show how Keats enriches his poetry with allusions to the people and the legends of ancient time, illustrating your answer with quotations and references." [1950]

"Retell very briefly the story of *either* 'Lamia' or 'The Eve of St. Agnes' and say, with illustrations, whether you think Keats has told it effectively.

"Above all else, Keats is a vividly pictorial poet.' Show with quotations and references how far you agree with this statement." [1954]

"Show, with quotations and references, that Keats was a close and accurate observer of the beauty of nature, and of the sounds and scents of the countryside."

"Which *two* of Keats' Odes, or other shorter poems, would you choose to persuade a friend that Keats is one of the most melodious of poets. Justify your choice by analysis of particular passages." [1958]

"Which of the shorter poems in the anthology do you prefer? Give a brief account of its content and give reasons for your choice."

"Illustrate and comment on the music of Keats' poetry." [1964]

"Give *briefly* the story of the 'Eve of St. Agnes' and illustrate how it gains from the way in which Keats has told it."

"Illustrate from your knowledge of the poems in this selection Keats' richness of imagery." [1968]

"Give an account of *one* of the sonnets in this collection and show, with illustration, what qualities make it memorable."

"Discuss and illustrate those aspects of Keats' poetry which most appeal to you." [1971]

The story of the 'Eve of St. Agnes' can be told in three or four sentences. What is gained by Keats' much longer way of telling this story."

"What use does Keats make of colour in his poetry?" [1975]

"How does Keats present Nature in the poems you have studied apart from the 'Eve of St. Agnes' and 'Ode to a Nightingale' ? *

"Using material from at least *three* of the poems you have studied, give an account of Keats' feelings about death." [1980]

"Just a series of vivid pictures ': is this an adequate description of Keats' poetry?"

"Dissatisfaction is the keynote of Keats' sonnets.' Comment on this statement, and illustrate your answer from the sonnets you have read."

[1981]

"How does Keats present contrasting moods in the poems you have read?"

"In the 'Eve of St Agnes' how successful do you think Keats is in telling the story?" [1987]

The virtual repetition of a 1954 question in 1981, and the apparent conviction that the

"Eve of St. Agnes" was the only proper text for a question based upon a single

poem, makes it very easy to establish a continuing and unvarying standard in this part

* The requirement to omit these two poems arises from the fact that extracts from them had been used in the alternative context question.

of the paper, and to argue that no contention that questions became easier can be sustained on the evidence of the Oxford Board's Literature paper. Equally, of course, it is impossible to sustain any suggestion that standards of requirement became more demanding over the period on the strength of the evidence from Oxford, though I believe there to be grounds for such an argument based on the nearest thing to an equivalent paper from the Associated Examining Board. This paper was the AEB's 027/1 (previously numbered 261/1) and was divided into four sections: Plays; Poetry; Novels; Other Prose. Candidates were required to answer five questions in two and half hours, and these had to be spread over at least three sections, with no more than two questions from any one section. Section 1 invariably included at least one Shakespeare title, together with one or two others, usually very similar in nature to those in the short lived Oxford Section D. Three questions were set on each text, but candidates were permitted to choose only one play from this section. Section 2 was invariably set on two anthologies, and again three questions were set on each, but candidates were not permitted to offer both. In both the remaining sections three or four titles were listed, and a single question in 'either/or' format was provided for each title. It follows, therefore that candidates could miss out either Plays or Poetry altogether, and do both the Prose sections, but would be required to increase their reading by at least one title if they did so. It certainly follows that teachers could avoid Shakespeare altogether, either by omitting the whole section from the class's study or by choosing a non-Shakespearian dramatic text, and it equally certainly follows that it was possible to avoid having to teach poetry at all. If this were done, however, the class in question would have been required, as a minimum, to study the chosen dramatic text in sufficient detail to answer two questions upon it, and a total of three prose texts to make up the necessary five questions spread over three sections. It is, I believe, a very reasonable assumption that the average candidate was prepared for a dramatic question on which he was expected to answer two questions; for a poetry anthology on which he was expected to answer a further two, and for a single prose text on which he was expected to answer the fifth and last. More able classes may very well have been prepared for an additional prose text in order that they might

have the flexibility of a sixth available answer and therefore additional powers of selection of 'sympathetic' questions throughout the paper. In this respect the course could be described as encouraging wider reading than that of the Oxford examination, which restricted answers to three texts only: on the other hand the fact that neither Shakespeare nor poetry was compulsory would have made it extremely difficult to persuade traditionalists that standards had not been sacrificed irretrievably.

It was a characteristic of the AEB approach to leave each selected text on the syllabus for about four years: for this reason there is far less repetition of titles once they have completed their cycle than is the case with Oxford – which makes examining changes in the nature of questions more difficult. In the case of Shakespeare, for instance, only one play was set in any given year, as opposed to the three on offer under the Oxford system, and it is therefore surprising that there was any repetition at all, since nine plays in all would have seen them through the thirty seven year life of the examination. However, one play did feature twice over the period: *Henry IV (Part I)* which was set from 1965 to 1968, and again for the unprecedentedly long period of 1981 to 1987; and would therefore be an appropriate starting point for this part of the investigation even if it did not also offer the opportunity of direct comparison with Oxford.

The most obvious change to have affected questions in the second as opposed to the first period in which AEB examined the text, is that they became much shorter, a point which will be illustrated by the appearance of the exemplary questions in transcript on this and the following page. In 1965 it was deemed appropriate to set questions which read:

"Explain how the Prince of Wales, even before the battle of Shrewsbury, was fully aware of his responsibilities although he seemed to give the opposite impression. Quote whenever appropriate." [June]

"Give an account of the main events which took place when Hotspur, Mortimer, Glendower, Lady Percy and Lady Mortimer met at Bangor. What in this scene leads you to believe that the rebels are not likely to succeed?" [November]

The three questions from the June 1966 paper read:

"What impression of the Prince do you gain from what King Henry says of him before they set out for the wars? How does the Prince defend himself against his father's accusations?"

"Explain Northumberland's and Hotspur's reasons for revolting against the King. How far do you think these reasons were justifiable, bearing in mind Henry IVth's views of these men and their behaviour?"

"For what reasons do you find Falstaff amusing? Refer not only to what he does, but to what he says."

One question from November 1966 reads:

"With reference to the text of the play, show how King Henry, by his words and actions, gives the impression that he feels insecure on his throne."

and one from June 1967:

"At various time and by various people the following adjectives have been applied to Hotspur: quick-tempered; romantic; imaginative; impulsive; tactless; valiant; optimistic; contemptuous. Choose the *three* which you think the most appropriate and, with close reference to the text, justify your choice."

To a greater or lesser extent, all these examples suggest, more strongly than is true of Oxford questions of the same period, that the approach of the examiners is not to elicit opinions from the candidates but to provide an opportunity for them to regurgitate predigested responses. To put it crudely, these are questions which expect the candidates to jump through hoops – to reproduce conventional reactions to the text which have been fed to them – rather than to think for themselves. There is real difficulty in arguing with conviction that such questions genuinely afford the opportunity which might legitimately produce the effect upon the examiners which the first Oxford Examiners' Report¹ claimed of their best candidates; that they "show independence of thought and judgement and some perception of the complexities of character and situation and of the moral issues involved."

Fortunately, this quality of question is far less apparent when the text reappears at the close of the GCE period:

"Does Falstaff treat Prince Hal worse than Prince Hal treats him?"

"What factors lead to the collapse of the rebellion in *Henry IV (Part I)*?"
[June 1986]

"Do you find much to admire in the character and actions of Hotspur?"
[June 1985]

"There are no villains in *Henry IV (Part I)*. Consider *two* of the following in the light of this statement: Prince Hal, Hotspur, Glendower, Northumberland, Worcester."
[November 1984]

"How far do you agree that selfishness is a major theme in *Henry IV (Part I)*?"
[June 1984]

These are all open-ended questions which permit the candidate to think for himself and

appear to take for granted some capacity for personal reaction rather than the ability to remember some interpretation dictated, or at least suggested, to a class. As such they appear to indicate an improvement in the standard of candidate response, probably represent an improvement in the standards of English teaching, and certainly demonstrate an improvement in the standard of examining over a period of nearly twenty years. No-one would argue that these questions give less scope than those from Oxford to the more able candidate, and the inclusion of Prince Hal among the list of possible villains suggests that opportunities for such candidates are being genuinely sought.

To advance this hypothesis of significant improvement on the basis of questions on a single text might seem presumptuous, were it not for the fact that other examples do lend some support. In section 3, Novels, for instance, Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd* also appeared twice, (from 1965 to 1967, and from 1974 to 1976) and although the interval between the two is shorter I believe a similar pattern of development is apparent.

"Give an account of how Bathsheba sent the Valentine and of the unforeseen results of her action." [June 1965]

"Give an account of how Gabriel Oak found it necessary to protect the ricks, how he worked on them, and how he conversed with Bathsheba while working." [November 1965]

"Describe Gabriel Oak's efforts to find work after leaving his own farm, and the circumstances which led to his being employed as a shepherd in Weatherbury." [November 1966]

"By referring to *three* episodes in the book, illustrate Oak's efficiency as a farmer." [June 1967]

All these questions demand little if anything beyond factual recall of a specific event or sequence of events in the novel. Interpretational skills or any kind of personal reaction to the novel are not only not called for, but could be inserted only at the risk of seeming to introduce irrelevant material. There is not the same level of improvement as was marked in the case of the Shakespeare text when this particular Hardy novel was set again, but it is, I think, nonetheless apparent.

"'Gabriel Oak, unlike Boldwood or Troy, loves Bathsheba unselfishly.' Discuss this statement, referring in your answer to Gabriel and *either* Boldwood or Troy."

"To what extent do the characters who own land live a different kind of life from those who do not?" [June 1976]

"In what senses may Gabriel and Bathsheba be said to be mutually independent? Refer to their characters and events in which they are concerned."

"For what reasons is Troy attractive to women, and in what respects does his attraction constitute a false promise to Bathsheba and Fanny?"

[June 1975]

"In his author's preface to this novel, Hardy refers to 'Legend, folk-lore, close inter-social relationships, and eccentric individualities.' Show the contribution made by two of these features to the success of the novel."

"In your view, does Bathsheba grow wiser as she grows older? Give your reasons, based upon the events concerning her." [November 1974]

It is true that there is something of a tendency to provide rather fussily detailed instruction to candidates on how the essay is to be approached, but at this later period questions do tend to be directed towards reactions to the novel as a whole, and to be based upon character and motive rather than on mere incident and plot development. Candidates are clearly expected to have thought about the book rather than just to be able to recall significant bits of it. If any conclusions about standards over the period can be drawn from such material I feel that, as in the case of the Shakespeare text, there is a detectable tendency upward even if the gradient is gentle.

In general terms, I believe that a detailed study of 'O' Level literature papers reveals an initial close adherence to the standards of the School Certificate examination, followed by a slow movement, more noticeable after the publication of the NATE survey *English Examined* in 1966, towards giving more weight to the candidates' own thoughts, reactions and opinions; and, indeed, having more faith in their power to formulate them. What I cannot believe is that such a study lends the slightest credibility to the concept of a progressive decline in the quality of response demanded of those who were entered for the examination over the period in question.

We are left, therefore, with the possibility that evidence of such of such a lowering of standards might reside in the quality of the scripts that were actually submitted, and in the examiners' increasing tolerance toward shortcomings that would earlier have earned their condemnation. As has been pointed out before, we have no archive of scripts which might be subjected to analysis to deal with this area of doubt, but as with the 'O' Level Language paper, we do have a very similar series of Examiners' Reports which provide highly relevant material.

The first Report from the Oxford Delegacy of Local examinations after the inception of the General Certificate of Education was issued in 1958, and, in its own words,

"All the main subjects in the examination are dealt with but those in which there are only comparatively few candidates have not been covered."¹

It is worthy of remark within the general study of educational history over the period, though not of immediate relevance to this thesis that 'main subjects', so defined, includes Latin and Greek as well as Ancient History within the 'A' level list, and Latin and Greek as well as Greek Literature in Translation within that for 'O' level.

This breadth of treatment meant seventeen subjects or subject groups at 'A' level, and twenty at 'O' level, and as the document confined itself to seventy pages, it is obvious that no extensive coverage was possible or intended, though exactly what function it was intended to fulfil is not immediately apparent.

It is not the wish of the Delegates, says the Secretary in his Introduction, "to appear to support any particular teaching method or to suggest the manner in which any question should be approached" and he goes on "teachers are fully aware of the kind of mistakes that their pupils are in the habit of making, and it does not appear to serve a useful purpose to recite every year the illustrations of these errors",² but he is rather less forthcoming on the positive side:

"It has, however, been represented to the Delegates that examiners and awarders of long experience must have much to say that might be of value to teachers and candidates and that the occasional issue of a general report conveying these impressions would be helpful to schools. It is in response to these representations that this volume of reports has been prepared."³

What the examiners actually provided of value to teachers of, and candidates for, Paper O2, occupies two and a half sides, and much of it deals with examination technique, though towards the end there are some observations of a philosophical nature which deserve a detailed response. The opening remark is conventional enough, and might have come from almost any examiner, in almost any subject, at almost any time:

"Too many candidates fail to note that they only have to do two of the three contexts set, and they overlook the significance of the word *briefly*."⁴

After a comment on what the examiners actually expect of a brief answer to a context question, the Report continues:

¹ Op.cit p 2

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid. p 35

"In the essays the qualities needed are accuracy of detail, some interest in and knowledge of, character, reasonable common sense in judgements, power to organize material and to make points clearly in straightforward grammatical English. The best candidates show independence of thought and judgement and some perception of the complexities of character and situation and of the moral issues involved, with an understanding of the problems of presentation with which the author has been wrestling. It is always clear in the essays whether candidates have responded directly to what they have been reading, and have found it interesting and alive."¹

Despite the apparent obviousness of the listed demands, it would be impossible to argue that there is any lack of meaningful academic standard here, particularly in the demand that candidates show "interest in" aspects of their set texts and make a personal response to them. Perhaps inevitably, there is no acknowledgement here that candidates may be jumping through hoops held out by teachers, with no motive beyond adding another 'O' level pass to their portfolios; but there might have been more patience with those whose verbal limitations fall short of the ability to communicate an effective participation in a literary experience:

"It is realised that the expression of appreciation of poetry is difficult, but there is too much feeble and inept commentary in the scripts. Candidates write sentences such as.....'The word "cracked" almost makes you see a mirror cracking' and in so doing they only succeed in giving an impression of insincerity."²

The intended point, of course, is perennially valid, but I am less happy with the choice of illustration. The sentence quoted is unacceptably clumsy and inadequate, but this still seems to me a harsh judgement of a candidate who is either ignorant of the word *onomatopoeia* or unwilling to risk spelling it, but who nevertheless wishes to convey his awareness that the word does have this quality in the context and brings to the image an almost literal impact and immediacy. It is, I think, probable that if a candidate had written the above line, the Report would not have isolated it as an illustration of the conventional complaint about the force of verbs being "lost by the use of the ubiquitous word 'almost'," ³ yet I have deliberately used the word in an identical sense.

It must, however, be admitted that the examiners state their expectation that candidates will be familiar with *onomatopoeia*, observing that

"a sound knowledge of the figures of speech most frequently used in poetry is needed if a candidate is to be equipped to comment satisfactorily on lines italicised in context questions, or to write an appreciation of almost any poem"⁴

¹ Op.cit. p 35

² Ibid.

³ Ibid. p 36

⁴ Ibid.

and goes on to emphasise that with regard to these terms of literary criticism (simile, metaphor, alliteration and assonance are cited in addition to onomatopoeia as those to which familiarity "could profitably be limited") "a warning is necessary to candidates that they should, if they wish to use them, take note of their spelling." ¹

The examiners would, therefore, presumably take issue with my estimate of a harsh judgement, and insist instead that they were upholding necessary standards as, presumably, they deem themselves to be doing in the concluding paragraph of the report.

"Misspelling will always be with us, but the matter goes deeper than this. If papers on literature are to have any value, it must lie in their stimulating an interest in reading, in providing a continually enriching pleasure, and, equally important, in helping those who take them to write with directness and liveliness. It is therefore disappointing to find many candidates ignorant of the meaning of such words as 'profligate' and 'taciturn', for it means that they are missing much of the care with which authors use words to convey the atmosphere of a situation or to bring out the quality of a particular character or the relationships between characters or places." ²

Again one would not wish to quarrel with the concern for the integrity of authorial intention, but nevertheless there is, I think, an element of pedantry here at odds with the requirement for a direct and personal response. I cannot actually remember a time when I did not know the meaning of the word 'taciturn', but I can clearly remember a time when I did not know how to pronounce it, and I am not at all sure that my ability to derive a continually enriching pleasure from my interest in reading was in any way enhanced by having my error pointed out to me with the same patronising tones as seem to characterise this part of the Report. Nor do I believe that teachers of English at the time of the Norwood Report, in 1958, or now, would necessarily agree that an essential importance of exam. papers on literature is to help the candidates to write with directness and liveliness. It is, of course, desirable that they should, and important that they be helped to do so, but I cannot feel that I am alone in supposing the function of papers in English Language to be the better attuned to this purpose. I am indeed reminded of an occasion during my probationary year in a very old-established and traditional boys' grammar school in the south of Buckinghamshire, when I set for homework to what would now be called a year nine class the essay title "The Joys

¹ Op.cit. p 36

² Ibid. p.37

of Reading". By far the most lively and direct response came from the young man who wrote with obvious enthusiasm about the fortnightly shopping trip with his family to a university city over the county boundary in Berkshire. Once I had established (as probationer teachers must) that this was not a joke at my expense, I concluded that the fault was mine, that the intended interpretation of the title was insufferably pompous, and that the reams of ponderous hypocrisy I had evoked from the rest of the class should not be repeated by any deliberate act of mine.

The moral of this digression is that while we can all talk of standards, we are not all necessarily, as we do so, marching to the same drum; and the educational standards spoken of so enthusiastically by contemporary politicians do not always square with those aimed at by contemporary teachers.

One cannot say that the standards of the examination have declined in any way between 1951 and the publication of this 1958 Report, and one can only agree when the writer makes the observation:

"Quite simple comment and appreciation which gives the feeling of sincerity, and shows accurate knowledge of a poem, is better than pretentious but imperfectly digested 'literary criticism'," ¹

but it would be reassuring to know beyond peradventure that the examiner could be relied upon to recognise simple appreciation when he saw it, and that he would show equal disdain for pretentiousness even when it had been efficiently digested.

It was to be ten years before the next Oxford report on English Literature in 1968, and two years before that the National Association for the Teaching of English had published *English Examined : A Survey of O level Papers*, a work to which reference has been made earlier in this thesis,² and which formed one of the milestones in both the teaching and examining of English in the GCE period. The *Survey* itself is not opposed to examinations as such, or even, despite the preaching of writers on English like Brian Jackson, to examinations in literature:

"[pupils] can thoroughly enjoy a year spent in the close study of well-chosen texts with a lively teacher who cares;At the end of the year, if the questions are well set, an examination can seem a natural and pleasant culmination of a year's exploration." ³

¹ Op.cit. p 36

² v.sup. pp 137-8 and 284-285

³ Op.cit. p 35

and it goes on to define what is implied by the concept of "well set":

"An ideal question would permit a candidate to write freely and pleasantly, conveying to the reader the knowledge he has acquired and the pleasure he has derived from his reading.Good questions are those which direct attention to the central theme, main ideas, chief interests and leading characters in the books." ¹

Unfortunately, the survey does not find much evidence of this idea in practice.

"Far too many questions are set to a formula which permits the regurgitation of prepared answers. The better questions are like a good comprehension test, eliciting evidence of understanding and response." ²

The NATE writers were not unfamiliar with the examiners' habit of hiding behind the parameters within which they had to work, but remained unconvinced:

"When an examiner asks questions about minor characters and incidents he is presumably trying to eke out the major questions since some Boards keep the same book on the syllabus for far too long" ³

nor were they inclined to follow automatically the most frequently voiced criticisms of literature papers, which related to their emphasis on reaction to selected passages, and to their allegedly over-academic emphasis:

"context questions have frequently been criticized as the worst feature of O level literature papers, but in fact they are often better, or less bad, than the essay questions." ⁴

"It has been suggested that the future rôle of the literature examination is as a preliminary for those pupils who are thinking in terms of an Arts course in the Sixth. The present 'O' level is useless for this purpose – indeed positively disabling for work where critical thinking, astute handling of material and ability to express personal response are what is required." ⁵

The most devastating comment, however, is that which I selected to stand at the head of this chapter, and which serves as a highly effective summary of the criticisms of English literature examination papers which recurred throughout the second chapter of this thesis, most notably from the teachers in correspondence with Fred Inglis: ⁶

"On some syllabuses.....if the candidates are taught well they do badly in the examination; if they are crammed for the examination, they develop a lasting distaste for literature." ⁷

It is, I think, not unreasonable to assume that this attack was by no means without influence on examination boards: it did not prevent the AEB from retaining texts on the syllabus for longer than either Oxford or Cambridge deemed appropriate, but it may well have accounted for the change of questioning style evidenced in the

¹ Op.cit. p 37

² Ibid. p 40

³ Ibid. p 38

⁴ Ibid. p40

⁵ Ibid. p 43

⁶ v.sup. pp 75-79

⁷ Op.cit. p 35

approach to *Henry IV* and *Far from the Madding Crowd* before and after the survey. There is no direct evidence of NATE influence on the Oxford Delegacy's Literature examination as there was in the case of language, but it is possible to argue that there has been a change of approach, and that the examiners are not entirely unaware of a growing body of criticism concerning the way a knowledge of literature is tested.

There is a surprising shortage of material relating to 'O' level English Literature in the files containing details of the criticisms officially forwarded to the Delegacy by the teachers' unions: between the Examiners' Reports of 1958 and 1968 I can find very few of any significance.

In 1968 there was a complaint directed at the poetry section which observed simply:

"richness of imagery" is felt to be too difficult and open an expression for 'O' level candidates"

and to which the Board replied in somewhat hurt tones:

"It is rather surprising for us to note that this question is not more warmly welcomed. It is the sort of question we are constantly urged to ask." ¹

Unfortunately, such constant urgings do not seem to have found their way into the Delegacy files preserved in the University Archive, though I did find in a collection of "Loose papers on marking" – a series of examiners' notes, some scribbled on the backs of examination papers or official report forms – a draft letter from an examiner to the Secretary of the Delegacy complaining about a particular centre:

"Practically all the answers had been learned by heart and reproduced word for word so far as memory permitted.....it amounts to compelling the pupils to learn four answers by heart and instructing them to fit them in somehow with the questions given. "

Again unfortunately, information of this kind never seems to lead to any kind of action: records of official protests by Examination Boards to centres which abused the system to this extent would at least have established that in the catalogue of complaints against the examination system, the faults were not exclusively those committed by examiners. What does begin to bulk large in the field of criticism from 1968 onwards is the matter of the ability of candidates to rely exclusively upon context questions rather than essays in completing their response to the paper, referred to above,² to which I will return later.

¹ O.U. Archive Reference – LE/Teachers' Criticisms/Comments

² v, sup. p 340

In more general terms the Report of 1968 begins with the expression of some lack of satisfaction with the standard of candidate preparation for the Shakespeare section of the paper.

"The Delegates regard the study at this level of a Shakespeare text one of the cornerstones of education in English Literature and would welcome a general raising of the standard of work in this section."¹

Answers, we are told, 'tend to be patchy in content and to lack factual accuracy'; there are too many candidates who 'quote Shakespearian blank verse as though it were prose'; the 'clear, well-composed statement, supported where possible by apposite reference and quotation' for which the examiners look is a rarity, and overall the impact of the quality of work in Section 1 is of 'a general decline'. 'The last thing the Delegates would wish to encourage is a stultifying learning of textual notes, but they do expect in the study in depth of a Shakespearian play some sign of interest in and appreciation of the language used'.²

It would be difficult to find much fault with the position of the examiners here. Their stated expectations are legitimate, given that one accepts the underlying premise that the study of a Shakespeare play is a cornerstone of education in English Literature, and there is less of the patronising element in the way those expectations are expressed.

Difficulties with Shakespeare are mirrored by a similar failure to engage with poetic texts:

"The examining of work on English poetry is always difficult and that it is difficult for students of O Level age is apparent from the quality of the expression of many candidates who lose command of the mechanics of writing under the stress of having to write about literary values. Indeed, so aware are the examiners of this that questions tend to concentrate on context rather than on poetic form."³

Here, again, the examiners seem to be inured to disappointment, and it is only in the prose section that candidates seem to measure up to expectations, their answers being

"better written in every way than those on the other two sections of the paper. The spelling, punctuation, syntax and composition were of a much higher level.....and there was ample evidence that the prose texts had been read intelligently and with pleasure."⁴

It is worth a passing observation that the Report goes on to state that of the available prose texts "the two most popular choices were Brontë and Hardy and the work on

¹ Op.cit p 25

² Ibid. p 24

³ Ibid. p 25

⁴ Ibid.

these two texts was, on the whole, good". This double endorsement by schools, in choosing the text, and candidates, in writing effectively on it, makes even odder the fact, commented on above¹ that *Under the Greenwood Tree* was never set again nor, indeed, any other novel by Hardy, though a selection of stories was set in 1972.

The author concludes:

"This report may in places seem censorious, but it must be said that some of the work examined was of a very high quality, and the general level of attainment respectable. The Delegates take pleasure from the knowledge that the schools regard the course leading to the examination in Selected Literature of such value that over thirty thousand candidates presented themselves for examination in it, and of this number approximately two-thirds reached a Grade 6 standard or better".²

It is not easy to analyse precisely what this Report tells us about standards, and the fact that it can be read to support a variety of educational opinions is a warning against leaping too readily to conclusions. For instance, the fact that 11,000 candidates for a single examining board failed to reach a satisfactory standard in an English Literature examination may well satisfy those whose definition of standards incorporates an essential element of exclusivity, but will unquestionably displease those who think in terms of the amount of human misery implicit in dragging so many pupils through a course that clearly failed to provide them with stimulus, entertainment, or one suspects, even much in the way of understanding. Support is to be found here for those who believe that English Literature should not be examined at all. Even those for whom percentage pass-rates are a more significant indicator than the number of failures may have doubts about the standards implicit in a situation where 66% of candidates can be awarded a pass in English Literature when the bulk of them are ill at ease with the Shakespeare and poetry sections of the paper. As I have said above, it is difficult to find fault with the position of the examiners, who seem to be struggling with the need to preserve an essential nucleus of critical approach, willingness to close with unfamiliar usages of the language, and genuine enjoyment of the literary experience against a rising tide of stubborn indifference to the values they seek both to inculcate and to test. It has, of course, been frequently argued that the twin intentions are mutually incompatible – and only the occasional script which shows signs of "texts

¹ v.sup. p 337.

² Op.cit. p 25

having been read intelligently and with pleasure" can be set positively against such convictions. It is not an argument that I find particularly sympathetic, but there would seem to have been an increasing gap between the expectations of the examiners and those of the teachers, who should surely have been eradicating some of those faults listed by the examiners, if, of course, they were always aware of them. The increase over seventeen years of twenty thousand in the number of candidates in the subject for a single board suggests that nationally there must have been a very substantial increase in the number of teachers to whom 'O' Level literature classes had been entrusted, and it may well be that not all of them were worthy of their charge. The standards of teaching, as well as those of the pupils are being examined, and the standards of examining are being scrutinised at the same time.

Quis custodiet ipsos custodes? indeed. Within this melting pot, the Report does seem to be indicating that the examiners are pandering to a declining ability to cope with poetry texts but refusing similarly to temper their own standards with Shakespeare; and if this implication were correct then standards in the absolute sense of quality of learning and understanding would have to be described as declining, whatever the number of successful candidates or the percentage pass-rate might seem to indicate.

In many respects, however, the next Report in 1972 is both more positive and more encouraging. Although "the writing on the Prose texts was generally of a higher quality than that of the other sections of the paper" as in the case of the previous Report; although "the Poetry section still presents the major difficulty to all candidates"; and although "by reason of their language, almost 'foreign' to today's candidates, their complexities of plot and subtleties of characterisation, the Shakespeare texts are inevitably challenging", the prevailing impression is one of challenges and difficulties being met. There is evidence that Shakespeare's plays "are being seriously and imaginatively studied and discussed. Trivial, superficial or distorted responses to the plays as a whole are fewer.....and there is less use of 'prepared' answers regardless of their appositeness to the questions asked"; and "there is evidence that many enjoy their reading of poetry and receive stimulating teaching". Perhaps even more positive is the observation "although the technical difficulties of making value judgements about

poetry are almost beyond the capabilities of many at this age, we feel it important to support the sensitive and sustained work of teachers in what some consider to be the most valuable part of a literature course." ¹

The apparent implication that the examiners, faced annually by the struggles of suffering candidates, would seriously contemplate abandoning the poetry section altogether if it were not for the pleas of dedicated teachers of literature, is not, I think, to be taken entirely at face value; but there is clearly an endorsement of the work which pupils and teachers are doing together which is warmer than anything previously encountered in these Reports. The writer in 1972 is by no means blind to the faults of the weaker candidates: there is a reference to those who "have obviously found careful reading of texts beyond them, either through lack of ability or through culpable laziness" but in general he finds that "the standard of literacy has improved and this is noticeable in such mechanics of writing as spelling, grammar, syntax.....and paragraphing." ²

Finally, there is the observation that the examiners:

"At this stage of the candidates' developmentlook for a rapidly widening range of vocabulary precisely used. That this is successfully tested is confirmed by the quietly rising standard in the manipulation of language as used by candidates in their answers. This development is also confirmed by the rise in numbers of candidates obtaining a Grade 6 or higher, in spite of the fact that the total number of candidates taking this paper has risen each year to this year's figure of over 37,000; this without any acceptance of dilution of quality in the work submitted." ³

It is curious, and slightly disconcerting, to find that the official statistics earlier in the same report do not confirm the figure given. As my appendix to this chapter giving figures for entries and pass-rates makes clear, it is true that this year produced the highest ever pass-rate at 67.1%, but the total entry was 34,486 – and even if we add in the other 'O' Level literature papers(O*3 and O4) we reach a grand total of only 36,334. The error is minor, and should not mitigate the general air of satisfaction with progress and with standards that emerges from this report, but there remains a nagging doubt about the reliability of the alleged improvement from the assessments of the previous report when the only statement susceptible to factual verification fails the test.

1 Op.cit. p 44

2 Ibid. p 43

3 Ibid.

1972 was the last year of the short-lived experiment with four rather than three sections of the paper, and, in consequence, the date of the only Report to mention it.

Comment is brief:

"The Drama section was added to the O2 paper in response to a widespread request from schools for such a section, but the result is disappointing in more than one way. The School for Scandal was prepared by fewer than a thousand candidates, Hassan by fewer than one hundred. The rest of those opting for the Drama section were equally divided between Shaw and Rattigan. It was interesting to find that many more chose to prepare a prose text than a play." ¹

What is not entirely clear is the number of ways in which the author found the result disappointing. The total number of candidates for the new Drama section is not made clear, save that the number preferring the old Prose section was significantly greater. If this was disappointing, it can hardly be described as surprising in only the third year of the new opportunity. If the comparative popularity of Pygmalion and The Winslow Boy is disappointing, then the examiners' own expectations are out of line with reality. If the standard of answers was less than adequate among those choosing Section D rather than Section C, which we are told was always the most effectively answered, then it is odd that no direct statement to this effect is made. One is left with the conclusion of an unfocussed dissatisfaction, possibly based on the failure of take-up to match the initial requests for the new section from schools. But if this is the only reason for abandoning the new approach, the Delegacy is being inconsistent. Paper O*3 attracted only 83 candidates, and the Report speaks dismissively of the majority of those. Yet it concludes:

"Occasionally one discovers a committed candidate of high quality who writes with precision and penetration. One always feels that the setting of the paper has been worth while – but at a high cost." ²

What I find unsatisfactory about the decision to revert to three sections in 1973 is that it implies an abandonment of the principle that the Delegacy is there to examine what teachers are teaching, and the substitution of the conventional wisdom that teachers are required to teach what the Boards are examining. The Delegacy attributes the former philosophy to itself, as we shall see in a later Report. This incident does not aid belief.

¹ op.cit. pp 44-45

² Ibid. p 45

In 1973 the Cambridge Syndicate published its *Report on the Work in English Literature at 'O' level in June 1971 and June 1972 with Specimen Scripts*. Apparently there was a similar full-scale Report in 1956, and I regret that I have been unable to find a copy in the Syndicate archives, because it would clearly be of considerable relevance to compare the change in attitudes revealed over a sixteen year period. Nevertheless, this 1973 document is invaluable in itself, partly because of its inclusion of a considerable number of completed answers to the question papers of the previous two years, together with brief justifications for the grade awarded in each case; and partly because the authors are clearly aware both that they are writing at a time of significant changes in classroom practice, and that they have a responsibility to reflect those changes in their conduct of the processes of setting and marking papers. The late sixties and early seventies marked a progressive acceleration of the process of the re-organization of secondary education along comprehensive lines which led in turn to substantial changes not only in the number of candidates for public examination, but also in the social and educational background of those candidates. This is, of course, a statement of the obvious, but it is none the less reassuring to find the implications for examiners being not only acknowledged but welcomed in an official publication. The Oxford examiners were, and were to remain for some years, considerably more reticent. The Cambridge Report on the 'O' level literature examinations of 1971 and 1972 seems to me, therefore, to cast useful light on a wider field than its title suggests, and therefore, and because the text is not readily available, to justify extensive quotation.

"There have been such fundamental changes in the world of education (as in the world outside the schools) that it seems relevant to preface this Report by an attempt to distinguish, in relation to the examination, those factors which remain unaltered.....from those in which the change has been so great as to amount to a minor revolution.

Objectives in the teaching of literature, and therefore in the examining which seeks to measure the child's success in profiting from that teaching, remain broadly speaking as before: to enable the fifteen/sixteen year-old to discover what reading (in its fullest sense, with enjoyment and understanding) can mean, to widen the range of what he can so read, and to give him the opportunity of developing a sense of discrimination and a vocabulary which will allow him to formulate his own response to what he reads. What has changed is the diet of books chosen by the schools in carrying out this process, a diet which now – matching the physical maturity of the readers as well as their apparently greater sophistication – includes works which are both more challenging than before (*Animal Farm* rather

than *Travels with a Donkey*) and more demanding in content (*Hard Times* and *To Kill a Mocking Bird* rather than *Northanger Abbey* and *Eothen*); even the volumes of short stories, which used to be considered the easiest texts, appear in the syllabus where (for example) Lamb's essays might have been found before, and offer introduction to an experience of life, sometimes of an uncomfortable kind, which demands a tough digestion on the part of the reader if it is to be absorbed with pleasure as well as understanding.

Side by side with this extension of the diet offered by the syllabus in literature has gone (in most schools) a significant change of approach in the classroom to the work done there. A wider and more varied range of home background, greater freedom both inside school and out of it, a less willing reliance upon accepted attitudes and views, more 'open' discussion and questioning of traditional standards of value – perhaps, too, a less docile application to study – all these have provided a challenge critical in its implications for both teacher and taught. In those classes where the disrupting elements have been allowed to dominate, the work in literature shows that study has been skimmed, depth of understanding being sacrificed for the discussions which, losing contact with the work that stimulated them, have become an end in themselves. On the other hand, where the challenge has been successfully met, the work in English takes on a new liveliness and depth; 'reading' becomes less closely hidebound and spills over into 'living' to the enrichment of both." ¹

In the course of these two paragraphs the author has demonstrated an attitude of mind somewhat at odds with the conventional examiner viewpoint, and not only in his willingness to concede that twentieth century writing may be more demanding and more challenging than the traditional classics, rather than seeing modern works as a sop to those who lack the ability to cope with the demand of 'real' literature. ² There is an awareness of what the contemporary teaching experience was actually likely to be, as opposed to the remote and donnish outlook that characterises Oxford at its worst. Here is better evidence for the contention of George Bruce that 'O' level examining is largely in the hands of teachers³ than anything that Bruce himself advances. Moreover, the emphasis of this passage makes the assertions which follow as to the position of the Cambridge Syndicate in relation to this upheaval of values and methodologies more credible than might otherwise have been the case.

"It is this movement inside the classroom, initiated by changes in the social and educational background, towards a wider field of study and a closer integration of literature and life that the syndicate by its syllabuses and the examiners by their question papers have tried to parallel, within the limits imposed by the nature of a public examination. At the same time, however, the very loosening of tradition which is illustrated by the inclusion in the syllabuses of controversial texts and the more frequent use, in the question papers, of open-ended questions inviting an individual response, have made necessary a re-appraisal of what the examination in literature can or should do, and the formulation of a 'philosophy of assessment' which will provide a basic structure for whatever changes the examination may be called upon

¹ Op.cit. p 5

² v.sup. p 338

³ v.sup. pp 153-154

to make in the future. The new freedom of approach in examination.....in no way implies a lowering of the standards of study, any more than the new freedom in the classroom necessarily implies a drop in the standard of behaviour; set books need to be read as carefully as before, answers need to be as coherently argued and illustrated; what has changed (one hopes) is that for the boy writing his answer the book has become alive, a part of his experience rather than a text to be memorised only; and for the examiner marking that answer, the basis of assessment has (or should have) become not 'How much has he remembered?' but 'How much has he understood?'¹

These encouragingly liberal sentiments are by no means undermined by the assessment technique which the author goes on to describe. In brief, they amount to a division of the marks for an essay question into three blocks of 30% each for the three underlying principles "most obviously involved in the presentation of an answer" and a bonus of 10% to be used

"for rewarding particularly successful work in.....the shaping of an answer or the development of an argument, for making an unusually sensitive analysis or perceptive comment. There is in this paper no system of penalties or deduction of marks for specific faults.....though these will of course detract from the effectiveness of an answer; the 'bonus' therefore becomes the means for distinguishing between the mediocre and the better candidate in an area not already covered by the generalised mark allocation."²

The three "underlying principles" which each carry 30% of the total mark for an essay are defined as (a) the candidate's knowledge of the text (ie the evidence he presents that the book has been read and understood); (b) the selection from and ordering of his knowledge so that it is brought to bear relevantly on the specific question set; and (c) the relationship established between the candidate and the text, his response to the book or the book's impact upon him, as made evident by explicit critical comment or even "the inarticulate sense of enjoyment (or of boredom which seep into an answer."

"What the examiners are looking for here (and too frequently fail to find) is evidence that the work has come alive, that it means something to the candidate in the terms of his own experience, that he has personal views and feelings about it..."³

Just how liberal these views are by comparison with previous attitudes may be judged from the Oxford instruction to the examiners included among the loose papers to which I have already referred.⁴ Here, for each of the three required texts, there was a 'context' question which almost invariably involved explaining or putting into the candidate's own words some section of the passage set, together with some other question

¹ Op.cit. pp 5-6

² Ibid. p 8

³ Ibid. p 7

⁴ v.sup. p 355

or questions upon it; there was also, initially at least, a compulsory essay title. The marking scheme allocated 10 marks to each context question, specifying that 7 of these were for "the first demand of a clear and accurate rendering of the original" and 3 for the remaining question(s); and 24 to each essay, giving a total of 102, though the marks awarded were to be regarded, when totalled, as a percentage mark without adjustment. Well into the nineteen-fifties there continued to be a reminder that there was no longer a credit mark as in the days of School Certificate, and that the pass mark was set at 50%; and one copy of this typescript mark scheme has in manuscript on the back the notes for minutes of a meeting held in the Chief Examiner's college rooms at which it was determined that there should be a deduction of half a mark for the first instance of each mis-spelling of a proper name. Even so mechanical an approach did not guarantee uniformity: another document among the "loose papers" gives a list of examiners for 1956 with the appropriate pass-mark in accordance with their own individual approach to marking. For the Shakespeare section of the paper, the pass-mark among fifteen examiners ranged from 13 to 18 out the possible 34, 16 being the most popular pass-mark with six adherents; for the Poetry section, from 9 to 14, among sixteen examiners, with the favourite pass-mark at 11, again with six examiners sharing this view; and for the Prose section from 13 to 16, with the bulk of the markers evenly divided between 14 and 15. It is apparent from these marks that the effective pass-mark was about 45% rather than 50% (and this indeed was the figure I was given as a schoolboy); it is also apparent that some examiners were quite unable to get the old School Certificate standards out of their heads and continued to mark work at bottom pass level at the old 35% level. One examiner indeed seems to have been quite incapable of marking in numbers, and persisted in recording his scripts as α , $\alpha-$, $\alpha--$, $\beta++$ etcetera, which were then converted for him by the Chief Examiner at 5% intervals from 80% downwards. It is, of course, perfectly possible that appropriate flexibility for recognising talent existed within this framework – but I cannot help but feel that teachers, if they could have been apprised of it, would have felt more confident with Cambridge.

Further instances of the insights the author of the Cambridge Report of 1973 clearly

had into both teaching and the minds of the candidates comes in the next section of that Report, which is headed 'Some Reasons for Failure', most notably because these are not all ascribed to inadequacies on the part of the candidates themselves. The first such reason listed is, for instance, 'Unwise Choice of Text'.

"*Chips with Everything* provides a clear example of a text which, in a lively group of boys and with enlightened teaching, can produce excellent results. Much more often, in this examination, it failed to rouse any response at all in the candidates (suggesting that it had roused none in the teacher responsible for preparing them) and produced work that was both thin and uncomprehending. It was not, for these candidates, the right text. They would have been much more successful, and it would have been possible to arrive at a truer estimate of their real capacities, if their study had been directed towards another book, the *Short Stories of our Time* for example. This is a text which has a relevance to their own experience absent from the Wesker play, and one which has proved stimulating of good work to candidates in a very wide range of ability." ¹

Modern readers are likely to be surprised, if not offended, by the apparent emphasis on the maleness of the candidature, particularly since Cambridge, (unlike the Oxford and Cambridge Joint Board for example) not only attracted significantly more entries from girls, but also found that they performed markedly better.² It is this latter element in the results, I suspect, that lies behind the emphasis on boys' performance in this Report: then as now, it was boys who were performing below their true capacity, who needed enlightened teaching, and who were liable to disruptive behaviour if discussion lessons were inadequately supervised. Girls, although the Board does not make a statement to that effect, were inherently more likely to approach the texts in the spirit for which the examiners were speaking, and thus seemed to need the guidance being offered here far less than their male counterparts.

Other subheadings under 'Some Reasons for Failure' were : (a) Unwise or unbalanced use of time; (b) Unwise choice of question; (c) Failure to read the question sufficiently carefully; (d) Inadequate preparation. The first three of these might seem to focus exclusively on weaknesses in the candidates themselves, whereas the last is obviously designed as guidance to teachers. In point of fact, all four, to a greater or lesser degree, indicate shortcomings on the part of the teachers responsible for preparing candidates for an examination, and I do not speak in the narrow sense of the NATE Survey of some eight years earlier, which suggested that teaching literature and

¹ Op.cit. p 9

² v. Appendix p 390

preparing pupils for an examination in the subject might well be incompatible activities. There is no doubt where the emphasis is placed by the author in this Report – on the personal views and feelings of the candidate which demonstrate that he is responding to the impact made upon him by the text. NATE cannot possibly have any quarrel with this. But an examination cannot be conducted without certain structural parameters; the response cannot be an uncontrolled 'stream of consciousness' but must be channelled into an articulate response to specific questions. The teacher's job, once the validity of literature examinations is granted at all, embraces not only the maximising of the impact and the unlocking of the response, but also the art of effective channelling – and it must never be forgotten that no measurement of pupil skills and attainments can be divorced from the measurement of teacher competences. 'Standards' in either without relation to the other is a fairly meaningless concept. It is a mark of the Cambridge 'full-scale' Report that it, unlike the occasionally waspish generalities of Oxford, never loses sight of that simple fact. Thus, for instance, under the heading of 'unwise use of time' we are told "some candidates even go to the absurd length of copying out each passage in its entirety before answering questions on it".¹ This odd behaviour derives from teacher instruction during the 'O' level course, to save the teacher's time when he is looking back through an exercise book or file to make an assessment for a report or in preparation for a parents' evening, that every piece of work should always have the question or instruction clearly written out at the head of it. I find it inconceivable that any teacher could be so inept as positively to instruct his pupils to follow this practice during the examination itself, but all too easy to believe that he might forget to point out that it did not, of course, apply to the exam; and this observation by the Board might serve as a useful reminder.

Under the heading "Unwise choice of question" the Report begins with a useful flash of insight:

"Most teachers (and therefore examiners, since they are drawn from the same ranks) recognise the waywardness which seems to afflict candidates in their choice of inappropriate questions, so probably little more can be done to avoid this pitfall."²

Very probably indeed, but this does not inhibit the Report from making a very useful

¹ Op.cit. p 10

² Ibid.

suggestion:

"It might be expedient...to offer some specific warning that those who have not studied the anthology (whatever it is) should *not* choose to write an answer on the poem printed on the question paper, an option which the very weakest candidates still see as being an easy one. It might also help some candidates to be given practice....in selecting the kind of question which is likely to suit best their own ability and knowledge, so avoiding the generalised questions....which they seem to believe must be easier than questions demanding detail on a specific scene or character. They could hardly be more wrong, of course: it is only the most able candidate who can organise his material successfully for the generalised theme." ¹

The heading "Inadequate preparation" also introduces a good deal of material which might usefully have been read aloud to classes in the run-up to the examination, as well as points best considered by the teacher alone.

"Far too often.....candidates see in the question some reminder of one which they have answered before, and rush into a reproduction of the material in its original form without attempting to shape it towards a new end. It was possible to deduce, for example, that many schools had (very sensibly) discussed the differences of character between Brutus and Cassius, and that many candidates had already written on this topic. When some of these came to Q.5 [Cassius and Brutus differ from each other in their opinions about Caesar. What are these opinions, and why are they so different?] they hailed it with relief and treated it as though it asked for those differences and nothing more, failing to take account of the fact that *this* question was based on the differences 'in their opinions about Caesar.' Much of the material they did offer was sound and would have gained good marks if only it had been made relevant to the question actually asked." ²

In the second category we find

"One outstanding instance of inadequate preparation is also one of the most recent in growth, and arises from the custom now apparently followed in some schools of leaving much of the preparation of one text....to the individual efforts of class members. The scripts of these candidates make it clear that, though much useful work has been done on the Shakespeare play, and though the second text.....has also been the object of close study, the third text has been left almost entirely for private reading. The predictable result is that while candidates are familiar with the narrative line of the book and can reproduce it with ease, they are unable to deal with points of interest in the construction or characterisation of the novel and have clearly never had a chance of discussing or of having explained any difficulties of background. There was, for example, in the answers to Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* a marked difference in performance between those who had obviously understood the historical setting against which the events of the novel are seen, and those for whom they seemed to exist in a vacuum, as an illustration of something vaguely labelled 'colour prejudice'....." ³

Useful as these insights are, however, both into the approach of the examiners and into the classroom methods of a period of rapid change, the greatest significance of this Report, as with the Cambridge Reports on 'O' level Language in 1957 and 1974, is

¹ Op.cit. p 10

² Ibid. p 12

³ Ibid. p 11

that it provides transcripts of complete essays at each grade, thus providing a clearer illustration of what 'standards' actually meant to the Cambridge examiners than can be conveyed in any amount of abstract theorising on performance strengths and weaknesses. As with the language instances,¹ I do not propose to quote from those instances of highly competent work which illustrate the upper grades. 'Standards', as topics of debate, are those on which pass and fail results depend, or those among the failures which specifically illustrate shortcomings in the educational process. Here, then, are two reprinted answers to this question from the paper of June 1971:

"Choose any two important occasions in the play when people are persuaded to change their minds and the course of events is thereby altered. Give an account of both occasions, making the consequences clear."

The first was graded a borderline pass, on the C/D boundary; the second as an unquestioned failure on the D/E boundary. Both are quoted in full, as completed answers.

"Two important occasions in the play when people are persuaded to change their minds – (i) In the beginning of the play there is a commotion in the street where the mob is rejoicing at Caesar's triumph over Pompey's blood. But however the two tribunes Flavius and Marullus who were in favour of Pompey were driving them away from the streets.

The persuasion really took place in Marullus' speech 'wherefore rejoice'. In this speech Marullus asked them if they remembered how they used to climb up on their widows and chimney tops to see Pompey pass the streets of Rome and how they used to make a collective shout all together, but today are rejoicing over his same blood, he calls them blocks and stones. At the end of his speech he told them to go home weep and pray to the gods to delay the plague. At this speech the people were forced to change their minds. (ii) Antony persuaded them to change their minds again. After Caesar was killed Brutus went to the pulpit and explained why he killed Caesar. The people applauded and made noises like 'live Brutus, live, live. They also called Caesar a tyrant etc. But when Antony went to speak in Caesar's funeral, he appealed to the emotions of the crowd, he told them of Caesar's glories and the good he had done to Rome. They considered his speech and some of them began to turn on his side. He also tried to make them come on his side by using the term 'honourable men' which was disgusted to the crowd. More over they were struck with hatred for the conspirators when Antony showed them Caesar's body 'marred with traitors'. His vesture all cut up. But it was only after he had showed them the will, they nearly went mad and decided to burn seek and kill the conspirators and their houses. To prove this. They met a man going to Caesar's funeral and because his name was Cinna decided to 'tear him for his bad verses.'²

This really is an excellent example of borderline work. It fulfills the demands of the question satisfactorily but clumsily. There are appropriate quotations but they leave a

¹ v.sup. pp 270-273 and 311-312

² Op.cit. p 31

nagging doubt in the reader's mind as to whether the candidate has really understood them. The reference to 'delaying the plague', for example, does not really make sense without the following line 'Which needs must light on this ingratitude', and the concluding reference to Cinna does not really make the situation clear. And, of course, for the purists, there are the failures to close inverted commas after quotations, the use of a lower case 'r' for Rome, and a variety of punctuation errors. Nevertheless, these infelicities apart, the candidate does demonstrate a knowledge of what the play is about, together with some sense of involvement with the action; and his selection of two appropriate incidents as the title demands is good in that it enables him to fit the two together into a continuous narrative. It would be a rather harsh sense of justice that pushed this script on to the fail side of the borderline, particularly as the essay is apparently typical of the candidate's overall performance – 'a borderline answer.... from a borderline pass script' is the verdict of the Report – whereas the second essay is an example of a fail essay from a 'safe pass' script.¹

"It would seem that, at least, on most of the occasions when decisions are called for, and the wrong one is taken, Brutus is the party responsible. In the words of Swinburne, he is a 'typical and ideal republican' and yet he is also convinced of his own reason and inability to do wrong."

When the conspirators are gathered at Brutus's house, Cassius, Casca, Mettellus Cimber, Ligarius, Trebonius, Cinna and the suggestion is made that Cicero the Senator might be included in the plot to assassinate Julius Caesar, as his wisdom and 'grey hairs' would add respect and win public favour to it. Brutus puts down the idea. Cicero he says, will never join anything that other men have started. And yet, are not the reasons given for the inclusion of Cicero precisely those given for that of Brutus? And is not Brutus guilty of those criticisms which he levels against Cicero. Brutus almost demands his own way, not out of spite and childishness, but through a conviction that he is right, as he may well be on occasions; he is an idealist and a republican. His answer is '....Not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more.' He makes no pretence to be a democrat and thus is justified in believing that any decision he takes must go through, for he is convinced that he is right, and it must then be for the good of the state.

The other conspirators then agree not to have Cicero as they had previously wanted, with the result that opinion was easily turned against them: Cicero may have made an excellent match for the sharp-tongued Antony. He might, too, have added better planning through-out to the plot. The conspirators gave way to Brutus when he suggested that they should move down from the hill above Philippi to the plain, saying that the enemy would be gathering men 'en route' and that if they moved down straight away they could catch the armies of Octavius and Antony while they were still tired from marching. Cassius and Messala argue with Brutus, but the former is in no mood to quarrel after the events of the previous day. And thus, although Brutus gains success over Octavius, the conspirators are defeated.

¹ Op.cit. p 27

Brutus was a man with great integrity – in the words of Antony: 'this was a man' but the haste brought about by his fanatical ambition to establish Rome as an ideal republic led to failure, where thought and trust would not have done."¹

This instance of failure may, I suspect, might come as something of a surprise to critics of standards. There are linguistic faults, the use of 'the' for 'they', for instance, which is almost certainly the result of writing in a hurry; and there is a more serious error in the line 'Is not Brutus guilty of those criticisms that he levels against Cicero' than the omission of the question mark. But in the main this is a competent piece of writing from a candidate who has clearly understood the play and is capable of deploying his knowledge coherently. The trouble, of course, is that the specific requirements of the title are pushed into the background, and the two examples of persuasion are on the fringe of the action rather than central to its development. This might be no more than the arrogance of a candidate determined to avoid the 'standard line' by not writing about the arguments as to whether Antony should be allowed to live, or to speak at the funeral; but it reads far more like an essay on Brutus which has been somewhat clumsily adapted to the needs of the examination paper, and its failure is particularly notable in respect of the consequences of the persuasion, since the first offered here is purely hypothetical, and the second clearly defective in that Brutus makes his point by his personal victory. What is at issue here is the degree of primacy to be afforded to the precise objectives of the question as opposed to an indication of competence at understanding the text and the complexities of characterisation. Where one is dealing with a competitive examination, as opposed to encouraging pupils to write about a text being critically studied, the answer is straightforward. Questions must be answered in direct accordance with their own internal parameters, and where these are in no way open-ended, the candidate who seeks to manipulate them to his own advantage must be penalised. It was sensible of the author of this Report to choose this as an exemplary instance of the kind of answer that does not satisfy examiners: it is exactly the sort of answer that a particular kind of candidate (and invariably a 'safe-pass' candidate as in this instance) tends to be rather proud of, and its inclusion is therefore likely to be of particular benefit to both teachers and pupils. Nevertheless, this essay has

¹ Op.cit. p 32

something positive to say about standards, and the argument that they were declining derives no benefit at all from it. A similar reaction. I think, will be aroused by another instance of a fail grade answer from a bare pass script – on this occasion dealing with a question on Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale*, also from the June 1971 paper:

"Show from this tale that Chaucer was a very observant man, who had read widely and thought a great deal about life, and who also had a shrewd and kindly sense of humour."

The answer reads as follows:

"Chaucer shows that he had travelled a lot all through the tale, describing things with great detail and adding small details which show his knowledge. He describes the widow's little cottage with great detail showing that he been in many of these old peasant cottages during his travels. He knew how these peasants made a living on what little they had. He knew what animals they kept and how the people worked during the day. He was no stranger to the country as a learned man in these lines might be, being able to give a fanciful but good description of the cock and the fox.

He had obviously read very widely. He is able to give a never-ending supply of quotes from famous authors before him such as Cato and Cicero.

He had taken as his style the *Nova Poetica*, written by Geoffrey de Vinsauf which was a work which set down principles for the writing of poems, a way in which to elaborate them. He sticks closely to De Vinsauf's principles using nearly all of them very well. This helps to make this story the best Chaucer has written – *Oppositio* – using the work to deny something but mean it –

'The goute never lette her fro to dance
N'apoplexie ne shente nat her heed.'

This is just one example of how Chaucer uses this work to good effect.

He thought a good deal about life. He had travelled far and obviously enjoyed being in the open. He enjoyed speaking to people, finding out things that he did not know. He must have learned all about the humours and laxatives from peasant women as he passed through the countryside.

He had a shrewd sense of humours. He made fun of another of Geoffrey de Vinsauf's principles in the *Nova Poetica*. The principle of *Descriptio*. De Vinsauf had said 'to carry the description of the full splendour from the top of the head to the bottom of the toes' meaning this to be for the description of a woman. Chaucer uses it to describe Chauntecleer, thus making fun of him.

'His coomb was redder than the fyn coral
And batailled as it were a castel-wall.
His bill was black, and as jet it shone.
Lyk assure were his legges and eek his toons.'

When Chauntecleer has been seized by the fox he joked that Chauntecleer lived more for delight than to multiply the world."¹

At a very superficial glance this might seem to be a competent effort. Any more searching scrutiny reveals a candidate who has been distanced from the text he was supposed to study by a scholarly edition providing notes which he barely understood,

¹ Op.cit. p 38

or by a teacher whose enthusiasm for the background information on Chaucer made far more impact on this particular student than his comments on the book itself. At all events, this is another instance of defective preparation from which teachers are more likely to learn than students; but it is also a clear statement from the examiners that a little learning is a dangerous thing to parade before them, and that half-digested material parroted like the Summoner's latin tags is unlikely to impress them. In other words, one of the standards that they were firmly upholding is that of academic integrity – which is exactly that standard which they must be supposed to let slip if the argument of declining standards is to be based upon unwarranted examiner tolerance. To return to the four yearly cycle of Examiners' Reports from Oxford, those of 1976 and 1980 both contain material relating to the changes in the structure of the paper which occurred over a period of three years beginning in 1968, and to which I referred earlier,¹ and thus directly continue a debate which had developed from a rare attempt by the Delegacy actively to conduct a survey of client reaction to its examination provision. The report of 1968 was the first to deal with this matter, and opened with the words:

"This year saw important changes in the Selected Literature paper. The traditional context questions were retained in the Shakespeare section.. An alternative to the traditional context question was added to the Poetry section; this consisted of a set of questions based on a sustained passage of verse.....of approximately thirty lines. In the Prose section the old style context questions disappeared and for them was substituted one long passage from each prose text on which a set of questions was built.

The alternative question on each of the Poetry texts was attempted by one third of the candidates and on the whole the quality of work done on the new style was better than that on the old in the same paper. This new form of question was introduced to encourage the careful examination, from the evidence in the longer extract, of the peculiar qualities of poetic statement. The questions were designed not only to test the understanding of the theme of the poem or extract and the meanings of unusual words, or words unusually used, but also the simple appraisal of the poetic devices which give poetry some of its distinct appeal.

In the Prose section the traditional context question was dispensed with to eliminate the element of chance when candidates had to 'place' a short passage from a long prose text. The longer passages included this year were all key passages and if the text had been carefully read the placing in context should have provided little difficulty. This was confirmed by the work of the candidates."²

This is a serviceable explanation of the changes introduced without prior discussion with clients, but it does not go very far towards providing justification. The requirements

¹ v.sup. p 340

² Op.cit. p 24

of the new approach to the Poetry section do not significantly differ from those of the old; indeed it is difficult to think of any approach to the examination of a poetry text that would significantly differ; though the expression may perhaps be less academic and formal than before. The Prose section seems simply to have been made easier for the candidates, by ensuring that the thorough reading of the whole text was replaced by an emphasis on 'key passages'. There is an underlying, though unstated, feeling about this passage that an attempt is being made to deal with an increasing number of candidates who could not cope with, or were being inadequately prepared for, the paper as it had been – which is not the same thing as saying that the standards of English teaching had declined. It *may* be the same thing as saying that the standards of teachers and examiners were growing farther apart, and if this is the correct conclusion, then the observations on the relationship between the two in later Reports become even more ambiguous in interpretation than they already appear.

By 1972 the 'new-style' context questions had replaced what the examiners (and Oxford English tutors in general) called 'gobbets', in all three sections, and the freedom to answer two such questions on any given text as opposed to one passage question and one essay had been extended. The Report for that year acknowledges that the change has not met with unanimous approval:

"The change was generally welcomed although, as was expected, some teachers of English thought the departure from the formal essay question to be a retrograde step. This latter criticism has grown in volume and the English Committee of the Delegates has given much thought to it. A compromise may be achieved by a different structuring of the questions on the longer extracts to include an extended piece of writing which will test sustained thought about, and handling of, material printed in the question papers."

It is interesting to speculate whether the phrase "as was expected" relates to a known body of teachers whose opinions had been canvassed, or to an assumption about the conservatism of the teaching profession in general and the reluctance of some of its elder practitioners to depart from the comfortable and convenient ruts of previous years. In either case, however, the projected compromise was hardly likely to placate all objectors, and the response, as indicated in the following report, was eminently predictable.

¹ Op. cit. p 43

In terms of standards it is not easy to determine the effect of the proposed modification: on the one hand "sustained thought about, and handling of, material printed in the question papers" could be interpreted as a watering-down of the earlier requirement that candidates should come into the examination room knowing their texts; an argument that is still heard, and by no means entirely without justification, with regard to the contemporary move towards 'open-text' examinations; on the other hand preparation of candidates to deal with such a requirement, even if a tendency to rely upon 'key passages' might make prediction reasonably accurate, could hardly be described as a reduction in the responsibilities of English teachers, and should, in fact, have been a more appropriate demand than that of preparing students for the 'hoop-jumping' exercise of gobbets and standardised essays.

It would also be interesting to discover, though again the evidence no longer exists, whether this compromise was the brainchild of the Delegacy's English Committee, or the result of some form of consultation, though I strongly suspect that this Report would say so if the latter were the reality.

As I observed above, the Report for 1976 reflects the almost inevitable result of compromise:

"The principal modification to the format of the paper that has taken place over the last three years has been the introduction of some context questions that require extended answers. Such questions have gone some way towards meeting the criticism that greeted the abolition of the compulsory essay; but not, in the eyes of many of our teachers, far enough. A few years ago opinion seemed to be divided fairly evenly over the question of bringing back a compulsory essay in each section; now opinion among teachers, examiners and awarders would appear to be hardening in favour of such a move. Clearly the final decision of the English Committee will be a difficult one, but the problem is under constant discussion. It may be that a compromise can be agreed: perhaps a compulsory essay only on Section C; perhaps one compulsory essay which candidates may choose from any of the three Sections."

Once again it would be interesting to know why it was the Prose section that was picked out for a possible isolated return to the compulsory essay; my own conjecture, based on memories of teaching during the period, is that candidates probably found it a good deal more difficult to manipulate the tools of criticism on a substantial chunk of prose than they did when faced with Shakespeare or a poetry text, and also that many

¹ Op.cit. p 35

teachers found problems in the task of improving this situation. Clearly the idea that each candidate must write at least one essay on any one of the prepared texts is the best compromise in terms of giving each candidate the maximum degree of flexibility to display his or her talents to the best advantage; but from the viewpoint of those whose reaction to the essay is as hard-set as that of the legendary addiction of some of their fictional colleagues to Rugby football and cold baths as essential to the forming of character; or from those engaged in the task of the Award and anxious that decisions on the grades of candidates should not be complicated by uncertainties as to the comparability of one question with another; such a compromise was no more likely to be successful than the previous attempt at reconciling opposites. And so, in fact, it proved.

The 1980 Report had reached an impasse and, in expressing it, provided a very illuminating comment on the argument about priorities between the teaching and examining functions.

"Controversy over whether a compulsory essay should be reintroduced for each text is still with us, certainly in the sense that many teachers have strong feelings – on either side. For what it is worth, schools may be interested to know that a fair majority of both the examiners themselves and the English Committee is in favour of such a reintroduction. But the evidence produced by the questionnaire sent to all centres in 1979 shows that there is roughly a two-to-one majority amongst English Departments for retaining the present form of the paper. If it is true, as the Delegacy has always claimed, that its job is to examine what the schools wish to be examined, we have a clear duty to abide (albeit somewhat reluctantly) with such a majority view. There let the matter rest – at least for the time being."

What is quite clear from this passage is the conviction of professional examiners that they know better than the teachers, and that the truth which "the Delegacy has always claimed" may, in fact, be based on a false premise. The doctrine that examinations will damage teaching in general, and the teaching of literature in particular, if they are allowed to dictate terms to classroom practitioners, used almost to be holy writ among the majority of teachers before the advent of the National Curriculum, and was certainly the basis of much of the educational theory of the period under review, but an investigation into standards cannot afford simply to take it for granted.

The reluctance of the Oxford Delegacy to have the fabric of its papers dictated by a

¹ Op.cit. p 39

majority must not be seen as an inevitable knee-jerk reaction: the possibility that a fairer comparison with the examiners' position is that of the doctor who is expected to endorse the patient's own diagnosis must be considered and evaluated.

Material on the actual structure of the paper apart, the 1976 Report is perhaps more specifically and harshly critical than had been the case for some years; nor is the criticism confined to the candidates:

"There are still too many candidates who spoil their chances of obtaining a high grade by not obeying the rubric – often by doing two essays on one of the set books: this mistake could presumably be rectified by more thorough preparation for the paper."¹

and there may be a similar implication in the remarks on poetry, which, as usual, was clearly the least confidently tackled section of the paper. Indeed, there is a repetition of the earlier implication of an offstage debate on the wisdom of continuing with it:

"Despite the difficulty that many candidates find with this section of the paper, there is a widespread feeling among teachers and examiners that encouragement in the comprehension and elementary criticism of poetry is a very important part of education in literature".²

So, of course, one would hope – but this passage follows on immediately from one which reads:

"There were some schools' entries which clearly showed that poetry questions were answered with enthusiasm and sensitivity. At the other extreme there were candidates who showed a total lack of understanding of poetry, but who were able to make at least an attempt to answer questions on Shakespeare or the Prose"³

It is the contrast between "schools' entries" at one end of this piece of polarisation and "candidates" at the other which can be taken, to put it no more strongly, that the teaching of poetry is defective in some schools, just as the preparation of candidates is to be blamed for the shortcomings of those who clearly did not understand the rubric; and a similar implication may well be detectable behind the summary which followed of examination scripts dealing with *The Pardoner's Tale*:

"A large number of candidates who chose the Chaucer text did not succeed in turning anything into 'clear modern English'. Depressingly, a substantial proportion of the answers was gibberish, with nothing but an odd word almost accidentally 'translated'. If they are to answer well, candidates have to show their knowledge of Chaucer's vocabulary and constructions, and also to write a piece of convincing modern English. Few did so. All candidates are advised to read their modernizations through to see that they make some kind of over-all sense."⁴

¹ Op.cit. p 35

² Ibid. p 36

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid. pp 36-37

Commentary on the Prose section begins with a somewhat illogical observation:

"The merging of the C and D papers[sic], so that this section of the paper now covers novels and drama other than Shakespeare, has meant that the set texts vary considerably in length and complexity.....for instance *Oliver Twist* contrasted sharply with *The Browning Version*It was difficult to frame questions that were approximately comparable on two such varied texts."¹

The business of comparability is, of course, a serious one; and I know from personal experience that the revision committees which scrutinise proposed questions for future papers do in fact compare, in terms of conjectural accessibility to the candidate, not only the questions which the candidate may be able to treat as optional alternatives but also those set on the same texts in recent years which the candidate may have encountered in mock examinations.

What is odd here is the association of this problem with the merger of sections C and D. Since, prior to the merger, the two sections were specific alternatives for the third question to be attempted, the examiners would presumably have had to take exactly the same pains to see that they were of comparable difficulty. Perhaps the sub-text here is that a modern drama text is to be regarded as 'a soft option', since the writer goes on to observe "the more demanding the text, the closer attention it gets from teacher and pupils, while the shorter and apparently simple book seems to be neglected", and the Report concludes with two remarks that require comment from a survey of this kind:

"Examiners have been pleased to see how many candidates obviously still enjoy encountering a major novel, and it has been the novels over the past three years that have produced the best work by candidates on this section of the paper. It is, of course, easy to criticize the relatively conservative choice of texts on the C section; but it is much more difficult to name new works of comparably high quality, accessible to the pupil of this age and ability range, available from publishers at a reasonable price, and satisfactorily examinable – this last, perhaps, a point often ignored by those who comment adversely on the prose texts which the delegacy offers for study."²

Since we have repeatedly been informed by successive writers of this sequence of Reports that Section C elicits the best work, this emphasis on 'the major novel' as the most effective stimulus within that section establishes it firmly as the most influential aspect of literature teaching so far as this particular spokesman for the delegacy is concerned; and the earlier implicit criticisms of teacher inadequacy come out into the

¹ Op.cit. p 37

² Ibid. p 38

open with this clear assumption of superior knowledge of the problem. Yet this is very definitely at odds with the concept that the Delegacy's examinations reflect the approach of the teachers who prepare the candidates, and, perhaps even more significantly, it takes as axiomatic the view that not all works of literary merit are 'satisfactorily examinable'. The various educational theorists who campaigned throughout the forty-four year period of this survey against the examining of literature on the grounds that it distorted and damaged the subject; and who, consciously or unconsciously, echoed those doubts of the Norwood Committee which stand at the head of the second part of the first chapter of this thesis; would find ready ammunition in this conclusion, and legitimate grounds for doubting the sincerity of the claims of the Delegacy to be consumer-led.

It may even be that there was some such reaction to this Report, (though no such evidence survives), since the next one, in 1980, goes out of its way to assert the principle in question in a passage which I have already quoted¹ from its first paragraph: "If it is true, as the Delegacy has always claimed, that its job is to examine what the schools wish to be examined....." This is completely unambiguous, unless, of course, one takes the view that putting the remark in the form of a question, and choosing the verb "claimed" rather than, for example, "believed", places a very large question mark over the sincerity of the assertion. What follows is, however, although directly relevant to this enquiry, unquestionably fairly bleak:

"Whilst it could perhaps be claimed that the general level of personal response has risen slightly since the last report was published, there is no evidence of any corresponding rise in the general level of literacy"²

and comments on candidate error in dealing with the various individual texts on offer (provided this year in much more detail than in any previous report) do seem to support the view that some of those entered for the paper had a remarkably limited vocabulary, or has given up altogether on the idea that any aspect of English Literature could be expected to be comprehensible.

Again, there is the discrepancy between candidates who do badly and schools which do well, as in:

¹ v.sup. p 375

² Op.cit. p.39

"a significant proportion of the candidates who attempted the Keats questions was incapable of understanding or appreciating this poet. Attempts to answer ...were frequently feeble and sometimes ludicrous, although a small number of school entries reached a high standard and scored consistently well."¹

which may well be another way of saying that some of the teachers who prepared their pupils for Keats were not adequate to the task.

Another implicit criticism from the 1976 Report has become overt by 1980:

"Frequently the longer books (eg *Oliver Twist*) seem to have been more effectively taught than the shorter ones (eg *The Old Man and the Sea*). We wonder whether teachers in some centres allow their pupils to do work unassisted on this section, on the grounds that the book chosen seems easier (or more approachable) than texts in the Shakespeare or Poetry sections. If this is the case, we think the view to be a misguided one. Section C usually throws up higher marks than either A or B, provided the candidates have been taught."²

Finally, the writer picks up the point from the end of the previous report. The whole passage given above [page 377, note²] is repeated, and the following conclusion is then added:

"These comments remain true (and indeed the problem of buying new texts, as all schools will know, has grown considerably greater). But one recent text, Golding's *The Inheritors*, proved an extraordinarily happy choice, and produced much excellent work. We hope for more such choices in the future, and are always grateful when (albeit rarely) we receive positive suggestions from schools."³

The sympathetic remark on the financial stringencies affecting schools from the mid-seventies onwards will strike a chord with anyone who was teaching English at that time, but it is hardly the key phrase in the original comment: and however impressed the examiners may have been by the response of candidates to *The Inheritors* when it was first set in 1978, it appeared only once more, in 1982/3, under the system introduced in 1980 that each text should stay on the syllabus for two consecutive years. The comment appears more in the light of a bridge-building exercise after adverse reaction to the original paragraph, and the inclusion of the phrase 'albeit rarely' makes clear that the Delegates were not normally in the habit of actively soliciting constructive comment.

The final Examiners' Report from Oxford was to appear in 1984, but before that came a flurry of observations from the Cambridge Syndicate.

¹ Op.cit. p 40

² Ibid. p 42

³ Ibid. p 44

Cambridge Reports for 1980 and 1981 were in the form *Criticisms of the Question Papers.....with Comments by the Subject Committees and with Examiners' Notes on the Work of Candidates* and tend, therefore, to be related very specifically to the particular questions set in a given year, rather than to wider generalities of greater interest to an investigation such as this. Nevertheless, some points of interest are usually to be found in any such Report, and in 1980 there is a direct light on the point that seems to be hovering on the verge of becoming a suggestion from the Oxford Examiners, that of ceasing to make a poetry text compulsory. The Cambridge Syndicate had tried exactly that, grouping all texts except Shakespeare in Section B of the paper, and requiring candidates to answer four questions on at least three texts from the paper as a whole. In 1980, the Examiners Notes contain the comment:

"Some disquiet was expressed that candidates should be able to take a syllabus consisting of Shakespeare and two novels, and there is growing support for the study of a poetry text (not Chaucer) being made compulsory." ¹

Incidentally, the same paragraph makes clear, not for the first or last time, that "four answers from at least three texts" is intended to mean exactly that, and that candidates normally answer two questions on that text with which they feel most comfortable. On this occasion the examiners use the words "It was apparent that no advantage was derived from studying more than three books" and one wonders why some teachers spread their efforts, and those of their pupils, over a greater number. The obvious answer, that a bright and enthusiastic class can easily cope with more than three books in the time available for literature in a two year GCE course, does not really meet the question, since, while it is undoubtedly true, there seems no good reason why more than three of the books they could profitably read should be taken from the list offered by one particular group of examiners in one particular year; and if the intention is to ensure that they have an additional choice of questions, it seems a redundant provision for able pupils who should certainly not only be able to cope with two questions on one of the books, but might well welcome the opportunity since a single question would be most unlikely to exhaust their ability to write effectively about it. Those students who

¹ Op.cit. p 8

might well have difficulty in coping with more than one approach to the same text are those who would be most likely to suffer from the effects of being prepared for four texts rather than three, a point which was emphasised when the topic was repeated in the 1983 Report:

"It should be pointed out that studying four texts is not necessarily an advantage, especially for weaker candidates." ¹

To return to 1980, this matter of the selection of texts was not the only area implicitly or directly critical of classroom practice.

"It is apparent that much good work is being done by many teachers, whose quality can be readily recognised in the answers of their pupils; but there is also some disquiet among examiners at the number of examples of poor or misguided or foolish teaching. Some teachers have obviously never given sufficient advice on basic examination or essay technique. Some, as commented on in previous reports, seek to interpret literature of a past age in the light of current sociological jargon.....or diligently search for homosexual relationships where none exist. What was most notable this time, however, was the increase in the search for symbolic interpretation. Of course there is symbolism in literature, and good teachers draw the attention of their pupils to its existence. What was disturbing was the frequent enumeration of symbols without any development of those symbols, or any relating of them to the questions – or even to the text." ²

Another minor light on examiner reaction to changes in the system occurs in the comment:

"There was, as usual, much high quality work produced by the best candidates, who showed a pleasing ability to quote accurately from the novels. However, examiners still regret the disappearance of Grade 1, as many good candidates no longer have enough to aim at." ³

The reference here is the replacement of the earlier nine point scale, of which grades 1 to 6 represented descending levels of what had originally been a single pass status. The system which replaced it and lasted until the the introduction of GCSE in 1988 had only five points of which only A to C represented levels of the original pass. Obviously any work which would have received a grade 1 under the older system would have been awarded an A under the newer, but so also would work which would earlier have been given only a grade 2. The demand to isolate and reward excellence is never entirely silenced, and the comparatively recent reintroduction of an extra top grade in the form of the GCSE A* is a case in point. Yet the alleged ground for such a qualification, that "good candidates no longer have enough to aim at" is not

¹ Op.cit. (1983) p 9

² Op.cit (1980) p 9

³ Ibid. p 8

supported by any proof at all. There is some evidence, and I shall return to this theme in my final chapter, that emphasis on ever more refined levels of achievement for the tiny minority capable of achieving them has a depressing effect upon those who have no chance of attaining such heights; but I can find none whatever to support the idea that gifted pupils make less effort because they can obtain the top available grade without really trying. In English particularly, but not, I think, by any means in isolation, it is really remarkably difficult to imagine a candidate saying to himself or herself "I have said enough about the comparative influence of the witches and of Lady Macbeth to get an A – I shan't bother to write another paragraph drawing attention to the evidence of Macbeth's own ambition and susceptibility to temptation"; and if such a candidate actually exists I should hate to have to teach him English. For a really good candidate the problem is keeping within the time scale of the examination, and avoiding the tedium automatically implicit in finishing well within the time allowed. Yet the old influence of the Universities and the concept that the prior function of examinations is to pinpoint their quarry, which I examined in Chapter Two, is never far below the surface. That an ever-increasing proportion of the school population was entering for English Literature, making a reasonable shot at the examination, and deriving both benefit and some pleasure from the experience, is far more important than the actual grade label to be attached to those who are, in any case, most likely to go to A level studies; and it is mildly disappointing that the Cambridge examiners, who often seem enlightened on these matters, should be still hankering after the past.

Nevertheless, the comment is far less significant than the strictures on teaching practice and should not be allowed to push those remarks into the shade, particularly since the topic, although not apparent in 1981, was notably to the forefront in 1983.

"Too frequently examiners comment on the failure of candidates to read the questions, to answer the whole of them, or to answer the questions set. Many answers are unplanned and have no sense of direction. There are too few children who seem to have actually written, or at any rate had marked and criticised, a literary essay. This leads on to the matter of teaching. It is always obvious when a Centre has been well taught, but the converse is also the case. One examiner wrote of a Centre that produced "learned notes and obsessive and slanted teaching.....irrelevantly full of 'the psychological implications of colour and furnishings.'" This examiner went on "It all makes one terrifyingly aware of the teacher's responsibilities, and of how helpless

even quite able candidates are in the face of incompetence and idiosyncrasy." ¹

It is almost a relief to move on, at the end of the same paragraph, to a more routine instance of incompetence:

"Schools should also ensure that they are studying the correct syllabus. We always have too many occasions when candidates discover when they get into the examination room that they can write on only two (sometimes even on only one) of the books on the paper." ²

Just how frequent such instances of incompetence were on a national scale there is no means of knowing – but if this comment is to be taken literally then one board alone took for granted that there would be more than one instance a year; and if that is typical, then over the public examination system as a whole this might easily amount to five hundred pupils a year whose chances of a GCE pass in English Literature had been thrown away by the indolence of teachers who had not checked the syllabus that they were engaged to teach. Statistics on pass-rates immediately take on a new dimension in the light of paragraphs like this; and another paragraph, a little later in the text, creates a disturbing contrast between teacher and taught:

"Where the writing of English is still taught and not left to chance at this level, there is general improvement in presentation, spelling, sentence construction, punctuation and vocabulary. There were a larger number of really fluent scripts. Paragraphing still presents problems, however. Many candidates show quite remarkable maturity and are increasingly aware of the world around us and have intelligent and interesting things to say about today's problems, both of personal relationships and international and political affairs." ³

In the light of that sort of encomium it is difficult to avoid the implication that, if there really has been any sort of decline in standards, it has occurred in teaching rather than in learning, and that the solution might well lie in improving the quality of recruitment to the profession and the morale of those already there, rather than in imposing governmental control on the curriculum and on the examination system.

Quality of teaching would, of course, be an even more difficult thing to measure than some other of the aspects of educational standards with which I have concerned myself – all that can be said with certainty is that at no time during the entire period from Matthew Arnold to today can it be said to have been uniformly inspirational.

1 Op. cit. p 9

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid. p 16

The Report for 1981, which I passed over, had very little to contribute. As with the report of 1980 none of the very few criticisms actually brought by schools were in any way memorable, and the Examiners' Notes section begins with the words "The only remarkable thing about the paper this year is that there seems nothing remarkable to report", and certainly there is very little which contributes to our understanding of standards. The remainder of the paragraph, on reactions to the texts on offer, does, however, give some insight into the attitudes of teachers and examiners to the task in front of them.

"The inclusion of *The Shrew* on the syllabus was a leap in the dark, but was generally felt to be successful. There was certainly evidence that the candidates had enjoyed it. However, there were also objections to it, first on the grounds that, as many candidates will only ever read one Shakspeare play, they should be offered a rather better example, and secondly because it offers, in the words of one examiner, "such a shameful view of marriage and children." As for Chaucer, apparently too many schools still fail to realise that knowledge of the original text is essential in any good answer. *Pride and Prejudice* was generally felt to be rather too sophisticated for 'O' level candidates (though the best showed evidence of real enjoyment.)"¹

There seems something a little bizarre about these comments – since *Julius Caesar* was offered as an alternative, why choose to teach *The Taming of the Shrew* if you feel that it is an inadequate illustration of Shakespeare's craftsmanship. It can hardly have been the standard argument about the necessity of utilising material in the stock-cupboard, since this is clearly the first time that the board had set the text, and there can hardly be a school in the country which does not have *Julius Caesar* to hand.

Why, when your candidates are entered for an syllabus which does not insist upon a poetry text of any description, choose to require them to study Chaucer if you are not prepared to teach it in the original? And in view of the examiners' insistence upon the quality of response to *Pride and Prejudice*, is it possible that it was some teachers, rather than pupils, for whom the text was too sophisticated? Or are we confronted here by assumptions about responses to literature rather than evidence?

The last Examiners' Reports available to me during the life-span of GCE 'O' level, are those published by Oxford in 1984 and 1986. The first of these begins with an acknowledgement that Oxford is beginning to lose its place in the forefront of the list

¹ Op.cit. pp 8-9

of examining boards and moving towards that position which was eventually to see it losing its autonomy altogether and becoming a mere subsidiary of the Cambridge board

"There has been a reduction over the last four years in the number of candidates entering for this examination; and a small but unhappy reduction also in the quality of answers submitted.

Too many candidates simply do not know their texts well enough (only three have to be studied, and it is not unreasonable to expect a knowledge of them to be precise rather than vague); and too many candidates convey their response to their reading through generalised assertions rather than precise demonstration. the second point applies particularly to essay questions: and we should like to remind centres that in 1986 and 1987 at least one essay question will need to be attempted from each section." ¹

With those last words the Oxford board indicates that it has at last resolved the long internal argument over the nature of compulsory questions, and that the experiment of allowing candidates to rely entirely upon reactions to lengthy extracts from their set texts is over. Or, to put it another way, that the paper is to revert, for its final two years, to a format almost indistinguishable from that with which it began, as a looking-glass image of School Certificate. It is perhaps entirely fitting that this news is accompanied by a commentary on the year's scripts that might have been written at any date between the two extremes; and the initial paragraph on Section A [Shakespeare] has a similar timeless quality.

"It should be noted that essay questions in this section are of three kinds: the first requires a scene to be described, the second usually relates in some way to characters, and the third involves a consideration of the play as a whole. The third kind, because of its relatively wide scope, is particularly challenging; and the best work in response to such questions is a pleasure for the examiners to mark and reflects great credit upon the pupils and their teachers. However, some weaker candidates unwisely choose such questions under the mistaken impression that it will allow them to get away with mere generalities; and it must be stressed that this third type of essay question is by no means a soft option." ²

The remainder of the Report is a detailed assessment of the shortcomings of answers to each of the questions on the paper. Predictably the examiners had been unable to resist the temptation to set George Orwell's novel in 1984; equally predictably it proved "by far the most popular text, and it produced the best work." ³ Even so, the examiners were disappointed by the unsatisfactory answers to the passage-based questions:

¹ Op.cit. p 47

"So rarely was the question tackled correctly that when a candidate gave such an answer as 'Parsons shows by his servile glance at the telescreen that he is trying to impress the unseen listening Thought Police rather than Winston by his admission of guilt', one was gratified." ¹

If there is a theme which runs through the responses it might well be the concern for the limited vocabularies of candidates which takes the form of listing those words which had clearly not been understood. No attempt is made to link them, and I may be jumping to conclusions, but it seems to me that there is a connection between the comment on *The Pardoner's Tale* "Many.....candidates failed altogether to explain 'boghte agayn'" ²; "Gray's 'Elegy'.....seemed almost totally incomprehensible to many" ³; and the following comment on Shaw's *St. Joan*, that long-standing pillar of Section C of this paper:

"....the work on it was often abysmal. Many candidates seemed to know nothing of the setting of the play or of the emaning of such key words as 'heresy', 'perjury' (souls pass through perjury before going to heaven), 'sorcery', 'witchcraft', 'saint'.many candidates did not know what the 'inquiry' was, and could not differentiate it from the 'trial'...or the 'canonisation'." ⁴

As I observed in the opening chapter of this thesis, ⁵ it is simply not possible to rely upon the knowledge of religious terminology and belief that authors used to take for granted – and words of this kind and the system of thought which makes use of them need to be carefully glossed by those who teach the younger generations born and brought up in an increasingly secular society. As was the case with the Cambridge Report of the previous year, these criticisms are, in effect, more pointers to inadequate teaching than to a decline in the level of comprehension manifested by pupils.

The final Oxford Report of 1986, the penultimate year of 'O' level, begins with an indication of the distribution of candidates between the grades, and the mark equivalent for each grade.¹ It is a pity, for our purposes of detailed comparison, that this information was not made available on a regular basis – but coming as it does at the end of the sequence, it does provide a clear indication of prevailing standards at that time.

¹ Op.cit. p 50

⁴ Ibid. p 51

² Ibid. p 48

⁵ v.sup. p 42

³ Ibid. p 47

⁶ Op.cit. p 7

Grade	Marks	%	Cumulative %
A	100-50	9.2	9.2
B	49-39	17.8	27.0
C	38-28	32.1	59.1
D	27-24	8.6	67.7
E	23-19	15.6	83.3
Unclassified	18- 0	16.7	100.0

If this was anything like a common system, it would certainly explain why the Cambridge examiners wanted to bring back the old Grade 1 or its equivalent distinction category: the inability to distinguish between candidates who might, in theory, have been separated by half the marks available must have been galling to those who longed to reward the tiny handful at the top end who were capable of really graceful and imaginative work. Yet such discrimination would have been devoted to what is already almost the smallest category of achievement. If discrimination were called for, would it not have been better directed to that enormous and amorphous body of candidates, virtually a third of the entire entry, who shared a band of ten marks and the 'pass' grade? It is at the point of seeking answers to such questions that one begins to realise how arbitrary a marking system is. A system which sets 28% as the pass threshold and devotes 50% to the uppermost 9.2% of the candidates is surely making life unnecessarily difficult for the examiners. In 1986, when there were 25,090 entries for this examination, the proportionate distribution of grades means that 2308 candidates were spread out over the mark range 50-100 (or more probably, on such a mark-scheme, 50-85 with no use whatever made of the top 15%) while 10,211 were crammed into the fifteen marks between 24 and 38 which included the all-important distinction between pass and fail at 28. With a more modern marking scheme which would have sought to use all the available marks up to 100, by assigning maximum marks for each question to a level of competence which the most able candidates might reasonably be expected to meet, the A grade boundary could have been redrawn at 75; the B grade at around the 60-65% mark; and the pass-mark at around 45%, without in any way affecting the actual grades awarded to the individuals concerned. Such a move would not only have made marking easier when it came to distinguishing between

middle-of-the-road candidates, who must, on any normal pattern of distribution, represent a considerable majority – it would have prevented outsiders with a scanty knowledge of the examining system from concluding that standards must have dropped a long way if it only took 50% to get a top grade and 28% to get a pass. The point at issue here, of course, is that in a subject like English 50% represents only what the Chief Examiner says it does, and not any measurable half way to a definable goal. On the assumption that about 60% of the candidature will be deemed to have passed, 40% is the obvious number to select as a pass-mark; and even that will inevitably lead to a thin sprinkling of candidates against each mark at the top of the ladder. The system which Oxford has kindly illustrated for us owes a little to the decisions to reduce the number of pass grades from six to three, and to make a CSE Grade 1 equivalent to an 'O' level pass; but much more to a rigid adherence to the old idea that the most able must be recognised by a mark scheme capable of fine differentiation between levels of excellence, regardless of the fact that the effects of such discrimination would remain a secret to everybody except the examiners themselves. It did no overt harm to the candidates, but I suspect that having so many candidates on such low marks encouraged the practice of seeing, and reporting, upon their weaknesses rather than their strengths; and of marking down shortcomings from a hypothetical level of excellence, rather than rewarding such insights as might, albeit fitfully, present themselves among the average scripts; and the Report itself, as with the Cambridge Report of 1980¹, reinforces this opinion by its conviction that candidates are 'working down' to an undemanding system:

"Many potentially good candidates are content to make little attempt at the critical comment that would lift their answers out of the average grade."²

Even so, the Report also makes the observation that:

"The general level of performance was similar to that of recent years. Many candidates were able to show their response to the content of set texts and also revealed an understanding of the characters, themes and styles of writing."³

¹ v.sup. p 381

² Op.cit. p 7

³ Ibid.

It is difficult to know, in general terms, what more might reasonably have been expected of them; and "many candidates" presumably means rather more than 9%, yet all those in excess of that proportion would have been given less than 50% of the total mark. It is easy to see why a conviction that standards were declining might have arisen among those who had political reasons for wishing to believe it, but far more difficult to find genuine evidence to support it.

What does, I think, emerge unequivocally from this survey so far, is that standards during the life of the 'O' Level examination in English Literature cannot be said to have declined in the sense that examiners were no longer expecting the same quality of performance from candidates; nor in the sense that candidates generally were no longer capable of meeting the same level of challenge; nor yet in the sense that teachers were no longer requiring the same amount of effort – though a case might be made for the assertion that they were no longer *making* the same amount of effort in the exercise of their responsibility to their classes.

Standards can be said to have risen in the sense that far more pupils were obtaining a pass in the subject by the end of the period than was the case at the beginning.

The worst interpretation that can be put upon this reflection of the numbers being entered and of the change in the expectations of the educational process in a society increasingly geared to measure the success of that process in terms of public examination results, is that the combined efforts of teachers and examiners united in this cause may well have been responsible for having brought about a decline in the standards of the literary experience of pupils in the classroom, particularly among those with no great predisposition for the subject. This, of course, is the argument presented more or less throughout the period covered in this thesis by those to whom the concept of examinations in English is an anathema, but evidence in any unambiguous sense for such an assertion is almost impossible to find or to evaluate, despite the intermittently patronising tone of Reports from the Examiners.

APPENDIX TO CHAPTER FIVE

The statistics below relate to the performance of candidates in English Literature at the Ordinary Level of the General Certificate of Education, as administered by the University of Oxford Delegacy of Local Examinations and by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate. The figures are derived from material in the archives of the relevant board.

UODLE

Year	Boys entered	Pass %	Girls entered	Pass %	Total Candidates	Pass %
1951					12958	
1960					26150	
1968	13072	55.4	19819	73.0	32891	66.0
1970	13499	52.8	20025	72.5	33524	64.6
1972	13881	59.0	20605	72.5	34486	67.1
1974	13450	56.2	20352	70.5	33802	64.8
1976*	13512	49.1*	21391	66.2*	34903	59.6*
1978	12848	51.3	20807	65.6	33655	60.1
1980	13183	56.6	20372	68.4	33555	63.8
1982#	12367	55.7	20859	66.0	33226	62.2
1984	11385	53.0	18211	60.5	29596	57.6
1986	9226	56.5	15864	69.2	25090	64.5

* From this year onwards the pass-rate percentages given are the figures for those obtaining at least Grade C

The decline in the number of candidates from this year onwards is ascribed variously to the increasing support for the CSE examination, and to the remarkable growth in the support for the newcomer AEB board.

UCLES

Year	Boys entered	Pass %	Girls entered	Pass %	Total Candidates	Pass %
1951	4464	54.7	5121	75.6	9585	65.8
1953	8611	58.1	8662	69.5		
1955	6221	51.9	7486	69.0	13707	61.3
1957	6606	53.3	7896	72.0		
1959					18538	
1961					20820	
1964	12154	52.5	15587	66.9	27741	60.6
1966	10745	51.2	15062	69.4	25807	61.8
1968	10482	58.2	14856	75.0	25335	68.0
1970	11327	62.3	15501	78.2	26828	71.5
1972	11908	59.9	15840	75.5	27748	68.8
1975*	11195	52.9*	16712	67.3*	27907	61.5*
1977	10538	47.0	16167	65.0	26705	57.9
1979#	8476	54.2	14856	70.5	23062	64.5
1981	8225	59.1	14232	69.6	22457	65.8
1985	6355	56.6	11634	67.7	17989	63.8
1987	4771	56.2	9349	70.8	14120	65.9

* From this year onwards the pass-rate percentages given are the figures for those obtaining at least Grade C.

The decline in the number of candidates from this year onwards may confidently be ascribed to the fact that the Syndicate introduced two alternative Literature syllabuses.

CHAPTER SIX

'A' Level English Examinations

"As to the observation that 'The nature of the passages was typically Oxford' we are in some perplexity as to whether this should be taken as a stricture or an encomium"
University of Oxford Delegacy of Local Examinations: Office Papers

As I write, the future of the Advanced Level of the General Certificate of Education Examination is in some doubt. Before the general election of 1997, plans were well advanced for a substantial reorganisation in accordance with the dictates of the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority to come into effect in 1999.

After that election there was imposed a year's stay of execution, pending a substantial rethink about examinations for the 16–18 age range along the lines laid down in the Dearing Report. SCAA has been reconstituted as the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority but no decision has as yet been forthcoming on whether the schemes for a revised approach to A levels are to go ahead, or the status quo is to be preserved, or yet further revisions are to be imposed.

Even prior to the proposals for reconstruction referred to above, SCAA had taken steps to ensure greater conformity from the various examination boards in respect of syllabus structures, and the committees responsible for setting papers found themselves confronted with grids laying down the assessment objectives with which the questions they proposed had collectively to comply. The days in which 'A' level was regarded by the politicians as a "gold standard", immune against reform and interference, ended some time ago. Nevertheless, 'A' level survived the Education Reform Act of 1988 virtually unscathed; and even after the introduction of coursework options and the subsequent arbitrary restriction to 20% of their contribution to the examination as a whole, and the more controversial move towards modular examinations, A level remains recognisably the same animal as it was in the beginning. This means that in the search for evidence on whether standards have declined, improved, or remained about the same, it is possible to produce more recent examples of material that remains directly comparable with earlier parallels than is the case with Ordinary level, and to see 1987 as a staging point en route rather than as the end of a journey.

The 'A' level English examination, just as its 'O' level cousins were a direct continuation from School Certificate, began in 1951 as a similar continuation from the old Higher Certificate. If we take the products of the Oxford Board as exemplars yet again, we find that the Higher Certificate examination in English consisted of two papers, each of three hours. The first of these was compulsory for all candidates and required the detailed study of four texts: a Shakespeare play, a Chaucer Tale, a book of Milton's *Paradise Lost* and a classical novel. In 1950, the final year of Higher Certificate, the texts in question were *King Lear*, *The Clerk's Tale*, *Paradise Lost Book IV*, and *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.

The second paper dealt with a specified period of English Literature, of which there were five on offer, dealing respectively with the periods 1550–1637, 1625–1700, 1700–1790, 1790–1832 and 1832–1896. It will be noted that no twentieth century literature was regarded as appropriate, an attitude of mind which, as I have shown, endured in the minds of some teachers even after the examiners had relented. Whichever of these periods was chosen, six books were prescribed for study, and the questions were so organised as to require answers on a minimum of four. In addition the paper set questions on the general literary "atmosphere" of the period, as well as on specific non-prescribed texts, though all such questions were entirely optional. In the last Higher Certificate paper, the requirement for the compulsory Paper 1 was as follows:

"Answer all six questions.

(1) Choosing one from Chaucer, one from Shakespeare and one from Milton, give full and clear renderings in modern English of *three* of the following extracts, adding explanatory notes on each of the three that you choose.

[there were two extracts from each text]

(2) Comment briefly on the style of the following passages: [two extracts from *The Mayor of Casterbridge*]

(3) *either* What impression of the Clerk himself do you get from this Tale? Does this correspond with the impression conveyed by Chaucer's description of him in the *Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*?
or Compare Chaucer's Griselda with Milton's Eve

(4) Discuss *one* of the following comments:

'Lear's age tends to make him a pathetic rather than a tragic figure'

'In adding the story of Gloucester and his sons to that of Lear and his daughters, Shakespeare ran the risk of overloading the plot of the play and complicating its structure; but the risk was overcome by skilful craftsmanship, and the tragic theme of the play gains greatly by the addition.'

(5) *either* Is it fair to accuse Milton of failing to make Adam and Eve sufficiently human in Book IV of *Paradise Lost* ?

or In appreciating Milton's description of Eden it is important to remember that it is Paradise he is describing, and not a mere beauty spot.

(6) *either* Would you agree that Henchard is as truly tragic a figure as Lear?

or 'In Hardy's novel, Casterbridge itself has a distinct character, and this character exercises a subtle and important influence upon the story'. Discuss. "

In dealing with developments in the second paper, I have decided to keep the scope of my comparisons within bounds by confining myself to the earliest (1550–1637) period, and within that period to examples of questions on the two most frequently recurring authors, Donne and Spenser. For the final Higher Certificate second paper, the format adopted was:

"Answer question 1 and *four* other questions. You should not write more than a dozen lines on each of the passages which you choose in question 1.

(1) Relate *four* of the following extracts to their contexts, and comment on any points that are of interest or need explanation."

There followed nine questions, three on general topics relevant to the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, or on books from that period which had not been prescribed texts, and one each in either/or format upon each of the six texts which the board had set. The questions on Spenser and Donne read:

"Use *two* of the following as texts for an essay on Spenser's qualities: *The Cave of Mammon, The Masque of Cupid, The Masque of the Seasons, and Months.*"

"What have you found in your reading of Spenser to support Milton's description of him as 'sage and serious' ?"

"Would you support or rebut the accusation against Donne that his verse is harsh?"

"What qualities in Donne have you personally found interesting?"

As I observed in the previous chapter¹, to establish a decline in standards from those laid down by the Higher Certificate, it would be necessary to demonstrate a slackening of the rubric requirements, the prescribing of more easily accessible texts, the setting of less demanding questions, or an examining body more tolerant of inadequate answers; and it should be admitted immediately that, so far as GCE 'A' level English is concerned, it is possible to make a case for a deterioration in the first of these areas from the beginning.

¹ v.sup. p 331

When the first Oxford A level syllabus appeared in preparation for the examinations of 1951, it was immediate apparent that there had been a reduction in the number of answers required to the questions on Paper 1. The paper had been divided into two sections, context questions and essays; and the Board required that candidates should answer from section A question 1 and two others, and from section B question five and two others. This meant context questions on the Shakespeare play and upon two other texts; together with three essays, also on the Shakespeare play and two other texts. There was no clause to restrict exact repetition of choice between the two sections, which meant that, at the risk of severely limiting the candidates' choice, it was possible for a school to prepare students for three texts only; and it was certainly possible for any individual candidate to determine for himself to abandon one text altogether and concentrate his efforts on the remaining three. So far as I can discover, the Board never publicly acknowledged this effective reduction from a minimum of four texts to three, but equally they never again set questions such as those quoted from the last Higher paper which sought to compare the Chaucer text with the Milton, or the Shakespeare with the Hardy; questions which depended upon all four texts having been studied by all candidates. The latter element, at least as illustrated in 1950, I cannot personally regard as much of a loss. Not only is it readily possible to write an essay on Henchard as a tragic figure without necessarily comparing him with Lear, it would be probably a better essay without the writer having his or her thoughts on the subject so constrained. And the question requiring a comparison between Griselda and Eve seems to me to be artificial in the extreme and likely to distort a clear perception of, and reaction to, both. Yet the desire to produce some kind of synthesis of response, to give the candidate an opportunity to compare and contrast the texts which he has studied, to emphasise that is is an examination in literature rather than on assorted texts in isolation, seems to me essentially a good one in principle, even if remarkably difficult to deploy in practice; and one may legitimately regret the loss of the possibility without supposing that, in practical terms, it actually reduced the candidates' literary awareness or the demands made upon them. That candidates were effectively shutting out Milton, or Chaucer or whichever of the great English novelists happened to be prescribed for

the year in question, as opposed to being required to study all four, would, however, undoubtedly do both of those things, to the detriment of the standards of education indicated by an A level pass as against one in the Higher Certificate. Even so, I cannot see this as a substantial deterioration. In practice, I suspect that all schools continued to teach all four texts, and that the vast majority of candidates not only went in to the examination prepared to answer on all four, but actually did so, choosing, for example, to write essays on the novel and the Chaucer Tale but combining one of these with Milton in the context passages. Certainly I have been unable to find any evidence of any significant number of candidates ignoring one of the texts, either in the official Examiners' Reports or in the litter of unpublished paperwork which examinations generate. And this one area of possible concern apart, I believe with some confidence that no further possibility of declining standards can be detected in the rubric of either of the two papers which constituted 'A' level; or in the texts set for study.

The specific rubric for that first examination in 1951 for Paper 1, Section A, questions one, two and three read "Give a full and clear rendering of one of the following extracts, adding brief explanatory notes" followed by two passages of between seven and ten lines in each case; while the rubric for the novel context question (now question 4) read "Choose two of the following passages and write eight to ten lines of comment on each, indicating the more notable features of matter or outlook or style", followed by three passages ranging in length from ten to sixteen lines. Section B, (questions 5 to 8, of which 5 was compulsory) simply offered two alternative essay titles on each text. Even allowing for the reduction by one whole essay from the requirements of the Higher Certificate paper, this is still a considerable amount of work to get through in three hours, and having tackled this paper myself as a schoolboy, prepared a number of sixth forms for it, and marked more mock examination scripts than I care to remember, I can certify that it was a distinct rush to complete in three hours – with a strong tendency for the third essay to be left in an uncompleted state. It is for this reason that I cannot regard the reduction in the number of answers required (as distinct from the number of books) as in any legitimate way a lowering of standards. To have to write four essays in addition to the volume of

material required for responding effectively to five distinct passages cannot but have reduced the content of all four of them to a level of superficiality which did little justice to the books concerned and which stood in need of the correction which 'A' level supplied.

It is interesting to speculate at this point as to why the new examination followed the old one so exactly in respect of context passage material, when it was prepared to exempt the candidate from tackling one book in this way altogether. Why always one passage on Shakespeare, Chaucer and Milton, but two from the novel? I can only surmise that the insistence on paraphrase which was common to the first three but absent from the last was felt to need appropriate compensation in weight. Certainly, as we shall see later, the 'full and clear rendering' carried much the greater part of the mark. (To anticipate my study of an actual detailed mark scheme, while essays carried 24 marks each, the Shakespeare context was worth 12 and each of the others 10, with 7 allocated to the paraphrase in each case. This means that the two extracts from the novel carried five marks each, and the 'explanatory notes' additional to the paraphrase were worth only 3 marks in the case of Chaucer and Milton and 5 in the case of Shakespeare. Opinions will doubtless differ as to the wisdom of insisting on candidates putting Shakespeare, Chaucer and Milton into modern English prose, and as to whether the skills displayed by those few candidates who could actually carry out this task gracefully in any way compensated for the acts of vandalism perpetrated by those who could not. My own opinion is that it is possible for pupils not of the first order of ability to have a reasonable instinct for what is meant by an author whose vocabulary and thought processes are well beyond their reach, and to be able in consequence to appreciate the general poetic effect of a passage quite sincerely, without being in any way capable of producing a 'full and clear rendering' for examination purposes – and I suspect that enjoyment of such pupils was substantially and adversely affected by the knowledge that this demand hung over them. Even a good candidate might well feel that an answer that gained good marks was a trespass against Milton that ought not to be forgiven, still less rewarded. The examiners, however, remained convinced of the value of this exercise as a discriminator for some considerable time.

The texts set for the first 'A' level Paper I were *Antony and Cleopatra*, *The Clerk's Tale*, *Paradise Lost Book I* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, thus establishing a pattern which was to remain a characteristic of the Oxford Delegacy's treatment of 'A' level literature texts, whereby, on each paper, half the texts change each year. This practice may well be regarded as so common that we may take it for granted, but it deserves some consideration. Was it introduced simply in the interests of school finances, to reduce the demands on English department capitation allowances implicit in changing the whole range of texts every year? Such consideration for the need of schools to keep a very close eye on budgets would be commendable, but since each book was allowed to run for two years before replacement, the cost over a two year period of replacing two books a year is identical with that of replacing four books every two years, and it therefore seems probable that some additional and less altruistic motive was present in the minds of those who established the practice.

From the point of view of the examination board required to maintain comparability of standards, the longer a particular title remains upon the syllabus, the more problematic it becomes to find questions of more or less precisely equivalent difficulty without direct repetition; and similarly it becomes easier for the candidates, or those who teach them, to predict what such questions might be. From the point of view of the candidate, some indication of the nature of the hurdle ahead of him in the shape of back-papers containing questions on the same texts is desirable, provided that this indication directs intelligent revision of the books themselves, rather than the preparation in advance of specimen answers: and the fact that papers for the previous year will contain 50% of such questions while the other 50% consists of questions on parallel texts keeps the balance about right. The fact that Oxford has tended to rotate the same texts on a roughly predictable timescale, and has never inhibited its examiners from the repetition of questions set on earlier papers, provided that a suitable interval has elapsed, might seem to give some advantage to candidates with access to a back-paper file; but in terms of actual practice the repetitions have been insufficiently regular to provide more than a gambler's chance of correct question prediction, while the most likely people to have access to files of back papers are teachers, who will wish to use them in the

setting of trial papers for their candidates, rather than simply to make them available for some esoteric exercise in forecasting. At all events, the second year of 'A' level saw *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Paradise Lost Book I* set for the second time, while the Chaucer Tale and the novel of 1951 (and of the last Higher Certificate paper) were replaced by *The Pardoner's Tale* and *Vanity Fair*.

In other respects the paper of 1952 followed the pattern of the previous year almost exactly. The only rubric change anywhere occurred at question 4, where "features of matter or outlook or style", became "features of matter, outlook or style". Presumably, some of the first batch of candidates had taken it that they were required to confine their answers to one only of the listed qualities, and it was felt necessary to emphasise the flexibility on offer. This reaction to candidate response is a recurrent factor in the detailed study of the development of examination papers, and, though usually unacknowledged, is of more impact than the criticisms addressed by teachers and others through the formal channels set up by the board.

In 1953 there was a further modification to the rubric, affecting questions 1 to 3, and requiring the candidate to give the context of the passage, which suggests that this information had not been forthcoming in what candidates had seen fit to provide in their "brief explanatory notes". So far as texts were concerned, it was the turn of Shakespeare and Milton to be changed. The replacement of *Paradise Lost Book I* with *Book II* was conventional enough, but in the case of Shakespeare, for the first and only time, teachers were offered a choice: either *King Lear* or *As You Like It*.

Presumably, since this choice was offered from the outset, it was the Delegacy which felt that *Lear* might be too heavy going for some candidates and thus compelled to offer an alternative. If this were indeed the case, then clearly the performance of those candidates who were prepared for the tragedy rather than its comedy alternative must have reassured the examiners, since *Lear* was prescribed again, without an option, in 1959 and 1960; and 1953 and 1954 remain the only two years on which the compulsory Shakespeare questions could have been answered on a comedy text.

1954 demonstrated that the minor change to the rubric affecting the context questions had still not entirely focussed the attention of candidates where the examiners felt it

should be, at least so far as the treatment of Shakespeare was concerned, and the instruction for question 1 was entirely rewritten. It now read

"Choose one of the following extracts and (i) give a full and clear rendering, adding any further explanation which seems to you necessary for a full understanding; (ii) give the context and a brief commentary on the dramatic significance of the passage."

There were no other changes, and the only remaining point of interest lies in the exchange of texts. That the Chaucer selected should have returned to *The Clerk's Tale* will have caused no surprises, but the prose choice, replacing *Vanity Fair* with Carlyle's *Past and Present* obviously caused consternation, because in the following year, 1955, an alternative to Carlisle was offered in the form of Newman's *Ideas on a Liberal Education*. This is the only occasion on which a change was introduced after a single year, and, in consequence, the Newman is the only example of a text that was examined once only. Such an experiment was never tried again, and the Delegacy returned to its safe diet of 'classical' novels by Thackeray, Hardy, Dickens or George Eliot, and stayed with it for years. Speaking as a victim of 1955 I can only express thanks for the fact that the rubric permitted me to avoid answering on Newman in the examination, though at the time I felt cheated by the absence of a real novel.

In hindsight, what I really regret is that the board sought to vary the novel with something quite so unsuitable for the purpose – a better choice at this stage might have paved the way for a more liberal selection of texts years earlier than it came. As it was, a similar rigidity applied permanently to the other elements of the paper. Milton could be Books I, II, IV, IX or X, but never strayed from *Paradise Lost*; and for the Shakespeare play, apart from the one exception already mentioned, the Delegacy seemed quite content to restrict itself to an endless cycle of *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Lear*, and *Hamlet*. Only in the selection of the Chaucer text did the examiners appear to exercise something nearer to the full choice available to them, repeating the initial choice of *The Clerk's Tale* in 1954/5 and 1960/1, but otherwise introducing new texts in each intervening pair of years. There is certainly an indication of changes in society over the period in this matter of the choice of Chaucer text: the impact of the so-called 'swinging sixties' meant that examiners had no doubt as to the acceptability of *The Wife of Bath's Tale* in 1971, whereas it comes as no surprise to find that they

had not thought of setting it earlier.

1955 and 1956 introduced no changes at all, but in 1957 there occurred the most significant change so far – a further reduction in the amount of material the candidates were expected to produce in three hours. Question 4 was revised to read:

"Choose one of the following passages for criticism and comment, dealing with the most notable features of matter, outlook and style."

No longer is the candidate to work under the rather strange constraint that his answer be from eight to ten lines in length, and far more importantly, a single passage for such treatment is now deemed sufficient. Further liberalisation came in the following year, affecting the other three context questions, but, hardly surprisingly, leaving question 4 in its new format. Question 1, oddly, reverted to its 1953 format; which meant that candidates were no longer required to give a brief comment on the dramatic significance of the Shakespearian passage. One must presume that in the intervening years since this requirement was first added, the distinction between 'context' and 'dramatic significance' had become blurred in so high a proportion of answers that it was felt necessary to simplify the instruction: but there may be an implication here that the examination has lost, however minutely, something of its academic rigour.

Question 2 was rewritten completely as

"Show a full comprehension of one of the following extracts, either by rendering it into clear modern English (with brief notes where necessary) or by detailed comment."

In this case, the removal of the absolute insistence on providing a modern version of Chaucer, and the willingness to allow the candidate flexibility in the choice of method of establishing his understanding, must be seen as an advance, particularly for the better candidates who will have been all too uncomfortably aware that their versions failed to do justice to the original. There is no loss of rigour here, and similarly with the revision of question 3:

"Give such comment on one of the following passages as you think necessary for its full understanding and appreciation"

removes the necessity for providing a modernised version of Milton (which, as I have intimated above, was a task never far from vandalism), and substitutes a much greater willingness to rely upon the candidates' own taste and good sense.

In 1959 question 4 was modified again, though only slightly; the introductory words changing from "Choose one of the following passages for criticism and comment" to "Write a critical appreciation of one of the following passages". It may be that this was no more than cosmetic: alternatively one might argue that the term 'critical appreciation' could by that date be taken for granted as part of the student's vocabulary, in which case there had been another small advance in the maturity which the examiners were assuming in their clients.

There were to be no further alterations until 1965, when there was a significant change in the approach to *Paradise Lost*. The new rubric read:

"Choose one of the following passages and (i) give the meaning of the italicised words and phrases; (ii) say briefly what you find most noteworthy in its style and thought. (The context is not required.)."

The decision to omit the context in Milton, though not in the case of the Shakespeare and Chaucer texts, probably suggests that fourteen years of experience had the effect of persuading the examiners that Milton simply did not lend himself to this kind of response as do the other two, with their far greater reliance on plot development and sequence of events. As such, though it makes the task of the candidate easier, it cannot fairly be described as a diminution of rigour, since the task had never been particularly appropriate. The other changes, however, are retrograde. The decision to allow candidates to decide for themselves what explanations were needed has been reversed, and they are now to have their noses held firmly to an italicised grindstone; similarly their freedom to write an appreciation of the passage is now constrained to the compass of short observations on style and thought. By becoming more prescriptive, the paper is actually giving less scope to the more able candidates.

Another period of some length was to pass before there were any further alterations, but when they came, in 1971, they marked probably the greatest change so far: one that must have been immediately visible to anyone remotely familiar with the paper. The "context questions", or passages for comment, became significantly longer. As I observed earlier in this chapter,¹ in 1951 these passages were between seven and ten lines each for the Shakspeare, Chaucer and Milton questions, and from ten to

¹ v.sup. p 395

sixteen lines in the case of the novel. I cannot find any instance in the ensuing twenty years when the Shakespeare passages exceeded sixteen lines, and in the immediately preceding two years they had held steadily at ten to twelve, but in 1971 there was a sudden expansion to forty. At the same time the Milton passages also expanded to 25 and 29 lines respectively, though no similar enlargements as yet affected the Chaucer Tale or the novel. The rubric to the first three questions also changed. In the case of question 1, it became a good deal closer to the recently revised question 3, the new version reading:

"Choose one of the following passages and answer the questions which follow: (i) What is meant by [three short phrases from the passage identified by line number] (ii) Comment on the dramatic significance of this passage (iii) Say what seem to you to be the most important stylistic qualities of the passage."

Question 2 was abbreviated to "Turn one of the following extracts into clear modern English and briefly give the context"; while question 3 was slightly extended by the addition of the two words "Explain or..." at the beginning of sub-question (i).

It is interesting to speculate on the collective implication of these modifications. The removal of the requirement to turn Shakespeare into "modern English" is an improvement: the sensitive candidate will have found the task artificial and pointless, while the less able will have found it a stumbling block. In neither case will it really have helped the examiner to reach an accurate conclusion as to the ability of the candidate to appreciate and respond to the author. As with Milton in the previous change, this is the removal of an outdated and somewhat immature restriction on the student's response. The re-introduction of "dramatic significance", removed in 1958, is also a slight 'upgrading' of the paper: if I was correct in suggesting above¹ that a small amount of rigour was lost when the phrase was removed from the rubric, it must follow that this further change restores it. Nevertheless, even if the combined effects of the various sub-sections of the revised compulsory Shakespeare question are collectively as appropriate and as demanding as they have ever been, the new form of the question is somewhat didactic and prescriptive, and seems to indicate something of a 'nannying' approach. Question 2, on the other hand, seems retrograde in content rather than in

¹ v.sup. p 395

expression. The new insistence on 'turning into clear modern English' without the option to demonstrate comprehension by notes and detailed comment, may well reflect the way in which a substantial majority of candidates had actually tackled the question in recent years, but it removes a flexibility which students had previously enjoyed, and therefore reinforces the prescriptive tone of the previous question. In question 3, however, the introduction of the option "to explain" rather than to paraphrase seems to be a movement, however slight, in the opposite direction.

What cannot be debatable, however, is the impact of the much longer passages. These make a greater demand on the candidates' powers of understanding, assessment and critical commentary than ever before, and in so doing also put an added premium on timing effectively the various components of the paper. In the crudest sense of the term, the standard of the paper has gone up.

In 1975 the words "The context is not required" were added to question 2, hitherto the last section of the paper to retain this aspect of commenting on a passage. Apart from making the phrase "context question" as a method of referring to tests of this type anachronistic, it is dubious that the change had any great effect one way or the other; while the restyling of question 4, which now read "Write on the more notable features of matter and style in one of the following passages" is also largely cosmetic. It is true that the candidates are no longer expected to comment on the powers of organisation displayed by the novelist, which might seem to make the question a little easier, but in practice it is doubtful if this possible area for comment was ever much exercised.

And so to 1980, when the set texts happened to be *Hamlet*, *The Franklin's Tale*, *Paradise Lost Book II* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. The examination had lasted thirty years, with no change whatever to the format or content of its essay questions and with only such modification to what the Oxford examiners, in their internal communications, called 'gobbets' as have been somewhat laboriously detailed above. It would be wrong to say that there had been no development at all over the period, but the quality of consistency is much more apparent, and it does give some colour to the 'gold standard' label attached to the examination by politicians.

The last seven years of the period which I have elected to study, before the advent

of GCSE and the Education Reform Act of 1988, provided a little more in the way of change, but hardly enough to warrant any fundamental alteration in the general tenor of my assessment.

In 1981 came another reduction in the work load confronting candidates. Section A (questions 1 to 4) now required the candidate to answer question 1 and only one other, though section B remained unchanged at question 5 plus two. It had, of course, as has already been pointed out, been possible since the inception of 'A' level for a candidate to get by without preparing, or even reading, one of the four texts: it was now at least theoretically possible to avoid detailed textual study of two of them. This may have been a response to complaints about the additional load imposed by the greatly increased length of the passages, and in terms of standards the removal of a previously required question cannot necessarily be held to prove that the paper has become easier since the examiners may well have expected greater detail in the five remaining segments of the paper to result from the additional time available to tackle them. In any case, it suggests that, increasingly, greater weight was being attached to the essays which the candidate wrote in Section B than to his performance as a critic on isolated particles of text in Section A; in contrast to the old Higher Certificate, which contrived to give the impression that the four short essays were makeweights and the context material in general, and the paraphrases in particular, the real discriminators of candidate ability. It is, however, a possibility which should be recorded that 'A' level examinations may have become a trifle easier from this date.

In 1985 there came a further change in that the paper was now divided into two parts, with Shakespeare separated from the other works. The Shakespeare section, for which ninety minutes was allowed, retained a passage for comment and an either/or choice of essay title; and, unusually, the play selected to inaugurate this new approach was *The Tempest*. The 'Major Authors' section was allocated two hours and a quarter, but there was no change in the requirement, which stayed at one 'context' and two essays on *The Knight's Tale*, *Paradise Lost Book I* and *Vanity Fair*. Within a short period, therefore, the number of questions has been reduced and the amount of time increased by 45 minutes. Clearly this must have significantly reduced pressure on the

candidates and allowed them to concentrate more on developing an argument and less on the examination room clock, which should, in turn, have produced more thoughtful and more effectively constructed answers.

The last two years up to 1987 produced no further changes in rubric or organisation, and the last group of candidates to take 'A' before the introduction of GCSE answered the required two questions on Shakespeare and three on major authors on *Othello*, *The Franklin's Tale*, *Paradise Lost Book II* and, – one of those rare occasions when the board offered teachers rather than candidates a choice – either *Little Dorrit* or *Portrait of a Lady*.

It may be said, therefore, that with the exception of such minor implications as I have indicated above, there is nothing in the changes that I have indicated in the format of Paper 1 from the early days of GCE 'A' level through to the Education Reform Act, and certainly nothing in the choice of texts, that points to any variation in the standards of education over the period. It must, of course, be remembered that the common Paper 1 represented only half of the Oxford 'A' level syllabus, but if that paper may legitimately be described as relatively unchanged over the period of this scrutiny, then the second, or period, paper was even more static. Taking that which dealt with the earliest available period (1550 to 1637) as the exemplar, it began with the rubric "Answer question 1 and *four* other questions", and the compulsory question 1 was headed "Relate *four* of the following extracts to their contexts and comment on any points that are of interest or need explanation". There are thus a total of eight separate requirements on the paper, which seems excessive for three hours, even allowing for the fact that the subsidiary components of question 1 cannot have carried many marks, and candidates were presumably taught not to spend much time on them.

The four extracts were, in fact, taken from only three of the six set texts, two on each. Candidates could thus confine themselves to only two of these texts for detailed study, and had, in any case, to deal with both passages from one of the texts.

In 1951, and typically, questions 2 to 5 were in 'either/or' form requiring essays on four of the set texts, while questions 6 and 7 gave the candidate no choice – a single essay title on each of the two remaining texts. The paper concluded with two general

questions: one on the ethos of the period and the other inviting the candidate to write on any one of an additional seven unprescribed texts from the period.

The only two modifications which could be described as significant occurred in 1963 and 1971 respectively. The first of these reduced the requirement of the paper from question 1 plus four other questions to question 1 plus three. This reduction not only affected the number of questions that the candidate had to answer: it also removed a whole text from the course of study. In so doing, it would seem to have made the course easier – particularly when one remembers the original assumption by the examiners that the candidate would have been reading a variety of other texts from the period of his own volition and would welcome the opportunity to write on these – and thereby to have lowered the standard, but I am far from convinced that this is, in fact, the case. Up to this point the requirement to comment on four passages, however superficially, and to write four essays on four different books had meant spending a maximum of twenty-five minutes on each question. With the best will in the world, it is difficult to imagine that many answers could have advanced much beyond predictable superficialities in so short a time. One is, in fact, reminded of the criticisms of early examinations to which I referred in Chapter One.¹ The addition of ten minutes per question would have given more opportunity for candidates to show (or, of course, to fail to show) a genuine perception of the subtleties of each text actually prepared for the examination, and the overall effect of the alteration may well have been actually to make the paper more rigorous.

A similar argument can be focussed on the one remaining modification of 1971, in which question 1 was comprehensively redesigned. It now read "Choose *one* of the following passages and write a commentary. Make clear the meaning of the passage as a whole and show how the use of such things as imagery, diction and other features of style contribute to the full effect." Only passages from the poetry works (a Book of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and an anthology of Elizabethan Lyrics in that first year) were provided, and the resulting piece of critical appreciation is thus elevated to the status of a full question worth 25% of the paper. This is a very major change, that

¹ v.sup. p 28

affects the balance of the paper significantly; and again an initial view might well suggest an easing of the workload. But on this occasion, too, I would argue to the contrary. The detailed prescription on how the question is to be tackled may be less flexible than the original form, but it concentrates on authorial technique and style, rather than on content, and in expecting the candidate to elaborate on the chosen passage for forty-five minutes rather than the maximum of ten which he might have afforded to each section of the question in previous years, the examiners seem to me to be expecting and testing a markedly greater depth of insight.

The paper remained in this form right through until 1987, though the practice of setting only poetry alternatives for the compulsory question 1 was abandoned. *Pilgrims Progress* was one of the offered options for this question in 1980 and again in 1987, and *The White Devil*, *The Alchemist*, *The Duchess of Malfi* and *Tamburlaine* all provided a dramatic alternative on one occasion each. But as such a change can hardly be regarded as material to the question of standards, I would hold with some confidence that in the course of its first thirty-seven years, the period paper had moved from demanding quantity of experience to expecting quality of critical analysis; and that cannot be described as a reduction in rigour by anyone who knows his business.

Finally, a brief acknowledgement must be made of the existence of the 'Scholarship Paper' – Paper 3. As originally conceived, it was designed to be taken only by those students who were regarded as reasonable candidates for State Scholarships, though success at this level was often expected by Oxford and Cambridge colleges from those who sought to enter as scholars or exhibitioners rather than as commoners; and the continued instances of inclusion of 'S' level performance as part of a conditional offer from Oxbridge is probably the biggest single reason for the fact that such papers still survive. The Oxford English example, throughout the period under scrutiny, consisted of eight or nine questions, none of them compulsory, of which candidates were advised to attempt three. One required the critical appreciation of an unseen passage; the remainder were general questions on literature designed to test the breadth of the candidate's reading and powers of independent judgement. There was a specific state-

ment that "Planning and style of answers are far more important than mere length", and the whole atmosphere of the paper was that it was intended solely for those who enjoyed the subject, and intended to take their study of it farther. Since such candidates were always a small percentage of the total entry, many schools were unable or unwilling to carry the financial burden of providing specific tuition for such uneconomic teaching groups, and many candidates were either left to supplement the standard 'A' level provision entirely from their own resources, or were dependent upon supportive teachers prepared to provide appropriate tuition outside the official timetable. Whether in specific recognition of this or coincidentally, there was never anything resembling a syllabus, and intelligent reading would usually see a candidate through the broad-based questions on offer. "Poetry is not the thing said, but the way of saying it." (A.E.Housman) Discuss." and "Comment on Shakespeare's attitude to kingship" were two such questions from an early Oxford paper, and there were no discernible changes throughout the period under scrutiny.

Since neither rubric nor choice of text for study provide any obvious grounds for a positive conclusion on a change in standards, it is necessary to investigate the nature of the questions asked over this period in the two papers which constituted the standard 'A' level requirement, and Oxford's habit of recycling the same few texts at more or less regular intervals provides a very convenient opportunity for direct comparison.

To begin with the compulsory Shakespeare essay question, I have quoted already the two questions set on *King Lear* in the last Higher Certificate Paper.¹ This play appeared again in 1953 and 1954; 1959 and 1960; 1965 and 1966; and 1973 and 1974. The eight questions concerned, spread over a period of a quarter of a century from that final Higher paper, were as follows:

"King Lear is not the tragedy of the downfall of a great hero; it is the story of a man who becomes great through tragic experience'. Discuss."

"As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods,
They kill us for their sport."

Does *King Lear* seem to you to confirm this view of human life?"

"The wicked in *King Lear* are so monstrous that they cease to rouse our fear or condemnation because they cannot command belief.' Do you agree?"

"Tragedy is said to leave us with a sense of exaltation. Do you find this true of *King Lear* ?"

¹ v.sup. p 392

"Bradley suggested that we might call this play 'The redemption of King Lear'. Consider the appropriateness of this title."

"Write on the function and interest of the underplot in *King Lear*."

"'As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, They kill us for their sport'
'The gods are just and of our pleasant vices make instruments to plague us'
Do you regard either of these statements as the key to the meaning of *King Lear* ?"

"In the late seventeenth century, Nahum Tate contrived a happy ending for *King Lear* in which Cordelia survives and marries Edmund. Undertake a defence or a repudiation of this alteration."

"The total and final impression produced by *King Lear* is that of profound pessimism. Do you agree?"

"Consider the value of the double plot in *King Lear*."

"'A conflict between age and youth' : do you find this comment on *King Lear* true and significant."

"Can you discern a method in Shakespeare's use of prose and verse in *King Lear* ?"

"Is *King Lear* a pessimistic play?"

"'Cordelia's part in the play is small in number of lines, but very large in significance.' Discuss."

"'In *King Lear* we find that virtue springs and grows in the midst of horror.' Discuss."

"Write on the presentation of evil in *King Lear*."

It would, I think, be quite impossible to argue with any degree of plausibility that these questions grew less demanding over the period of time in question: if there is any discernible change it lies in the declining necessity to load the question with pointers to the expected approach. The best example lies in the various questions dealing with the relevance of the Gloucester sub-plot: what is effectively the same question took four lines of typescript in 1950, but was reduced to "Consider the value of the double plot" by 1965. Nor is *King Lear* by any means an isolated example from the compulsory section of paper 1: *Antony and Cleopatra* was the first choice after the introduction of 'A' level, and question 5 in 1951 read:

"'Both Antony and Cleopatra are discussed at the outset of the play in terms of strong condemnation, and yet ultimately we are not moved to censure.' Discuss."

"In planning the structure of *Antony and Cleopatra* Shakespeare turned the limitations of the Elizabethan stage to positive advantage."

In 1964, and again in 1984, the equivalent questions read:

"'The passion that ruins Antony also exalts him'. Discuss"

"Consider the importance of some of the minor characters as commentators on and interpreters of the actions of Antony and Cleopatra"

"The focus of attention in *Antony and Cleopatra* shifts so constantly that for all its power the play gives an impression of confusion.' Discuss."

"How is Shakespeare's portrayal of Cleopatra developed in her conversation with characters other than Antony?"¹

¹ UODLE examination papers quoted are filed in the University Archive Ref LE49/96➔

Again, I cannot find that candidates in the later years received any advantage.

Shakespeare, both as a compulsory question and an figure of unrivalled importance might have been atypical in the treatment dealt out by examiners, so we should look also at the way in which questions on Chaucer and Milton developed in the hands of the A level examiners. Again, questions from the last Higher Certificate paper on *The Clerk's Tale* and *Paradise Lost Book IV* been quoted already.¹ The Chaucer text was repeated in 1951, 1954 and 1955, 1960 and 1961, and 1968 and 1969; while the Milton reappeared in 1955 and 1956, 1961 and 1962, and 1973 and 1974. The questions are listed below:

"What do you think attracted Chaucer as a poet in Petrarch's moral tale of patient Griselde?"

"Although much of Chaucer's work seems modern in outlook, *The Clerk's Tale* is mediaeval, through and through.' Discuss the truth of this judgement."

"'*The Clerk's Tale* would be intolerable in prose.' Discuss."

"Do you think *The Clerk's Tale* succeeds in making patience an attractive virtue?"

"Unconvincing characters cannot point a convincing moral; *The Clerk's Tale*, therefore fails as a moral tale.' Do you agree?"

"Chaucer puts primitive action into a sophisticated setting.' Discuss."

"Happiness and innocence are the most difficult of all subjects for a writer.' How far do you think Milton has succeeded with these most difficult subjects in *Paradise Lost Book IV*?"

"Exhibit the variety of Milton's style in Book IV."

"Does Satan as presented in Book IV seem to you a consistent character?"

"Virtue in her shape how lovely'; do you find the loveliness of virtue in Book IV?"

"This particular tale would have been spoilt if the characters and incidents had been too lifelike.' Consider this view of *The Clerk's Tale*."

"Bare – even threadbare like the Clerk': discuss this description of the style and narrative sequence of *The Clerk's Tale*."

"*The Clerk's Tale* shows Chaucer as a master of the pathetic.' Discuss."

"To accept the action of *The Clerk's Tale* calls for too great a suspension of critical judgement.' Discuss."

"*Paradise Lost* has grandeur enough, but lacks charm and loveliness.' Would Book IV support this criticism?"

"Satan is the best drawn of Milton's characters only because he is the easiest to draw. Milton's real greatness is shown in the much more difficult creation of good and happy characters.' Consider this opinion with reference to Book IV."

"Does Milton's picture of Paradise and its inhabitants please?"

"No hero could survive the treatment accorded to Satan in Book IV. Discuss."

"The beauty of the unfallen world': does Milton succeed in portraying this in Book IV?"

"A subtle study of evil': consider this view of Satan as he appears in Book IV."

"In *Paradise Lost Book IV* Milton displays the beauty of human love in harmony with nature.' Discuss."

¹ v.sup. pp 392-393

I cannot believe that any objective critic, reading through that list of questions, set down as they are in the chronological order of their appearance, would conclude that they become easier as the sequence progresses. Indeed, I would suggest that there is a tendency, though an inconsistent one, for questions to become less predictable and to make more demands upon the candidate's personal response.

In Paper 2, with its initially heavy syllabus, answers could not reasonably be as detailed as those on major authors, and it would be reasonable to expect some slight increase in expectation from the examiners as the rubric was altered to permit greater depth of study to replace the original breadth. Yet I do not believe the change is in any way reflected by the questions, and it might be a perfectly legitimate conclusion that the reduction in the number of answers that a candidate was expected to produce in three hours was occasioned by the hope that he might thereby do justice to some of the questions set. As I have suggested above, Donne and Spenser are the two authors who feature most frequently in the earliest period of the Oxford examination, and I attach below, with dates, a selection of the questions which these authors attracted over the period of this study. The questions from the last Higher Certificate paper have already been quoted.¹

"What impression have you gained from what you have read of Spenser of the range of his poetic powers?"

"Spenser paints in words.' Discuss." (1951)

"What seem to you the most notable features of Donne's style?"

"Spenser has been called the most unread of great English poets. Can you suggest from your reading of Book I of *Faerie Queene* why this is, and why it should not be so?"

"Spenser's imagery is usually obvious and traditional but it always serves his purpose.' Discuss." (1954)

"Spenser's style has been charged with monotony. Can you defend it against this charge?"

"Spenser needs room to deploy his forces; brevity is not one of his charms.' Discuss."

"Donne's visual imagery rarely seems to me beautiful, and I do not often find his poetry musical, yet I enjoy it though I do not know why! Can you suggest to this speaker reasons for his enjoyment?"

"What qualities are common to Donne's poetry and his prose?" (1955)

"A puritan, yet responsive to all the delights of the senses: does your reading of Spenser lead you to agree with this description of him?" (1956)

"Milton spoke of 'our sage and serious poet Spenser'. Demonstrate Spenser's sageness and seriousness." (1957 and 1968)

"Surprisingly capable of harsh realism as well as of luxurious sweetness' do you think this is a good description of Spenser's style?" (1957)

¹ v.sup. p 393

"What qualities do you find common to Donne's love poetry and his religious poetry?"

"'Donne is less interested in things than in ideas about things'. Does his imagery suggest that this is true?"

"What is Spenser's conception of holiness, and how does he convey it in Book I of *Faerie Queene*?" (1958)

"What lyrical qualities had Donne's poetry?"

"Of what kind is Donne's wit?"

"'The beauties of this world are precious to Spenser because they enshrine another beauty.' Discuss."

"Where do you think Spenser is at his best?" (1959)

"Do you find Donne's writing equally beautiful in verse and prose?"

"Discuss and illustrate the range and variety of Spenser's interests."

(1960)

"What powers has Spenser of imparting variety to his presentation of either good or evil scenes and characters?"

"'In moving through Spenser's 'Faerie Land' we have a strong sense of place but time has no meaning for us.' Do you agree?"

"What has your study of Donne's writing led you to think he most longs to find in either love relationships or religion?" (1961)

"What is Spenser's idea of holiness? Does this appeal to you? (1965)

It is interesting, *en passant*, to compare this last question with that for 1958. It illustrates effectively a slow transition from answers based upon qualities which can be taught or acquired from a good edition, to answers based upon a personal reaction. There is a similar element in the 1965 Donne question also:

"What subject do you think Donne handles most effectively in his poetry?"

and traces of it again in 1969:

"Ben Jonson prophesied that Donne, 'for not being understood, would perish'. Have the difficulties in Donne's poetry stood in the way of your enjoyment of it?"

though most of the intervening questions tended towards partial repetition of familiar themes of Spenser's 'poetic luxury' and the 'exceeding vividness of his descriptions'.

In the 1970s the following specimen questions are typical:

"In what ways does Spenser's use of allegory increase, or detract from, your pleasure in reading Book II of *Faerie Queene*?" (1970)

"'When he describes any thing, you more than see it, you feel it too.' Is this true of Spenser in Book I of *The Faerie Queene*?" (1971)

"What kind of a love poet is Donne?" (1972)

"How would you answer someone who declared that *Faerie Queene* had little or no relevance to human life?" (1975 and 1979)

"Has Spenser any merits as a story teller?" (1976)

though these were intermixed with familiar elements from previous years. Neither poet was set in 1977 or 1978, and they both appeared more intermittently from then onwards, examples from the next decade including:

"What seem to you the most characteristic features of Spenser's style?"

"How far does Spenser in Book I of *Faerie Queene* make you feel that the dangers which confront the Christian knight are a real threat?" (1980)

"Donne is a highly logical, but highly unpredictable poet: he argues constantly, but constantly surprises us by the way in which he develops his arguments.' Discuss."

"Write on Donne's sense of humour as manifested in the poems you have read." (1984)

"Spenser declares in his Prefatory Letter to *Faerie Queene* that his aim is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline. How effective do you think Book I is from this point of view?"

"The close involvement of *Faerie Queene* with the life of its time makes the poem difficult for modern readers.' Discuss." (1986)

I am unable to discern any pattern in this sequence of questions which would point to an identifiable change of policy on the part of the examiners, but as was the case with Paper 1, I am convinced that it cannot possibly be used to sustain an allegation that questions became less demanding in the later years of 'A' level, any more than can the changes of rubric or the choice of set texts. There remains to be investigated, therefore, the actual attitudes of the examiners towards their tasks of setting and marking the papers, and, so far as surviving material provides any information on the matter, the nature of the standards which they deemed themselves to be maintaining. One of the papers which does survive is the complete typescript of the marking scheme for Paper 1 issued to assistant examiners in 1951, the first year of A level.¹ This begins with the words "This year the arrangement of the paper is different, and only three essay questions are asked for." There could hardly be a better illustration of the suggestion I have made earlier, that the transition from School, or Higher, Certificate to General Certificate of Education was seen by the examination boards as a change of label rather than as any fundamental change of educational and examining philosophy, regardless of the intentions of the Norwood Committee. That the papers were more or less unaltered has already been established, but it is interesting to see that the transition in instruction is so seamless. The marking scheme then goes on:

"As candidates can choose three out of the four questions in section A each of these must carry the same mark, The maxima for questions will therefore be

Section A : 10 marks per question. Total 30

Section B : 24 marks per question. Total 72

This gives a working total of 102, which is lower than usual, but in previous years, when the working total was 109, the marks on this paper tended to run too high at the top. Examiners should be aware of the difference this year, and be certain that candidates around the pass line

are not suffering from a slightly different method of marking; this should not occur as the proportion of marks allotted between contexts and essays this year favours weaker candidates."

The fact that questions A1 and B5 were compulsory, and the choice amounted to two from A2-4 and two from B6-8, means that the statement that all components "must carry the same mark" is not strictly accurate, since additional weighting could have been given to the Shakespeare questions if the chief examiner had so wished. More interesting, however, is the observation that giving more proportionately more marks for the essays and less for the context questions "favours weaker candidates". This is very much the point of view that we would expect from the old Higher Certificate mentality, which seems to have seen writing in general terms about a work or an author as a 'soft option' by comparison with writing a paraphrase or providing the precise context for a passage; and to have sought, so far as possible, to examine facts rather than opinions or reactions: it is the attitude condemned by Stephen Potter in *The Muse in Chains*. From such a stand-point, subsequent developments in the structure of 'A' level papers which further appreciated the significance of the essay, further depreciated that of the response to specific passages, and eventually did away with paraphrases altogether, must seem to have been an abandonment of rigour, a retreat from a truly academic approach, and a watering-down of the standards of the examination. There is clear evidence that there are still those who take that standpoint, and their influence is something that will be examined in the concluding chapter of this thesis; but they are not commonly to be found among contemporary examiners, and the view is not one which I find it possible to share. The value which was attached to the paraphrase in the early years is, however, made absolutely clear by the mark scheme and the accompanying instructions for its implementation:

"Questions A1-3 Full and clear rendering is the first demand here, and I propose 7 marks should be allocated for this and 3 for the explanatory note.Errors in the renderings must be scored in order to let the Awarders see how the mark assigned is arrived at. I propose that we should all use the following pretty conventional signs:-

Strike out actual mistakes in rendering.

Put a wiggly line under a doubtful or questionable but not wholly blundering phrase of translation or paraphrase.

Put A to show an omission. (it is important to notice and mark omissions, so that a candidates may not gain by evasion.)

If we mark with these signs, the visible signs of error or correctness will guide us in judging the worth of the rendering.

Mentally deducting about $\frac{1}{2}$ for each mistake and $\frac{1}{4}$ for doubtful points, will probably lead to the right mark, though we should give the mark on each rendering to the nearest whole number.

Qn A4. 5 marks should be allotted to each passage. Roughly speaking the main points are that (a) is conventional description of a scene, expressed in rather stilted vocabulary and syntax and the touch of observation at the close is laboriously expressed....(b) the scene is imaginatively described, with intense feeling for the visual effects of flowers and stone, and for history, and with a characteristic humour.....(c) both the speech and the attitude of mind of the speaker need discussion: good candidates might find both rather conventionally 'rustic'. From each passage chosen, candidates should quote actual phrases to illustrate their comment."

It is difficult, of course, to produce a marking scheme which does not sound prescriptive, and this example is no worse than many others in this respect. But there is, I think, a detectable note of marking the script down from a hypothetically perfect exemplar, rather than of rewarding what the candidate actually has to say. There is a similar tone, though less marked, in the scheme for the essay questions.

"...it is as well to remember that 12 represents a pass; on the other hand, we must not evasively bunch too many marks at 11, 12 or 13. Good marking should produce a wide distribution of marks. We must be ready to mark up really good answers to 18+, and to mark down really bad answers to 9-; and we must also use the middle range of 9 to 18 with sound discrimination. Relevant, well arranged discussion in good style should be marked up. Irrelevance and shapeless outpouring of knowledge should be marked down.

The suggestion that "really good answers" should be marked to 18+ is worth a passing comment. 18, of course, represents 75% of the available mark, and its use in this context reinforces my observation in the previous chapter¹ that marks above 85% were very rare indeed.

The marking scheme continues with some detailed suggestions for each question. Those on *Antony and Cleopatra* (5a,5b) have already been quoted on page 409, and those on *The Clerk's Tale* (6a,6b) on page 410. I have added the wording of the remaining questions in square brackets at the head of each section of the instructions.

"Qn5(a). This is a difficult question, and full credit should be given to those who are aware that admiration and censure are blended throughout the play. I suggest we might distinguish candidates who show awareness of the poetry of the play from those who merely discourse on 'character' and actions."

Again it is worth a passing mention that 'those who show awareness' in this final suggestion has received the marginal annotation "v. few" in pencil on the file copy.

¹ v.sup. p 387

"Qn.5(b). Candidates should show a clear understanding of what are the limitations of the Elizabethan stage and relate these considerations to the structure. If examiners keep this idea of the structure firmly in mind, this should distinguish good from mediocre answers."

Qn.6(a). The important words are as a poet. (Credit should be given to candidates who see the implication: that the story does not give scope to some of Chaucer's gifts.) But the main points are the opportunities Chaucer saw and took in the story for poetic description, drama, pathos and irony.

Qn.6(b). Candidates are not asked to discuss the concessive clause; but a candidate who does briefly consider it and makes intelligent reference to Chaucer's other works should be given credit for doing so. Most candidates will not be able to give much content to the word 'mediaeval' from their general reading and knowledge. It is enough if they make quite clear what aspects of the poem strike them as 'not modern'. e.g. attitude to the relation of sexes, isolation of one moral quality, patience, and one duty, 'wifely obedience', and general simplification of a human situation in order that it may symbolize something else, cf. ll 1142-1155. Candidates who show awareness that Chaucer is not wholly at ease in writing a moral tale of this kind and question the words 'through and through' should be rewarded.

Qn.7(a). ['Who first seduced them to that foul revolt?' In the lines following this, Milton describes Satan as a creature of guile, envy, revenge, pride, ambition and impiety. Is that the impression you gain of Satan as presented in the rest of book I of *Paradise Lost* ?]

This question must be closely argued from the text. We should not decide which attitude a candidate should take up; but a simple 'yes' or 'no' is obviously a bad answer. Good candidates will be aware of what can be said on both sides, and the best will probably use the summary of the first description provided in giving the case against Satan. High credit should be given to candidates who are aware of the similes used and of the attitude of Satan's followers to him, as well as of his powers as a leader, etc.

Qn. 7(b)['His natural port is gigantic loftiness' (Johnson on Milton) Apply this to the style of Book I of *Paradise Lost*.]

Qn.8(a). [Illustrate the part played by coincidence in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Do you consider that Hardy's use of it increases or diminishes the tragic effect of the novel?]

The question falls into two parts: illustration and critical discussion. I propose we divide 16 and 8, and that in the first part examiners should be strict in judging whether candidates are clearly aware of what coincidence is and show well the importance of the incidents they discuss in the plot.

Qn.8(b).['While containing some elements of permanent truth, Hardy's picture of country life and character is rapidly becoming a picture of a bygone age. From your reading of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, would you agree with this observation?]

This might be handled in two parts, but I imagine most candidates will not divide their answers. Permanent truth about country life and character is what is asked for, and not permanent truth about human life generally.

One might conclude that both questions and marking scheme are somewhat long-winded and heavy handed, and there is a strange mixture of expectations about candidate response: for instance the assumption that some candidates will have read sufficiently widely in Chaucer's other works to comment usefully on the idea that *The Clerk's Tale* does not really give adequate scope to his style sits oddly with the conviction that few

of them will be able to give much 'content' to the word 'mediaeval'. Some further illustration of this 'Janus' stance is provided by the coincidence that not the marking scheme alone but some of the ephemeral paperwork of the examination for 1951 also survives¹. All examiners were issued with a report form for completion which contained the sentence:

"The pass-marks in most subjects are such that, of a large and representative group of candidates, about 50% will reach the pass standard. I consider that, on my marking, an appropriate minimum would be _____ for a Pass at A level"

Of those responses which have survived, the majority of examiners have inserted 40%. The examiner responsible for Paper 2A has left the space blank and written below the words "I feel that I must leave this to the Awarders" then added the observation:

"Could it be impressed upon the teachers of boys especially that general remarks are of little value without the backing of close reference to or quotation from the text?"

The Chief Examiner's own report form has been completed with the figure 40-45, together with the following handwritten comment:

"
REPORT ON QUESTION PAPER
A & C is a highly unsuitable set play.very few seemed aware what 'structure of the play' meant. Setters will have to realise in future that a great majority of candidates have no idea what a 'coincidence' is.
Paper III proved beyond the capacity of all but a handful of candidates. We have to realise that illiteracy is growing and candidates can neither use words properly nor understand their proper use."

Some support for this last paragraph is provided by the report form of the examiner for Paper 3, who observes "Appeared right for real Scholarship candidates. Many cand. too immature for it. Pass mark 40%". He then appends a summary of his marking scheme which makes clear that he had given the best paper 75%.

There is quite a lot to be learned from this, and perhaps the most important point is the fact which emerges that, initially, a pass-rate of 50% was specifically aimed at, and the so-called 'pass-mark' of 40% was arrived at as a result of drawing a line across the completed and tabulated results about half-way down the list. It comes to exactly the same thing, but it always seems to change the perspective if one says that there was a policy of failing half the candidates who had voluntarily stayed on for three years after the school leaving age. I do not need to repeat here the distinction

¹ Oxford University Archive Ref. LE 65/4

between norm and criteria referencing, but the fact that examining methodologies changed from one to the other in the course of the period under review must not be forgotten – nor must the concomitant fact that the change was never understood by many of those who insist upon a decline of standards. The elitist mindset of the early university dons responsible for marking 'A' level scripts is clearly illustrated in that reference to illiteracy, and in the echo on real scholarship candidates – i.e. those who would be applying successfully for Open Scholarships at one or other of the examiners' colleges. The early emphasis on candidates of this calibre being the ones who really matter is a weakness rather than a strength of the system, and casting it aside is a sign of the improvement of educational standards, not a decline.

One further point that emerges from these casual notes, and that indicates a fundamental distinction between the approach to the business of conducting 'A' level examinations at the beginning and now, is the original absolute division between the 'Setters', the examiners, and the 'Awarders'. Today, when the 'Setters' are known as the Question Paper Evaluation Committee, and consist of the group of Principal Examiners who actually write the draft papers and meet collectively to debate all the drafts and to agree on modifications where necessary; when the examiners work under the direction of the same group of Principal Examiners, who prepare mark schemes at the same time as they draft their papers and which come under the same collective scrutiny; and when the Awarders are the same people again, who preface every section of the award by a brief report from the relevant Principal Examiner on candidate performance on the paper concerned, it is extremely difficult to imagine the way in which the work might be contained in watertight compartments. That it did not work efficiently thus divided is illustrated not just by the opinion of the Chief Examiner that *Antony and Cleopatra* is 'a highly unsuitable play' – an opinion which was clearly totally disregarded by the board since they used it again several times – but by the ephemeral paperwork of 1956 which, again coincidentally, has been preserved alongside the marking scheme for that year. Before we come to this matter, however, the first formal Examiners' Report must be considered, issued as it was in 1953, by the Cambridge Syndicate.

The 'atmosphere' of this report seems perhaps a little less hidebound than that of Oxford. On the nearest equivalent to Oxford's paper 1, a paper dealing with Chaucer, Spenser and Milton, the Report begins:

"What the examiners look for in this paper is evidence of a lively knowledge of the prescribed texts: 'lively' because it is hoped, from the nature of the questions asked, to encourage not only an informed familiarity with the actual texts, but an interested enjoyment in the more general aspects of the works. Unfortunately, though not invariably, many candidates seem to possess too many 'notes' on some of the set books to have any room either for pleasure or reflection. This is a pity, as too much parrot-like knowledge, however accurately and competently repeated, often prevents the question from being properly answered.The questions are designed to induce the candidates to scrutinize, assess and rearrange what they know, and they must, therefore, be able to rearrange what they know to suit the occasion."

At first sight, this might seem an approach altogether nearer to contemporary expectations than Oxford's dismissive concerns with the illiteracy of scholarship candidates, and the emphasis on lively interaction with the texts rather than on the display of acquired knowledge to be an encouragement to good teaching. As the document progresses, however, despite the fact that there is nothing in this Report with which one would wish to quarrel, the two universities seem to draw a little closer together. The Cambridge examiners continue:

"Three main faults have been observed.....First, candidates seize upon some familiar word or phrase in a question and, without thought, allow it to evoke some stock response of ready information. Often this information is quite irrelevant to the question and the real subject remains untouched. Secondly, candidates sometimes feel the need to pour out all they know upon a subject, irrespective of its value or concern with the point at issue. Thirdly, candidates waste time by writing long introductions to their answers. In a paper of this length it is necessary that candidates should come to grips with their subject and not waste time on vague preliminaries. They should be encouraged to marshall their thoughts before starting on the answers and to avoid using the first page for random thoughts while they seek a way to the central point of the question.Candidates must be encouraged to read the questions carefully and with open minds, to concentrate on relevant facts and to avoid discursive asides."

The first two points hardly advance us much beyond the material of the introductory paragraph, and the repetition is beginning to come across as captious. The third point is valid, and a direct appeal to encourage teachers to spend a little time on the matter of examination technique rather than on the main task of inculcating knowledge of, and enthusiasm for, the texts. But as soon as that obvious remark is made, one is reminded immediately of the long-standing objection to examinations on literature –

that examinations become an artificial topic of study in their own right, and an obstruction to the proper focus on what the author is saying and the points of style he uses to get his message across. And as soon as that thought enters the mind, it is immediately accompanied by the question as to whether those "discursive asides" were possibly evidence of 'an interested enjoyment in the more general aspects of the work', and whether the required concentration on 'relevant facts' does not savour a little too much of the Gradgrind to be entirely compatible with a lively knowledge. This may well be a harsh interpretation of the message which the Cambridge Syndicate is trying to convey; and a more generous and hopeful gloss would be that all the candidates in 1953, and for a few years beyond that date, would have been prepared for examinations by teachers brought up on the School and Higher Certificate pattern from which the enlightened Cambridge board was progressively drawing away, and therefore in need of constant reminders that the old order was changing. Yet the factor of the norm-referenced 50% pass-rate cannot be overlooked. So long as scripts were to be subjected to this kind of arbitrary judgement, rather than assessed on their individual merits as responses to a literary stimulus, the onus on teachers must have been to play safe and concentrate upon indisputable facts which might come in useful, rather than to encourage an enthusiastic but very possibly less disciplined approach.

Once Cambridge gets down to details, the resemblance to the Oxford approach becomes closer. On context passages for instance:

"...what the examiners expect is an accurate and lucid rendering of the chosen passages, succinct commentary on any difficulty or ambiguity, and a brief relation of the passage to the whole work so as to explain their setting and reference"

though the commentary on the actual performance of candidates in this section of the paper is interesting, and reinforces my earlier comment¹ on the excessive emphasis placed upon this exercise, which was, of course, eventually to be abandoned altogether.

"The paraphrasing of the Chaucer passage was quite well done and an improvement on previous years.....it should be noted here that candidates' knowledge of Chaucer's English has improved over the last few years. The Milton passage was not particularly well done. Candidates appeared to be hypnotised by Milton's style and vocabulary and quite unable to put the passage into their own words. Too many merely put the poetry into prose and retained all the key words and phrases."

¹ v.sup. p 402 et seq.

However, perhaps the most useful aspect of the Cambridge Report of 1953 is the early example provided of a 'safe pass' essay on Chaucer. The question set had been in the form of an instruction to:

"Illustrate the Pardoner's knowledge of the psychology of the common people and show how he plays on their hopes and fears."

and the preliminary comment on performance in general reads:

"Apart from the gambit word 'psychology', (which, by the way, very few candidates spelt correctly) this was a simply asked question. The mention of 'hopes and fears' should have provoked more straightforward answers. What the examiners wanted was some suggestion of what was in the minds of his simple mediaeval audience. eg preoccupation with the business of getting a living from the land....and then some indication of how the Pardoner played on and up to these 'hopes and fears'."

The example essay appended certainly follows this prescription very satisfactorily:

"The Pardoner is very wide awake to the fact that the people of mediaeval England live by and with their land, and therefore the most important care in their lives is the safety of cattle and stock, the quality of the corn and above all the health of their sheep, for it was on wool that their livelihood depended.

Knowing this the Pardoner offers to them his relics which will help them, the shoulder bone of the sheep of the Holy Jew (name carefully concealed) set in 'latoun' is offered to heal the 'pokkes' and 'scab' – dread of all farmers.

A mitten is good for producing a heavy crop of 'whete' and 'otes', another relic will see the increase of stock and cattle, and the Pardoner, by understanding what troubles are nearest to the hearts of country people is able to extract their money from them without any difficulty."

The specific editorial comment on this essay explains that it has been quoted for its

".....relevance, clarity and well-argued ideas. The wording is occasionally clumsy, but it is obvious that the candidate knows what she is talking about and has the shape and plan of her answer in her head as she writes."

This, of course, is unquestionably true, and this is a workmanlike if rather brief and superficially illustrated response to the question. But it is, perhaps, surprising to find that it is clearly in the upper 50% of the scripts submitted in 1953, as it must have been to merit the description 'safe pass'. That it was so does not argue for an enormously high overall standard at the time, or suggest any great scope for a hypothetical decline in quality in the years to come. Three years later, the Oxford Chief Examiner is to reinforce the picture of general, factually-accurate, mediocrity in no uncertain manner – and to blame the examination paper unequivocally for it. The Oxford University Archive again preserves the full typescript of the 1956 marking scheme for paper 1, together with the formal and confidential report of the Chief

Examiner to the Secretary to the Delegacy¹, and together they make very interesting reading, focussing as they do on the matter of the separation of responsibilities to which I referred above.²

The mark scheme is longer than that for 1951 by a whole, closely-typed foolscap sheet, and though much of the introductory material is directly copied from the earlier document, it is the points of difference which catch the attention. In the first place, the Chief Examiner has availed himself of the fact that the Shakespeare questions are compulsory to increase the mark for question 1 from 10 marks to 12, thus increasing the total possible to 104. He has also allocated both the extra marks to the explanatory note rather than to the 'full and clear rendering' on the grounds that

"...more is asked for in part ii of this question and a good candidate ought to have the opportunity to gain 5 marks for good comment on context and dramatic significance."

Context questions on Milton and Chaucer retain the earlier 7/3 weighting, and the remainder of the general instructions are unaltered, but there is an interesting addition to the instruction for deductions for defects in the 'renderings'.

"While the system of ½ mark off for each mistake and ¼ off for each doubtful phrase proves a useful guide, any rigid application of it has proved useless in past years. Similarly, examiners must not be too hidebound by the division of marks between rendering and comment, though this is a necessary framework for marking in view of the setting of the question. The total for the question is after all the important thing, and examiners must be prepared to use this proposed framework sensibly, so that the total arrived at is in their opinion a fair estimate of the whole question's worth."

This encouragement to use a more flexible approach to marking, and to consider the 'whole question' rather than follow a precept to divide the mark up into rigid fragments is encouraging, and it was to be followed, when it came to individual questions, with further advice to vary the basic marking rules. It rapidly becomes obvious that the Chief Examiner has no very high opinion of the paper to which this mark scheme refers. In the extracts relating to individual questions which follow, to illustrate the approach of examiners at this time, I have supplied the wording of the relevant questions in square brackets. Questions 1 to 4 are passages for 'rendering' and contextual comment; 5 to 8 are essays.

¹ Oxford University Archive Ref: LE 65/6

"1(a) ['Hamlet' : 11 lines from 'O! What a rogue and peasant slave..']
Contains few difficulties of syntax and the sense is not obscure. Difficulty lies in the rendering of such half-modern words as 'fiction', 'conceit', 'working', 'function' etc. The context will take up much of the comment, relating it exactly to what has gone before. The rest will be comment on Hamlet's character, his delay, and the continuous provocation to action of which this is one example.

1(b) ['Hamlet': 14 lines from 'The Queen his mother/Lives almost by his looks'] A much more complicated piece than (a) which I should think very few candidates would choose. Difficulties of word and phrase are much greater, and some will need a note rather than a rendering. e.g. lines 5 & 10. Comment here not so much on specific character as on relationship of characters, and on how this speech clears away another possible reason for Hamlet's failure to perform his mission.

2(c) [Chaucer 'Man of Lawe's Tale' : stanza beginning 'O firste moevyng cruel firmament] "An extremely difficult piece to set for 'rendering'. Comment seems to be the more important thing here, and we might be prepared to give a few more marks for comment than rendering, if this gives a fairer total mark..... The complexities of the universal double movement and its astrological implications present the major difficulties.

3(b) [Milton, 'Paradise Lost Book IV': 12 lines from 'Now came still Evening on'] A 'rendering' of this seems a stupidly unnecessary exercise for it is perfectly clear as it is. Nevertheless 'amorous descant', 'living saphir', 'apparent Queen' might possibly be devitalised into clear English, with some comment on the double use of 'apparent' and certain Latinate constructions as in line 4."

The paragraph on marking essays is almost the same as in 1951, but one clause has been added, after the instruction not to bunch too many marks at 11, 12 and 13. This reads "though in practice it is undeniable that many papers do fall around the mere pass mark". With the pass-mark set at norm-referenced figure to pass half the candidates, it is hardly surprising that there was a crowd of scripts at or about a point which represents an average performance. It is none the less encouraging to see an honest admission of this inevitability, instead of the conventional pretence that by skilful marking meaningful discrimination can be achieved at this point. The essay titles selected from the remainder of the document are those to which reference is made in the confidential report.

"5(a) ['What impression do you gain of Hamlet as a person from his soliloquies, his actions, and his relations with other people, up to the beginning of the play scene?'] A straightforward question which will doubtless produce many plodding solid highly-documented answers. Any attempt to escape from a sectionalised chronological commentary, and to unify the various impressions into a personality should be rewarded.

5(b) ['It is strange that in what has been called a drama of delay the action should be so packed and rapid.' Discuss.] Candidates should show that (a) the 'delay' is Hamlet's and that much of the action is not initiated by him (b) that much of Hamlet's action is not directed to the end he should be fulfilling; that his delay finds its expression in actions which avoid the issue. weaker candidates will talk either of Hamlet's delay in general terms, or will list the 'packed and rapid actions. Higher marks should go to those

to those who attempt to join these two into an argument.

7(a) ['Does Satan as presented in Book IV of *Paradise Lost* seem to you a consistent character?'] The possible inconsistencies suggested must be the combination of the huge and heroic with the sneaking and petty, of the apparent moments of tenderness and remorse with hate and destructive urge. These ought to be pointed out and some credit given for the pointing out and illustration. Better candidates will argue that that these are all consistent with the state Satan has reached in this Book, with his last look at possible penitence, his 'Evil be thou my good' resolution, and the slow disappearance of the archangelic in his nature.

8(a) ['The real seen as fantastic, the fanciful made as solid as the real': do you find this in *Bleak House* ?] I can see more being written on the first part of this question – the real seen as fantastic, both in character and event in general inflation and exaggeration, though there is less evidence of the 'fanciful made as solid as the real, as far as I can see.'¹

Save for the odd flash of impatience, this marking scheme is written within the conventional parameters of a Chief Examiner imposing common standards on his assistants, though as I have already suggested, the writer is prepared to accept something more akin to contemporary reliance on the professional judgement of the examiners when it comes to the precise allocation of marks to the first section of the paper. All this reticence disappears, however, when it comes to his official report to the Secretary of the Delegacy.

"Here is my report on the English Literature paper A1/1, which I had not room for on the sheet provided.

As a group, we thought this an extremely bad paper. I wish to speak quite strongly about it. Personally, I can say that after seven years' marking of this paper, I had to face the dreariest and dullest collection of scripts which it has ever been my misfortune to mark, and I am sure the paper was largely responsible. I did not find one candidate out of 210 who even smelt faintly of distinction quality, nor any spectacular fails. The paper seemed designed to give the stupid, solid candidate his head, and to drag the bright ones down to mediocrity.

The examiners would like to protest once more – I forget how many times we have protested – against the stupidity of the present method of setting the paper. Why is the paper-setter set apart from a) the senior examiner, who has to prepare the mark sheet and try to see what the setter was getting at in his questions; and b) the examiners, who know better than anyone what certain questions produce, and what exercises are failures of tests of quality etc.? If the paper-setter must be apart, could he not be present at the Examiners' Meeting? If not, the examiners would like to know why not.

In section A, most of us objected to 'renderings' on principle. It is surely teaching a child a wholly wrong approach to Poetry, i.e. that there is a valid prose equivalent and that, even more horrid, there is some merit in finding one. When such a piece as 3(b) is set, which is perfectly clear and supremely beautiful English, one gives up in despair. 2(c) seems an idiotic piece for rendering. How on earth could it be rendered? Explanatory notes, yes. But rendering.....

As working examiners, we would like to point out that 4 is a complete failure as a type of question and ought to be discontinued.

As for section B, 5(a) was a terrible question and produced nothing good. It encouraged children to give their ready prepared "character sketch of Hamlet". No thought was needed; originality was swamped in material. The same goes

¹ Op.cit.

for 7(a). Heaven knows what the use is of trying to break down this "character" obsession in the study of literature if we go on encouraging it with questions such as this. 5(b) was a little better for better candidates, but here again they generally either listed the actions, or got bogged down in the futility of "Why did Hamlet delay?" B8(a) again produced streams of fact. What else could it do? I could go on, but my point is clear. The questions invited a parade of facts, and the candidates know the facts. Heaven knows they know the facts; and so, I suspect, do the poor, suffering examiners. The dullest of the candidates can parade them; the brightest, if led by such questions, is smothered by them. Cannot more discussive questions be framed, questions which will give better candidates an opportunity to frame an argument and use their knowledge? Only thus will we get a wide range of marks, reflecting the real ability of candidates.

I am sorry if I appear violent, but after this year's examining I feel that violence is necessary somewhere, unless we want the examination to become a pass guarantee to the dull plodder.

As I doubt whether I will be examining next year, I have taken the liberty of sending a copy of this report to my fellow examiners, so that next year there will be some continuity in this report and its observations." ¹

It is difficult to know exactly how one should react to this letter. It demonstrates an examiner who feels keenly about the importance of the job he is doing, and is prepared to make a fuss about the shortcomings of the system imposed upon him as he sees them. That must be a good thing, and it disposes of the image, frequently called up by critics of the examination system like Brian Jackson, of the examiner as a mechanical drudge. The initial cause of his protest, the isolation of the anonymous 'setter' is obvious and genuine ground for concern, and what is said about it is so obviously in tune with what has been standard practice for years that one remains startled that it ever needed saying. Moreover, another target of the writer's dissatisfaction, the 'rendering' of context passages, was eminently in need of expression on very much the grounds expressed here. One can only hope that this attack shortened the days of this particular approach to examining, though it was to be some years before it was finally and totally abandoned: certainly it must have had some impact, since it seems to be the only report of its kind to have been retained in the Archive; though it is, of course, possible that this was kept on record to justify the termination of his contract that the author seems to forecast! On the other hand, there are aspects of this letter which are unhappily conformable to those aspects of the Oxford Delegacy's attitudes which are least acceptable to modern views. There is the patronising double reference to 18-year-olds as children for example; there is the clear indication that in the sixth year from the inception of the Advanced level

¹ Oxford University Archive Ref: LE 65/6

of the General General Certificate of Education, a Chief Examiner's mind is still firmly rooted in the old Higher Certificate, with his seven years of experience of this paper and his concern for candidates of the "distinction quality" which has officially ceased to exist; but, above all, there is the undisguised contempt for "stupid, solid, candidates" as though those qualities are inseparable, for candidates who know and can parade facts, and for "dull plodders" for whom this paper was clearly, in his opinion at least, never designed. It hardly needs the college crest embossed at the head of the letter to remind us that the selection of appropriate candidates for such establishments seems to have been the principle concern of the Oxford Board's examiners for some years, rather than the ever-increasing number of students who chose to stay on into the sixth form and to study English literature, and who did so with both benefit and enjoyment even if without the skills to manifest really scholarly responses. There are, of course, also students who stay on into the sixth form more through inertia than design, and who take English because they suppose it to be a soft option; and their examination papers are, as they must be, an annoyance and a provocation to examiners, who are justified in complaining about them as they regularly do. But there will have been far fewer of these among the greatly restricted entry of 1956, they will almost certainly not have mastered even the 'facts' of their set books, and no examiner will have described them as 'solid'. There was a good deal wrong with the Oxford paper of 1956, and it is good to see a Chief Examiner prepared to risk his post in order to point them out; but it would have been better still if he had done so in the interests of all those entered for the examination and not merely the "better candidates" capable of featuring at the top of "a wide range of marks reflecting real ability".

Nevertheless, the strength of feeling in this letter makes it abundantly clear why the 'pass/fail' concept so warmly defended by the authorities was doomed to fail, and why the introduction of grades to public examinations was inevitable.

The Report by the Examiners of the Cambridge Syndicate from the following year is specifically a report on the work of candidates dealing with Shakespeare, and again it contains extracts from candidates' answers together with critical commentaries on their strengths and weaknesses. The general tone is rather more sympathetic than that of the

Oxford document, and confines itself exclusively to the business of illustrating how questions have been tackled and how teachers and students might benefit from this analysis. The foreword begins with a clear statement of these parameters:

"This is not a report on the examination but the performance. No attempt has been made to offer a critique of the paper or of the methods of the examiners." ¹

Much the largest part of the document is taken up by extensive quotation from the work of candidates of widely varying ability on every question on the paper, together with some generalised comment upon the ways in which each question had acted as a stimulus to both impressive and inadequate answers. The *Introduction*, however, deals with the fundamental reasons for using Shakespeare texts as the centrepiece of a literature examination, and thus casts a useful light on examiner intention.

"One would like to believe that Advanced Level Shakespeare studies are meant to encourage the sort of interest in the plays that will continue outside school, whether in the university or elsewhere. The task of all who are concerned with Shakespeare should be to keep the plays alive, to keep responses to them full and fresh. This is the teacher's job and the examiner's." ²

The inclusion of 'or elsewhere' at the end of the opening sentence is a clear indication of a difference in approach between the Oxford and Cambridge boards: Oxford always contrives to give the impression, even if unfairly, that the examiners never even think of 'elsewhere', still less say it. A more definite distinction lies in the fact that Cambridge spends some time in justifying the inclusion of compulsory paraphrase, to which, the Oxford Chief Examiner tells us, most of his colleagues "object in principle" ³. As I have already made clear, my personal inclination here is to side with Oxford, but it must be conceded that Cambridge make a reasonable case.

"The evidence of the scripts suggests the continuing need for a comprehension test, and the paraphrase seems to be the best available form. Tests which ask for comment on italicised words or phrases or for answers to specific questions would prove too exacting for the average candidate, and impose the examiner's preconceptions without necessarily discovering the candidate's interests.....Any grammatical and intelligible reading which solves the more obvious difficulties of wording, syntax and thought, is highly valued. Only the more ambitious need attempt the refinements. The most distinguished paraphrases interpret the rhetoric as well as the sense, express the mood as well as the thought. But this appears to be a skill only within the reach of the gifted few, and it would be unwise and unjust to frame a rubric designed to encourage it." ⁴

¹ *Report on the Work in English Paper II, Shakespeare, GCE Advanced Level 1957* p 2

² *Ibid.* p 5

³ *v.sup.* p 424

⁴ *Op.cit.* p 7

This last sentence is one which the Oxford examiners might well take to heart. Not, of course, that Cambridge rejects the 'gifted few' or confuses them with the less able, even to the extent of acknowledging that such gifts do not always result in perfect responses:

"It is most apparent that those who do well in Section A have not always rehearsed the passages they paraphrase and have not been trained to reproduce the notes: they make too many small mistakes and are guilty of omissions that poorer candidates could correct. But they have been taught a critical method – to ask the right questions about their own reaction to the passage, and to supply answers that are carefully phrased and express their sense of what is important.It will be seen that the best candidates are often those who show themselves conscious of the play as a made thing – usually, but by no means always, as a thing made for the theatre. They are more likely to ask themselves, "Why does Shakespeare make Claudius say this, in this way?" than to ask "Why does Claudius say this?"The sense of the play as a made thing – a theatrical artifact and an organisation of metaphor – does not invalidate an approach through "character". On the contrary, some of the best answers are in terms of character; and those who would rather talk of people than of words, images and ideas must not be discouraged." ¹

Here, too, one is conscious of an approach clearly distinct from the Oxford reaction to "character obsession"²; an approach which is not only more balanced, but which provides a better explanation of the defects of the 'character' approach than does the more vehemently opposed Oxford comment. There is a sense here that Cambridge is genuine in its wish to encourage those who would rather talk of people than of words and ideas, while it is difficult to rid oneself of the notion that the Oxford examiners rather despise them, and what I have called the more sympathetic approach is apparent in some of the examples quoted :

"Shakespearewants to convince his audience that Claudius's smooth exterior conceals something loathsome'. This is right, while the sentence supplied in another script, 'Shakespeare's blank verse here is smooth and regular', is simply uncomprehending.A phrase such as...'Shakespeare wants to convince his audience that....' is usually a sign that the candidate is alive to the playwright's craft. But equally good results sometimes follow from a pursuit of the character's motives – 'Claudius wants to convince his court that he and Gertrude have acted responsibly.'" ³

But again it is obvious that the Cambridge approach is far from abandoning critical principles in order to encourage mediocrity or the servilely imitative, and the *Introduction* is at pains to distinguish between real and synthetic reactions:

"Personal responses, like most other things, can be simulated, and the examiner himself needs a "tact for the genuine" if he is to distinguish that

¹ Op.cit. pp 5-6

² v.sup. p 425

³ Op.cit. p 10

quality in the candidate. However, the examiner when he is vigilant, looks for the kind of responsiveness that has been cultivated, intensified and made articulate by study. The teacher and the critic often do much to shape and clarify a candidate's personal response, although sometimes, no doubt, they must share with examiners the responsibility for destroying it." ¹

To move on to actual examples of candidates' writing, the first passage set for paraphrase and comment was taken from Claudius' speech to the court in Act I of *Hamlet*, starting at 'Therefore our sometime sister, now our queen' and extending for 18 lines as far as 'To our most valiant brother'. Three full versions are printed, and I have chosen that which is described as an "unambitious but representative 'good average' answer" ²:

"Thus we have married Gertrude, who was formerly our sister-in-law but has now become our queen and our partner in ruling this country well prepared for war; but we have done this with frustrated pleasure, as you might say, celebrating while we mourned and mourning at our wedding, balancing equal amounts of pleasure and grief.troubled us with notes demanding that we should give back to him all the territory which our very brave brother won in a perfectly legal way from Fortinbras' father." ³

One can, of course, see why some critics might feel that this was an exercise not worth setting, and the performance is undoubtedly plodding – but equally it *is* solid, and it clearly deserves to pass. If this is merely 'good average', somewhere in the mid-fifties in percentage terms, or a 'safe C' in modern examination terminology, the standards overall cannot be unduly generous on the one hand or severe on the other. Unfortunately for the purposes of this thesis, all but one of the specimen essays printed are there to illustrate particular strengths and insights as examples of what candidates are capable of achieving within the restrictions of the examination room. Of the exception, we are told:

"Many features of the 'pass' answer can be observed here – the one quotation, the inaccuracy, the toughness and the sentimentality. On the other hand, she writes with energy...." ⁴

The set title for this example was "Do you find in *Richard III* suggestions of pity and humanity which act as a foil to the cruelty and harshness?" and the writer begins:

"In 'Richard III' there is little suggestion of pity and humanity which act as foil to the cruelty and harshness. Richard turns his deformity which might have aroused our pity into his greatest weapon:

I that am curtailed of this fair proportion
Cheated of feature...[my abbreviation]
I am determined to prove a villain.

¹ Op.cit. p 5

² Ibid. p 14

³ Ibid, p 15

⁴ Ibid. p 28

Here we have Richard's own words for his career throughout the play. The only pity that seems to be in the play is pity for the two little princes who have not deserved their fate, and the only person to show that is Elizabeth.

Richard had decided before the play opens that Clarence should be his first victim. When the curtain goes up and after Richard's soliloquy, Clarence is revealed as being on his way to the Tower.

Richard may be justified in what his part in putting Clarence in the Tower springs from. Clarence has deserted his family and fought on the side of Henry VI and Warwick. To Richard who fought to get the throne for his father this was reason enough for murder.

Clarence also helped to murder Warwick. A man who betrays his family and kills those with whom he has fought deserves no pity; and Clarence gets none.

Edward 'the wanton' dies naturally as a result of the kind of life he leads. The two princes in their innocence excite our pity, but this only sharpens the harshness of Richard. Our pity for him is aroused when he tells Lady Anne that his love for her has drawn tears to his eyes, something that even the death of his father could not do. In 'Henry VI' we learn that Richard loved his father; fought to gain the crown for his father; shouted and cheered him on in battle. Richard hero-worshipped his father, and so we can pity him when his father died." ¹

I have quoted approximately half the completed essay, and the remainder is neither better nor worse than this. It may well remind us of Oxford's impatience with parades of facts, it is not entirely accurate, and the style is jerky and repetitive. But there is enough there to justify the bare pass which the examiners gave it, and, I have no doubt, which their successors would endorse today if this script were submitted to a contemporary grade award. The exact equivalent modern grade to a bare pass from 1957 is as difficult to determine as the value of a given sum of money from the same period, and in offering this analogy I am certainly not seeking to imply that the standards of forty years ago have been devalued. On the contrary, I am convinced that there is nothing here to assist the supporters of the falling standards argument. But there have been considerable changes in attitude. The assumption that the pass-rate should be fixed at a level which would fail half the candidates was abandoned years ago in favour of a criterion-led assessment, and in consequence a 'bare pass' in 1957 which represents, and is sometimes also described as an average performance, suggests a level of achievement which, in 1987, would have been represented by the upper end of a grade D, the most commonly awarded grade, received at that time by some 21% of the entry, between the 46% who were awarded grades A to C, and the 33% who finished with E, N or U. If this script were to be assessed today, it might well fall

¹ Op.cit pp 41-42

into the band of marks within which the C/D boundary had to be determined, but it would almost certainly be judged to fall in the lower category. Categorization is not, in English at least, an absolutely exact science, but when we are allowed words rather than marks or grades in which to assess performance, examiners tend to speak very much the same language across the decades. The essential difference between the approaches of the Oxford and Cambridge examiners is that the former tend to dwell upon shortcomings and the latter to make the best of what their candidates offer. It is very much the classic distinction between the pessimist and optimist – that the one sees the bottle half-empty and the other half-full. Where Oxford laments the solid plodder's regard for facts, Cambridge discriminates more finely between candidates who achieve around average marks:

"Naïve plot summaries are rarer in middle-grade scripts, but many share with the story-tellers two limitations of approach: they frame their answers in narrative order and they treat the play as though it were recast by Shaw into prose argument. Neither limitation, however, need be disastrous. There are those who plod through the plot, keeping the question more or less in mind; but there are also those who dance, pursuing the question with spirit and skill through a bright scenario. There are many who deprive the play of all its energies of language; but there are a few who, while neglecting the poetry, contrive to display the human tensions of the plot with wit and insight – colour-blind but still responsive to the draughtsmanship." ¹

Despite the example given by Cambridge in the matter of publishing Reports designed to assist teachers and students in preparing for their examinations by explanations of the examiners' purpose and approach to setting questions, and of their reactions to sample scripts, Oxford were not initially tempted to follow suit. The first official Examiners' Report to be published by the Delegacy was issued in 1958, and at that time, as the Introduction makes clear, there was no thought of this as the first of a series.

"It hasbeen represented to the Delegates that examiners and awarders of long experience must have much to say that might be of value to teachers and candidates and that the occasional issue of a general report conveying these impressions would be helpful to schools.
.....it is not proposed to issue any further such document for a substantial period." ²

It was, indeed, not until 1966 that the Delegacy next found occasion to issue such a document, after which the Report became a biennial publication, though as it was so organised that each individual examination was dealt with in alternate Reports, there

¹ Op.cit. p 12

² Op.cit. p 2

was an interval of four years between each specific subject report and its successor. It is for this reason that there was, in fact, a ten year gap between the first report on A level English and the next. It is, therefore, quite impracticable to attempt to derive any consistent picture of the standards of the generality of candidates in 'A' Level English Literature from these Oxford reports, and even had they been annual their remarks would have had to be treated with some caution. Examiners are no exception to the general rule that people have a tendency to air their own particular prejudices when presented with a captive audience; and the separate observations by English examiners published by the Delegacy at intervals over the thirty years of this survey are perhaps too personal, subjective and idiosyncratic to be reliable guides to the rise, fall or maintenance of absolute standards of student competence.

Nevertheless, some patterns do emerge from a study of these documents which cast an interesting light on progress over the period. There is, for example, an arid, academic tone about the 1958 Report which corresponds to the internal material of earlier years, and contrasts somewhat with the more generous spirit of the Cambridge Reports; and which must indicate something about the examiners' expectations, as well as about the candidates' shortcomings. For instance:

"A quotation....which cannot be given with at any rate reasonable accuracy may do more harm than good. Under examination conditions an occasional mistake is pardonable, but this is not the case with errors so gross that they ruin the sense, spoil the rhyme or mar the rhythm. It is not unusual to find a heroic couplet so misquoted that it neither rhymes nor scans; and some candidates clearly have no sense of the rhythm of a blank verse line. This is strange, since, not only do satiric or emotional points often inhere in the effect of rhyme and rhythm, but also the mnemonic assistance of rhythm must have been rejected in a-rhythmic memorizations." ¹

"the vocabulary of literary criticism is largely drawn from that of common speech and much care is needed to discriminate the mainly literary from the mainly practical connotation of many words." ²

"It is asking too much to expect from candidates maturely informed and perceptive criticism, but a controlled reading of the critics can help them towards maturity of style and judgement." ³

".... there often appears an alarming inability to follow any train of thought depending upon the arrangement and choice of words, or upon syntax and punctuation, or upon figures of thought." ⁴

and, as a final assessment:

¹ Op.cit. p 5

^{2,3,4} Ibid. p 6

"Too many candidates reveal slovenly reading and thinking in their slovenly writing. Elementary grammatical mistakes and deformed syntax in the work of candidates pretending to advanced critical judgement must raise awkward questions." ¹

Remarks of this kind are sprinkled at regular intervals throughout the text, reinforcing the generally minatory quality which informs it from the beginning, as in the conclusion to the second paragraph:

"....whatever question may be set on Wordsworth, some candidates always offer as an answer an essay on 'the stages in the development of Wordsworth's attitude to nature', jejunely cut down from a painfully memorized piece of class- or home-work. Similar irrelevance is very common, and is to some extent allowed for at Ordinary Level; but if candidates after two years preparation are perpetuating the habit they deserve to fail, however much information they have garnered and however many and long the quotations they have learned." ²

By the time of the 1968 Report the tone of the contributors has become waspish rather than arid, while remaining academic:

"It seems strange that a generation of candidates who constantly use the word 'relevant' as an absolute term of praise for literary works should frequently offer answers that examiners find 'irrelevant' but the strangeness is more apparent than real." ³

"When we set specific questions we are asking for answers to them; we are not merely finding verbiage to disguise a vague hope that candidates will write down anything they happen to remember about Chaucer or Spenser or Milton or Wordsworth. If we wanted this we should ask for it." ⁴

"In many candidates' scripts there is distressing evidence of inability to read, in any but the most superficial sense of following words with the eyes and the surface of the mind. There has been no grip, no engagement between the mind and the meanings of words, either in themselves or in a context." ⁵

"How can candidates respond to a poem that they cannot read? How can examiners gauge the quality of their response if that response is made to a poem existent only in minds bewildered by semi-literacy?" ⁶

Nevertheless, there is also in the 1968 report some sense of feeling for the candidates and a desire to assist which was absent ten years earlier. For instance:

"For various reasons it is now only too easy to over-estimate an adolescent's reading capacity, and there is perhaps a need to find out just what a pupil understands of a text before expecting him to remember much extra information *about* the text.if he finds difficulty with the text itself, the use of criticism should be limited at first to helping with sheer explication.....We should like to see candidates helped to make contact with great authors, not shielded from them by an armour of criticism." ⁷

This is an advance on the assumption that reading the critics would automatically

¹ Op.cit. p 7

⁵ Ibid. p 29

² Ibid. p 4

⁶ Ibid. p 30

³ Op.cit. p 28

⁷ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

improve not only understanding but also style.

Or again:

"Apparently in all innocence (the candidate) writes out his acquired knowledge with no awareness that the knowledge may be used in relation to specific problems.Often potentially relevant material is present in such answers, and the examiners do what they can to give credit for the potential even when it is not actualized." ¹

or, on the effects of incompetent teaching:

"When the latter is the explanation we feel the candidate has suffered an injustice. The examiners, unfortunately, cannot always rescue candidates from the effect of such injustice, though they do their best." ²

There is, perhaps, a suggestion here and there in the 1968 Report, that candidates are less able, or less well prepared than they were, or it may be no more than a recognition of the ever greater numbers attempting the examination, but there is also an acknowledgement that the faults castigated are by no means universal:

"In fact, all the best work (and the best is very good indeed) is based on loving attention to the literature studied, with a real effort to understand it fully and think about it honestly. Good answers take notice of the questions, and use clear statement and sufficient well-chosen evidence. Some very modest work, making no claims to originality or 'voguishness', is admirable for its honesty and care." ³

but, above all, there is a clear indication of a less Olympian approach.

Both Oxford and Cambridge Boards produced Reports dealing with Advanced Level English Literature in 1972, the latter of some substantial length and illustrated once again with reproductions of the work of candidates. Oxford's, on the other hand, is confessedly very much a restatement of 1968, though the improvement of tone is continued, perhaps as a reflection of the improvement in the scripts:

"We hope that this report will be read in conjunction with our Report of 1968, as most of what we said then we still wish to say.....It is true that our last report seems to have had one or two results. A higher proportion of candidates than formerly now try to give some appearance of answering a given question, even when they are really mainly writing out a prepared answer; and there has been a marked improvement in one detail chosen last time to illustrate some failures in reading. Nearly all candidates now understand what happens in the boat-stealing episode in *The Prelude*, which is now, again, a set text. But these are mere details, and we wish to repeat that 'we hope to see work in answer papers that is relevant: to the candidates' own response to, and thinking about, the work studied; to the works themselves; and to the question set. Our concern this year is with one major cause of work which is inadequate because it is irrelevant to the real study of the subject.'" ⁴

¹ Op.cit. p 29

² Ibid. p 28

³ Ibid. p 31

⁴ Op.cit. p 47

Before concentrating on this area of concern, however, I think it appropriate to dwell briefly on one of the 'mere details' in the opening paragraph of this Report. If it is true that the previous Report actually had results, as opposed to certain candidate shortcomings having coincidentally been rectified over a period of four years, this is not a matter to be dismissed lightly. The results claimed by the examiners are, firstly, that the practice of copying out, so far as memory serves, an essay previously submitted and marked, regardless of its appropriateness to the question set, is on the decline; and secondly, that a passage in Wordsworth's *Prelude* that was held up in the 1968 Report as an example of candidate failure to comprehend set texts is, in 1972 causing no significant difficulty. Clearly, there are grounds for pleasure on both counts – but far less so, I would suggest, if the 1968 Report in any direct or significant way contributed to either. Let us not overlook the circulation of these Reports: a copy for each main academic department sent to each school which customarily entered candidates for the Board's examinations, and a handful of additional copies to other interested parties. The school copies should have circulated among all the members of the departments included in the Report, and may well have actually done so, in the weeks following its arrival, after which they will have finished tucked away in departmental stock-rooms, out of sight and out of mind. It is, for example, highly unlikely that newcomers to the staff, or even newcomers to responsibility for 'A' level classes, would have their attention drawn to the existence of Examiners' Reports from earlier years. Such Reports may well have been not without influence upon the teaching practices of those who read them with attention, but the suggestion that the examiners' official pronouncement that Wordsworth "did *not* fix his eye upon a peak and row towards it" was responsible for the error being eradicated four years later seems to suggest that many teachers had actually been guilty of this misunderstanding themselves before the examiners set them right; and that they had also been guilty of encouraging candidates to write down anything they knew about the set text rather than to give careful consideration to the question, before the examiners explained that such a practice was unacceptable. At best, one would have to suppose that the teachers were indifferent to their pupils' incomprehensions of the text and inadequacies in examination conditions. If such

interpretations were indeed the explanation of the change, then the general level of English teaching in the late sixties and early seventies must have been in an even more parlous state than anything has hitherto suggested. Far more plausible, I suggest, is the idea that there was actually an improvement in the general candidature between 1968 and 1972, that fewer candidates were so bereft of ideas on the texts that they had been required to read as to be driven to the desperate remedy of offering a recycled essay on another topic, and that, equally, fewer candidates were actually incapable of making sense out of Wordsworth, given a little appropriate guidance. If we are to take the assessments of examiners entirely at face value, then it is abundantly clear that many of the 'A' level candidates in the first twenty years were, at best, semi-literate; yet, until the late sixties, almost all of them would have been educated in grammar schools or in the independent sector. If the acid observations by examiners, those from Oxford most notably, on the shortcomings of 'A' level scripts are to be regarded as typical of those scripts, then there was simply no room for the deterioration in standards alleged to have taken place. As I shall attempt to demonstrate in my final chapter, the selective education system was by no means the recipe for outstanding performance that vague nostalgia would have us believe, and I, for one, have no difficulty in believing that the steady growth of comprehensive schools in the late sixties and early seventies had more to do with improving standards than had the occasional Reports of the Oxford examiners. Even the major concern of the 1972 Report, from which I digressed, is an unacknowledged admission that candidates are taking the examination more seriously, and preparing themselves more effectively for what is expected of them.

"This cause of irrelevance is the substitution of reading work *about* a set text for reading the text itself. Certainly, criticism of a text can be very valuable as an aid to understanding the text, but it can be no substitute for reading the text itself.What is the use of inviting candidates to meet, face to face, a great writer, if they read his commentators, his critics, even his translators and bowdlerizers, rather than accepting the invitation? Certainly, candidates will require help in understanding the text of many works, but they should attempt to understand the text and *not* substitute for it a précis or a commentary. Nothing but the study of the prescribed work itself will leave candidates sufficiently flexible to answer any in the possible range of questions asked about it." ¹

¹ University of Oxford Delegacy of Local Examinations, *Examiners' Reports*, 1972, p 47

There is a warmth, commitment and conviction here somewhat at odds with the sterile remoteness more normally associated with the Oxford Reports, and the point at issue is both valid and important. There undoubtedly is a tendency for candidates to lack confidence in their own ability to form effective value judgements about authors and texts, and to substitute ready-made, second-hand opinions for the effort of formulating and justifying their own. This tendency has not diminished over the quarter of a century since this critique appeared, and, indeed, the appearance of rival ranges of 'cribs' specially prepared to assist in this process, testifies all too obviously to the degree to which the practice is widespread.

Yet the fault is not one of candidates who do not care, or have not bothered to find out, what the examiners expect of them. Rather is it a weakness of those who believe themselves to be inadequate to cope with those expectations, without the injection of security which the 'crib' brings to revision and final preparation – or even, where the teaching is inadequate, or lacking in confidence or clarity, to the actual writing of essays, coursework and other preliminary material at an earlier stage. But the question that has to be explored is the original source or cause of that sense of inadequacy. It may, of course, be fully justified in the case of candidates who ought never to have been encouraged or permitted to take 'A' level English Literature, or at least not without a willingness on the part of the school to provide teaching at a more basic explanatory level and more individually targeted than is normally considered appropriate for sixth form work. Where scripts from such candidates appear before the examiners, a sense of frustration can be fully understood, even if some expressions of it are hard to justify. Or the sense of inadequacy may arise, as I have suggested, from inadequate teaching. The examiners acknowledge that 'candidates will need help in understanding the text of many works', and if that help is not readily forthcoming from the editor of the text itself, or from the teacher, the want must be supplied from an alternative source. Or it may be created by the tone of examiners' reports, by the language employed in formulating questions, by the apparently deliberate policy of interposing a rigid formulaic screen between the text and the reader's enjoyment of it on the one

hand, and the business of conducting examinations on the other. Earlier in this thesis I quoted the instance of the pupil who said to me "I can't write an essay on this, it made me cry"¹, as though the intrusion of natural emotions was some kind of automatic barrier to a proper critical assessment. For the existence of this kind of conviction, the examiners have themselves to blame, though not in isolation: and the writer of the Oxford Examiners' Reports perhaps share more of that blame than some others. When they talk of 'inviting candidates to meet, face to face, a great writer' there is a sincerity there which it would be churlish to ignore and unscholarly to overlook – but the almost irresistible implication of their general comments is that they would prefer such a meeting to take place in the antiseptic, clinical surroundings of a literary hospital, rather than in the cluttered chaos of a teenager's room.

The Cambridge Examiners' Report of 1972 very specifically focussed on a new dimension to 'A' level English introduced that year as its title makes clear: "Report on the Work in Advanced Level English – Paper 1 (Critical Appreciation and Comment)" and as its opening words emphasise:

"This is the first year.....in which the element of comprehension has been reduced in order to place greater emphasis upon concerns that should properly take the stress of 'critical' in its fullest sense. The purpose of the paper now is to allow candidates an opportunity to write at some length on passages of prose and poetry they have not initially prepared but which will involve their sensibility for literature to a much greater extent than in the past. That is to say the underlying assumptions of the paper are those of practical criticism, the strengths, and indeed the weaknesses, of the paper as it now stands being the strengths and weaknesses of that undertaking. One major weakness of practical criticism is that passages are abstracted out of context, both literary and historical, with the result that candidates may attempt an irrelevant reconstruction of that context, irrelevant simply because unless the candidate is very good, with a highly developed sense of literary history, it will make rudimentary errors. However, it would seem that this is an inevitable consequence of an examination set in this manner, the main strength of which lies in its leading the candidate to concentrate upon the language of the text he is dealing with. The relative success or failure of a candidate or group of candidates (a whole year's intake, say) should be seen in relation to this prime consideration, the candidate's ability to express the quality of his engagement, a critical engagement, with a piece of writing. An examiner is most likely, therefore, to place his emphasis in giving marks on the candidate's critical intelligence, on the candidate's ability to pick up central matters in the text before him and express them with force and clarity. A further point that should be made in relation to this question is that a critical reading of a piece of literature, especially of two passages set for comparison, involves evaluation. A good candidate should attempt to make clear what the criteria are by which he

¹ v. inf. p 169.

reads literature and what it is in the passage before him that he finds of greatest importance. With the displacement of the element of the traditional comprehension exercise goes the displacement of merely descriptive writing, writing which confines itself simply to the externals of a passage.....the kind of reading the paper is trying to encourage is one that is not aimed simply at the external features of, say, a poem, but one that attempts to involve the reader's sensibility as a whole. And since this involves consideration of rhythm, image, metaphor, ambiguity and other like imponderables, no descriptive technique is going to be adequate to the task in hand: judgment and evaluation are inevitably involved at every point and are indeed special indications of the quality of the candidate's mind." ¹

So much for granted do we now take questions on 'unseen critical appraisal' that it is no surprise to find it a compulsory element in the framework for the proposed new English 'A' levels to which I referred at the beginning of this chapter, and difficult to imagine in what other way certain of the required 'assessment objectives' on which all prospective examination papers must now focus, might be met. What may come as a surprise is the discovery that Cambridge were breaking new ground with questions of this type in 1972, while it was not until the early 1980s that Oxford introduced such a paper as an alternative to the 'period' Paper 2. This was certainly the first major break with the old Higher Certificate format, and is clearly a very positive move in the direction which teachers of literature had been requesting for some time. Although this opening explanatory passage is surprisingly 'woolly' in style, the underlying excitement of testing the candidates' powers of criticism and evaluation comes through clearly – and with it the sense that the 'merely descriptive' writing evoked by traditional context questions on set books with their tedious demand for paraphrase have been a burden on examiners as well as on those for whom the papers were set. More to our immediate point, the new approach seems to have been an instant success:

"The feeling general amongst examiners was that this year's paper had produced better work from candidates than in previous years and that this was true across the whole range of marks. The rubric to questions was more directed than in previous years and this had the result of saving candidates the usual rush to place everything they had at their disposal into a few paragraphs. Answers in general were not so stereotyped as in earlier years, possibly due to the more specific rubric and perhaps to the more interesting nature of the passages and exercises the new formula permits. At any rate, there were greater numbers of candidates in the higher mark ranges, and the numbers in the lower ranges were, happily, much reduced." ²

¹ Op.cit. p 3

² Ibid.

It would be a kindly thought from the examiners if they were to consider and then acknowledge the causes for this "rush to place everything they had at their disposal in a few paragraphs", instead of assuming this Cadarene tendency among candidates to be a symptom of irrational examination hysteria, or, if rational, either a wilful refusal to tackle the question set or an attempt to disguise the inability to do so. I have always supposed, on the basis of conversations with the authors of the weaker performances among my own pupils in 'mock' examinations and the like, that this practice arises simply from a reluctance to waste the knowledge painfully stored over two years, coupled with a largely unjustified faith in the conviction that in a just world such evidence must surely be worth something. Obviously the problem is not one which affects good candidates, who take for granted the necessity for discriminate selection, just as did the bard in the Old English mead-hall, 'unlocking his word-hoard'; and just as Caedmon on such occasions left the hall, so the despairing below-average candidate must, in the absence of an encouraging angel or similar miracle, say whatever he can in the hope that it may prove relevant at least in part. The comparatively recent introduction of 'open text' examinations is an answer at least to that part of the problem relating to the memorisation of 'useful quotations' – a total waste of effort if they were not deployed in the examination, save for that minority of candidates who were storing them up permanently rather than for use on this one occasion – and at the same time an enormous relief to those who cannot guarantee to remember how to spell the names of minor characters or the sequence of events in a novel. Examiners cannot be unaware that the candidates who have a natural affinity for any given 'A' level subject are markedly outnumbered by those slogging their way through a second or third preference, and their refusal to admit this in Reports is one of the factors which unbalance subsequent thinking on standards. And since I have raised the subject, I am unable to find that 'open-text' examinations are, in themselves, a lowering of standards. Those who are adequately prepared for the examination make very little use of the pile of books beneath the desk, very often only for such questions as save printing costs for contemporary examination boards by giving line references for passages set for comment rather than printing them out in full; those who are

inadequately prepared and reliant upon their texts find that they simply do not have time both to find the material they require and to deploy it – and their final performance tends to be in no way better than when they were compelled to rely upon memory.

Those who do benefit are those who have worked honestly but without the love and inspiration of the English enthusiast, and who need the prompting of a familiar text to enable them to recall the salient points genuinely covered in the course of the previous two years. This is a category of student which deserved better than the patronage and sarcasm at which examiners are gifted, and whose competencies, limited though they may be, were overdue for appropriate recognition.

Nevertheless, to have extracted just the sentence that encapsulates the commonest failings of the weaker candidate from the 1972 Report is unfair both to the Cambridge examiners and to the context. The acknowledgement that a more specific rubric and a more interesting approach might well have a beneficial effect upon candidate performance ought not to be overlooked, and nor ought the clear and unambiguous effect which the new paper had upon candidates across the entire mark range. No-one, however committed to a belief in declining standards, can argue that unseen critical appreciation is a 'soft option', or that learning to manipulate the tools of practical criticism is easier than preparing a text for questions based upon comprehension. Yet the 'general feeling' of the examiners was that the standard of work had improved. In order fully to appreciate the finer detail of both examiner response and candidate performance, it is necessary to see the full text of this paper¹, a photocopy of which appears on the next three pages of this thesis.

¹ Cambridge Syndicate, *Report on the Work in Advanced Level English – Paper 1, 1972*, pp 58-60

Advanced Level English

PAPER 1

(CRITICAL APPRECIATION AND COMMENT)

JUNE, 1972

Answer all three sections.

SECTION A

Read the following passage carefully, and answer the question on it briefly, to the point, and in your own words:

Men are less free than they imagine; ah, far less free. The freest are perhaps least free.

Men are free when they are in a living homeland, not when they are straying and breaking away. Men are free when they are obeying some deep, inward voice of religious belief. Obeying from within. Men are free when they belong to a living, organic, *believing* community, active in fulfilling some unfulfilled, perhaps unrealised purpose. Not when they are escaping to some wild west. The most unfree souls go west, and shout of freedom. Men are freest when they are most unconscious of freedom. The shout is a rattling of chains, always was.

Men are not free when they are doing just what they like. The moment you can do just what you like, there is nothing you care about doing. Men are only free when they are doing what the deepest self likes.

And there is getting down to the deepest self! It takes some diving.

Because the deepest self is way down, and the conscious self is an obstinate monkey. But of one thing we may be sure. If one wants to be free, one has to give up the illusion of doing what one likes, and seek what it wishes done.

But before you can do what it likes, you must first break the spell of the old mastery, the old it.

Perhaps at the Renaissance, when kingship and fatherhood fell, Europe drifted into a very dangerous half-truth; of liberty and equality. Perhaps the men who went to America felt this, and so repudiated the old world together. Went one better than Europe. Liberty in America has meant so far the breaking away from *all* dominion. The true liberty will only begin when Americans discover it, and proceed possibly to fulfil it. It being the deepest whole self of man, the self in its wholeness, not idealistic halfness.

That's why the Pilgrim Fathers came to America, then; and that's why we come. Driven by it. We cannot see that invisible winds carry us, as they carry swarms of locusts, that invisible magnetism brings us as it brings the migrating birds to their unforeknown goal. But it is so. We are not the marvellous choosers and deciders we think we are. It chooses for us, and decides for us. Unless, of course, we are just escaped slaves, vulgarly cocksure of our ready-made destiny. But if we are living people, in touch with the source, it drives us and decides us. We are free only so long as we obey. When we run counter, and think we will do as we like, we just fleet around like Orestes pursued by the Eumenides.

• *Orestes having murdered his mother was pursued by the Furies.*

What idea of 'freedom' does the above passage convey to you? How effectively do you find the presentation of these ideas?

SECTION B

Read the passage below and answer the questions that follow it:

We got there in about half an hour, fairly dripping, for it was a most awful hot day. There was as much as a thousand people there, from twenty mile round. The woods was full of teams and wagons, hitched everywheres, feeding out of the wagon troughs and stomping to keep off the flies. There was sheds made out of poles and roofed over with branches, where they had lemonade and gingerbread to sell, and piles of watermelons and green corn and suchlike truck.

The preaching was going on under the same kinds of sheds, only they was bigger and held crowds of people. The benches was made out of outside slabs of logs, with holes bored in the round side to drive sticks into for legs. They didn't have no backs. The preachers had high platforms to stand on, at one end of the sheds. The women had on sun-bonnets; and some had linsey-woolsey frocks, some gingham ones, and a few of the young ones had on calico. Some of the young men was bare-footed, and some of the children didn't have on any clothes but just a tow-linen shirt. Some of the old women was knitting, and some of the young folks was courting on the sly.

The first shed we come to, the preacher was lining out a hymn. He lined out two lines, everybody sung it, and it was kind of grand to hear it, there was so many of them and they done it in such a rousing way; then he lined out two more for them to sing—and so on. The people woke up more and more, and sang louder and louder; and towards the end some begun to groan, and some begun to shout. Then the preacher begun to preach; and begun in earnest, too; and went weaving first to one side of the platform and then the other, and then leaning down over the front of it, with his arms and his body going all the time, and shouting his words out with all his might; and every now and then he would hold up his Bible and spread it open, and kind of pass it around this way and that, shouting, 'It's the brazen serpent in the wilderness! Look upon it and live!' And people would shout out, 'Glory!—A-a-men!' And so he went on, and the people groaning and crying and saying amen:

'O, come to the mourners' bench! come, black with sin! (amen!) come, sick and sore! (amen!) come, lame and halt, and blind! (amen!) come, pore and needy, dank in shame! (a-a-men!) come all that's worn, and soiled, and suffering!—come with a broken spirit! come with a contrite heart! come in your rags and sin and dirt! the waters that cleanse is free, the door of heaven stands open—oh, enter in and be at rest! (a-a-men! glory, glory hallelujah!)

And so on. You couldn't make out what the preacher said, any more, on account of the shouting and crying. Folks got up, everywheres in the crowd, and worked their way, just by main strength, to the mourners' bench, with the tears running down their faces; and when all the mourners had got up there to the front benches in a crowd, they sung, and shouted, and flung themselves down on the straw, just crazy and wild.

- (i) What does the passage gain from being written in non-standard English?
- (ii) Say what impressions of the preacher's audience are conveyed in the passage. Point out in each case how the author presents these impressions.
- (iii) By referring to specific details of the passage, say what attitude the reader is invited to take up towards the preacher.

SECTION C

Read the following two poems and answer the questions concerning them.

- (a) When the eye of the day is shut,
And the stars deny their beams,
And about the forest hut
Blows the roaring wood of dreams,

From deep clay, from desert rock,
From the sunk sands of the main,
Come not at my door to knock,
Hearts that loved me not again.

Sleep, be still, turn to your rest
In the lands where you are laid;
In far lodgings east and west
Lie down on the beds you made.

In gross marl, in blowing dust,
In the drowned ooze of the sea,
Where you would not, lie you must,
Lie you must, and not with me.

- (b) It was not death, for I stood up,
And all the dead lie down.
It was not night, for all the bells
Put out their tongues for noon.

It was not frost, for on my flesh
I felt siroccos crawl;
Nor fire, for just my marble feet
Could keep a chancel cool—

And yet it tasted like them all.
The figures I have seen
Set orderly for burial
Reminded me of mine,

As if my life were shaven
And fitted to a frame
And could not breathe without a key;
And 'twas like midnight some

When everything that ticked has stopped
And space stares all around,
Or grisly frosts, first Autumn morns,
Repeal the beating ground,

But most like chaos—stopless, cool,
Without a chance or spot,
(Or even a report of land
To justify despair.

(i) What impressions do you gain from each poem of the speaker and what does the tone of voice of each speaker contribute to the poem?

(ii) Compare the language of the two poems.

Before providing over fifty pages of exemplary material from candidate scripts, the examiners discuss responses to the paper section by section: the quality looked for in dealing with Section A is made clear in the final paragraph of the introduction:

"What the passage requires, and what good candidates were able to bring to it, is a sense of the intimate connection between what is said and the manner of the saying. It should be possible to see that the consideration of 'ideas' of freedom and the mode of presentation are really looking towards the same kind of thing, the actual use of language in the passage itself. It is not really sufficient to emphasise one aspect of the language (the 'ideas', say) over the other, the expressive means of the words themselves. What is required is a critical response to the nature of the English of the passage, a response which would in fact encompass language and ideas at once."¹

Hardly surprisingly, only a minority of candidates responded at that level; however:

"A large number of the candidates became very deeply engaged with this passage. More than one made the point that the piece was important because they cared about the outcome of the argument. A proportion began by admitting that the ideas expressed were new to them and that they felt challenged and indeed disturbed by them, their own previous opinions being of a rather different and perhaps more orthodox kind."²

If the new design of the paper had achieved nothing beyond this, I would suggest that it had been a success – surely there is no better test of quality in a syllabus or in the examinations set upon it than that it makes the candidates not only think but also re-evaluate previous thought processes. In fulfilling this objective, appropriately chosen passages for critical appreciation advance standards farther than can ever be achieved by any requirement to reproduce acquired and taught knowledge. Not, of course, that the paper was so successful with all the students confronted by it.

"The main failure of the question was that candidates did not realise sufficiently that the rubric reading 'How effective do you find the presentation of these ideas?' was an invitation to an evaluation, a critical reading, of the passage as a whole. Some candidates indeed did not attempt the second part of the question, evidently taking Section A as a whole to be the old comprehension question over again. The confusion was also due in part to candidates who misread 'effective' to mean 'true'.The chief faults that otherwise came up were, predictably, not only the lack of critical reading but also the reduction of the ideas of the passage to banality. A rather rarer fault, but one that disturbingly still crops up from time to time, is naivety mingled with vulgarity: this is especially unsettling as a fault because it indicates that the candidate's mind is probably unsuited to the study of literature, the style of the answer being the candidate's own fumbling attempt to deal with the false position he finds himself in. An example of work of this kind is [candidate] VIII."³

This is distinctly harsh criticism, and Script VIII is therefore an excellent example of work which fails to meet the standard the examiners were setting for an 'A' level pass:

¹ Op.cit. p 5

² Ibid. p 4

³ Ibid.

CANDIDATE VIII

The passage conveys the idea of freedom not as open choice to be able to do what one wants to do on the spur of the moment, but as a set plan to follow.

Freedom is having a goal to work towards. That goal is pursued until achieved, and in the end more may be achieved than was at first thought possible.

The goal may be planned as a group venture or may just be a creation of the individual. The most important aspect of freedom is that it keeps the mind occupied and the body busy with something worthwhile. When such a situation is achieved, time becomes irrelevant.

The passage indicates that the search for one's own particular goal may be the hardest part in achieving freedom. We create visions of what we think we would like to do. These visions are likely to be false and must be forgotten so that our real path to freedom may be revealed.

It is important to remember that freedom for a lot of people means unity among these people. They must be able to work together as a single body and not expect to be able to put on one side all ideas which they have been striving against up to now." ¹

It would be tedious to reprint the whole of this answer. It concludes like this:

"The idea of being pursued by the furies for going against the principles of freedom is true in any society. Toleration of the unruly is unsuccessful. They must be eliminated." ²

It is well to remember that when the Oxford examiners talk of 'illiteracy', as they do from time to time, they are using the word in a rather specialised sense, and that they may very well mean writing like this. To their Cambridge counterparts, this is simply the work of a candidate 'probably unsuited to the study of literature'. Either way, as a response to the stimulation provided by D H Lawrence, this is unquestionably inadequate for an 'A' level candidate, and in terms of standards a failure. Those who argue for a decline in those standards cannot overlook the evidence that such a judgement provides.

On the Section B passage from *Huckleberry Finn* the examiners observe:

"A sense of proportion was needed for dealing with this question, a sense of proportion which can only be arrived at through the experience of a number of different kinds of writing so that candidates can recognise where a passage is loaded with the significant, the telling, the almost allegorical detail and where it aims at giving the illusion of being unselected, of registering the disparateness and unclutteredness of life itself.Very few candidates tried to see behind the ostensible view of the narrator to that of the author.This is perhaps not too surprising since some sophistication is needed here, though only the sophistication to recognise that fictions are in fact fictions and to realise that one is dealing with a verbal artefact, not the direct outpouring of feeling and emotion. What was in this context most surprising was the extent to which candidates misread the narrative tone. 'Fearful', 'terrifying', 'a hypocrite', 'a disgrace to Christianity', were some of the terms used." ³

¹ Op.cit. p 14

² Ibid. p 15

³ Ibid. p 6

The script of Candidate XX is described as 'an average answer' which means that, by modern standards, it would be judged to be at, or perhaps just a little above, the C/D grade boundary, and I am quoting approximately the first half of the script, which deals with two of the three questions set, in order to give a fair impression of what standard 'average' represents.

"(i) Because the passage is written in non-standard English, it is something more than just a description of the events at this religious gathering. One feels that one is actually there, among others like yourself. It is the description of an ordinary not well-educated man and he uses appropriate language which is more effective in this case because he is describing people like himself. Accordingly, the essential atmosphere is better conveyed than could be if the passage were written in strictly grammatical modern-style English.

On the descriptive side, one can appreciate the picture of the people much better because it is given in simple terms. In short, the essential simplicity and unpretentiousness of the people is well conveyed because the passage is written in that sort of way.

(ii) One can picture the women in their sun-bonnets and their dresses of different materials. Obviously these would be their best clothes, worn for the grand occasion of the religious gathering. These are all poor people who have come because they have religious faith. They do not care over-much about convention and yet one senses that despite their obvious simplicity of dress and manner, they are proud people who take a certain amount of pride in their appearance.

During the preaching the people are blinded by the speaking power of the preacher who soon has them swaying and groaning. This further adds to their picture of being simple and not deep-thinking people. Obviously they are content to be led, one might say like a flock of sheep; for they do not have complete control of themselves by the time the preacher has finished. The picture presented in the last paragraph is one normally associated with some negro or primitive spiritual. The occasion has utterly gained control of the people and their inner selves is open and apparent to all as they force their way to the front 'with tears running down their faces' and fling 'themselves down on the straw, just crazy and wild.'" ¹

Now there are obvious shortcomings in the linguistic competence of this candidate; both syntax and vocabulary display defects, and there are clumsinesses and repetitions that a better writer would have avoided as well as some superficialities of reaction – but he is by no means devoid of insight, there is shape and coherence to his answer, and he has clearly read the passage with some critical attention. Which is, I suppose, a rather long-winded way of restating that he is an average candidate. As such, his answer constitutes an excellent illustration of what 'standard' means when applied to performance at 'A' level English. It is easily possible to imagine work a good deal better, and the examiners provide quite a selection of it in the course of this Report.

¹ Op.cit. p 25

It is also easily possible to imagine work a great deal worse, though on this occasion no samples are provided. But it is not, I think, possible to declare that such a piece of work should be declared unworthy of an 'A' level pass, or that standards are threatened when one is awarded. This would have passed comfortably in 1951, if a paper so demanding of individual and creative critical assessment could have been set at that time; it would pass today at the grade I have suggested; it passed in 1972 as an average performance, which is exactly how any competent English teacher would describe it. There is nothing here to disturb the findings of the 1996 SCAA analysis of 'Standards over time', that no significant change had occurred.

Section C of the paper was, predictably, "the most poorly answered of the three." ¹

"...it seems clear that a distressingly large number of candidates are too unsure of any critical mode of approaching poetry. An irrelevant kind of technical analysis was still to be found, the endless detailing of rhyming and metrical schemes without relation to the meaning or movement of the poems, a naive description of syllabic values and sound effects and also the forcing of metaphor and simile out of context without consideration of what part they had to play in the poetry: but this type of analysis was less notable than in previous years." ²

Once again, the examiners are pointing to slow improvement rather than slow decline, a factor which may fairly be said to characterise the whole sequence of examiner reports in all English papers at both Ordinary and Advanced level, though this is very far from suggesting that there are fewer point of dissatisfaction or that examiners have given up directing the attention of teachers to them.

"Other common faults were, firstly, a relentless search for black and white contrasts and unprofitable points of comparison.Candidates were also too fond of assuming that because a poem had a regular rhyming scheme it must be the worse of the two....All these latter types of fault are perhaps due to the candidates attempting to work out what it is the examiner wants and then attempting to satisfy these supposed demands. The result is always beside the point, time wasting, and detrimental to any real engagement with the poetry." ³

Again, I have chosen an example of a script offered as illustrating a performance categorized as just below average, or a grade D in contemporary assessment terms, though I suspect that the award of such a grade might be a little generous by today's standards and that, for this part of the paper at least, an E might be nearer the mark. It must, however, be borne in mind that this was a new approach to examining in

¹ Op.cit. p 6

² Ibid.

³ Ibid. p 8

1972, whereas, for modern candidates, training in this kind of thing is an inalienable part of preparation for 'A' level.

CANDIDATE XXXVIII *

"The speaker of poem a is describing being haunted by dead people whom it is implied that he has killed; however, instead of saying openly that they people hated him, the speaker disguises the the fact with the phrase : 'Hearts that loved me not again'. It could be argued that this fits the rhyme scheme more easily, but this is not the only instance of the speaker using a picturesque phrase to describe something fairly ordinary: others include 'stars deny their beams - for a starless-night. The tone of the first three stanzas is one of false sweetness which gives an impression of the speaker as not being able to face up to the truth: an impression which is strengthened the euphemisms and picturesque phrases. It is only in the first two verses of the last stanza that the speakers feelings are clearly revealed by the nastiness of the the ideas conveyed in them. The speaker's tone of voice seems, to me, to make the poem very nasty, because of its masked nature.

The speaker of poem b appears to be describing his own emotions on seeing some 'figures' laid out for burial. A feeling of complete despair pervades the poem, for the speaker describes 'negative' feelings in the first third of the poem, then having described the cause of his sentiments, proceeds to describe a feeling of being completely transfixed at an unpleasant moment. The speaker's tone of voice seems to express horror: the language he uses and the curtness of his phrases express this in the first part; whilst the ordinariness of his vocabulary, and the extension of the last sentence through the last three and three-quarter stanzas create a feeling of suspension of time.

(ii) The vocabulary used in both poems is simple, the most unusual word being 'siroccos' in poem b, which it is not even necessary to fully understand in order to comprehend the speaker's meaning. However, the two different speakers use their vocabulary in almost completely different ways: the speaker in poem b talks directly about his experience without softening and veiling the ideas he is expressing as speaker a does." ¹

Subsequent Cambridge Reports are far less detailed and are inclined to concentrate on the minutiae of observations made by client schools to the Syndicate's Subject Committee, and on particular or general reactions from the examiners in response to these or to their own feelings about the paper. As I have already remarked about the similar records from Oxford, it is unusual to find such observations covering more than petulant nit-picking on a remarkably parochial basis; but I believe it, nonetheless, to be worthwhile to glean through the remainder of the Reports for such occasional nuggets of illustrative comment as they contain. At this stage, however, it is worth recalling that we have covered twenty years since the inception of 'A' level, or rather more than half the period that elapsed between the Reform Acts of 1944 and 1988, and that at this stage there is clear evidence that candidate performance overall is getting better rather

* The technical errors in this passage, including omissions of both words and punctuation marks, are as printed in the Report, and may therefore be assumed to be the candidate's own.

¹ Op.cit. p 46

than worse.

In 1976 the Oxford examiners again turned to 'A' level literature and began with the observation that it was pleasant to comment:

"on a change for the better since 1972. Fewer candidates now refuse to answer the question set on a particular author and substitute a 'useful all-purpose essay', prefabricated in the hope that kindly or weary examiners will find at least a few marks for the bits of the essay that are accidentally relevant to the question.all but the very silliest candidates do now try to answer the questions." ¹

but if this is an expression of an improvement in standards, it is balanced by the final sentence of the report, which reads

"Good Advanced Level work on English Literature is as good as ever it was. The bad work is both duller and more confused than it used to be." ²

In short, the examiners are finding polarisation: standards maintained or improving at the top end of the scale but declining at the bottom. This picture may well be a paradigm for the whole standards debate, but it does invite us to ask an important question. Were the standards of the weaker candidates actually declining, or is the ever increasing number of candidates evidence that students of lower natural ability than before were being accepted into sixth forms and completing 'A' level courses? At least a partial answer is provided elsewhere in the Report, when the examiners turn to 'S' level, where, we are told,

"Candidates show up common defects with extreme clarity, because they are now by no means always the cream of candidates." ³

which seems to confirm that a much wider range of entries is being encouraged by the schools, even if not always wisely. It is also true, of course, that by no means all schools could provide regular tuition for 'S' level, and a number of candidates were thus left largely to their own resources. What is unfortunate is that this observation should have led to the quotation of howlers perpetrated by candidates in both 'A' and 'S' level papers, rather than to more constructive observations. However, among these are some observations which suggest that the Oxford examiners are at last coming to terms with the real world world in respect of the problems actually faced by some of their candidates and are ceasing to judge them predominantly on their suitability to read English at the University:

¹ Op.cit. p 41

² Ibid. p 44

³ Ibid. p 43

"It is natural for timid and anxious candidates to try to reassure themselves by relying on 'taught ideas' or a display of apparent erudition, but their attempts do them no good.....We must repeat what we have often said, that as much credit as possible will always be given to honest opinion sensibly argued and based on *direct knowledge of the text*. We are not looking for imagined 'orthodox' answers." ¹

The next Examiners' Report on 'A' level English Literature which has anything of substance to concern us was that from Oxford in 1980 which begins, conveniently, with a highly relevant observation:

"During the last four yearsthe quality has remained very variable, with no indications of any general improvement or deterioration." ²

There is, however, an indication of past concern which was not immediately apparent from the previous report – a factor which contributes to my earlier observation that, while they are potentially useful indicators of progressive standards, these reports have to be handled with some caution.

"Three or four years ago we were dismayed at what seemed to be a progressive deterioration in standards of literacy among candidates: work was often presented in sentences so ill-constructed and ill-punctuated that communication was seriously impeded. It would be exaggerating to say that a marked improvement has taken place; but at least the deterioration seems to have been checked. The feature of expression that remains very disturbing indeed, however, is the poverty of vocabulary at many candidates' command." ³

At one level, this may seem to be an echo of a complaint that has been constant throughout these reports: at another, we have to consider whether this is an indication of one area in which standards have actually declined over the period under survey, or whether, yet again, this is a reflection on the fact that candidates who would not in earlier years have stayed on at school at all, are now taking 'A' level English – and if the latter explanation is the true one, whether adequate teaching is being provided to bridge the gap between that kind of background knowledge which used to be taken for granted and that which actually exists.

Two other areas of discontent, peculiar to the study of 'A' level literature though they are, are also susceptible to an interpretation of declining standards – though it might not be a simple matter to determine precisely which standard is under threat.

The first, on which I have already commented,⁴ refers to a growing dependence on

¹ Op.cit. pp 41-42

² Op.cit.p 47

³ Ibid. p50

⁴ v.sup. p 437

what used to be called "cribs" – booklets on literary texts designed not so much as general criticism of text or author, but rather as specific props to examination candidates, and a temptation to the less able to dispense with the actual texts altogether. It is in this year that the examiners feel compelled to comment on what was clearly becoming a lucrative market:

"There have been disquieting signs in recent examinations of an increased reliance by candidates on notes about the texts, which, as it were, put the candidates at one remove from the texts themselves.the danger is twofold: it inhibits a personal response.....and it induces a rigidity of approach, and a tendency to produce 'stock' essays, instead of answers which are directly engaged with the actual questions asked." ¹

Since it has also been an habitual complaint throughout this sequence of reports that candidates do not directly respond to the actual questions asked, a request for evidence that the fault is now to be attributable to reliance on cribs must be a legitimate response. Nevertheless, the examiners are right to draw attention to a 'disquieting' factor, which hints at increasingly inadequate teaching as well as at all the implications of 'short-cut' motivation.

The other area of examiners' concern in 1980 was that:

"a disturbing feature of many essay answers in recent years has been the lack of any evidence of 'background' knowledge or a sense of historical perspective" ²

and the writer goes on to complain that many candidates treat "each text as though it were a wholly separate entity that cannot be related to anything else".³

Here too, the complaint points to defective teaching as much as to shortcomings in the candidates, though the defect in question may not lie in the individual teacher so much as in timetable requirements that compel the division of sixth form classes between two or even three members of staff. If the school chops up the English syllabus into groups of texts on no better basis than that of which member of the English department happens to be available on Tuesday afternoon, it is perhaps asking rather a lot to expect any but the most committed students to reimpose a synthesis. A similar reservation must be expressed about the remainder of the 1980 Report, which devotes itself to a lengthy and illustrated account of what "has always been and still remains by far the biggest reason for candidates' failure to fulfill expectations"⁴ – relevance.

¹ Op.cit. p 49

^{2,3} Ibid.

⁴ Ibid. p 48

"This weakness is seen most obviously when the candidate simply does not answer the question set at all, but instead writes an essay (or, possibly, reproduces an essay already written) on some vaguely related subject. This year, for instance,candidates were asked to discuss *Hamlet* in relation to whether the hero in tragedy must be superior to the world about him. Poorer answers to this question often became (after a token acknowledgement of the question, at the beginning) mere general essays on Hamlet's character, with no attempt to identify aspects of superiority (or its opposite) and with any relevant points appearing as if by accident. The trouble with these answers was not lack of knowledge, but a failure to apply the knowledge relevantly. More subtly, lack of full relevance results when attention is paid by candidates to only one part of the question, and not to its full import. Again in this summer's paper one of the Chaucer questions quoted from *The Franklin's Tale* the line 'Which was the mooste fre, as thynketh yow?', on which we asked 'How far does this final question reflect the impressions that *The Franklyn's Tale* leave on your mind?' Too often, answers simply and exclusively dealt with the question 'Which was the mooste fre?' and the full force of the question was thereby lost. As another instance, we may take one of the questions on Hopkins.....'"Hopkins manhandles language in order to secure the utmost concentration on his poetry." Discuss.' Many answers considered the 'manhandling' of language without any reference at all to 'concentration'." ¹

I am inclined to feel that the middle one of these examples is a slightly unfair illustration of the point in question, and that the examiners ought to be thinking again about the wisdom, if not the validity, of wrapping up one question inside another. That question which the candidates 'too often' answered is a reasonable one for which they might well have been prepared, and to have disguised the real intention in the way described might well be felt to come dangerously near the kind of objection to examinations explored in the earlier chapters of this thesis. Even the *Hamlet* instance, though not ambiguous in any sense that ought to trip up an 'A' level candidate, does seem to be more an 'S' level question cut down to 'A' level size by a title restriction, and thus liable to wrongfoot a candidate not trained to move lightly between the general and the particular. In short the whole paragraph, while perfectly legitimate in stressing the nature of clearly inadequate answers, seems to be pointing at the problems of candidates who had not been properly trained to read examination questions, rather than having been not properly trained to read literary texts; though it is, of course, always possible that there were deficiencies in this area also. But it remains a central point when it comes to evaluating examiner comment that only outstanding candidates surmount the hurdle of 'A' level examinations by their own unaided efforts – and in the nature of things, those candidates who actually could do so are the least likely to

¹ Op.cit. p 48

find it required of them. The vast majority of the candidature need help and guidance in understanding the texts, in placing them within a literary context, and in formulating answers to critical approaches to these texts. The NATE Survey, *English Examined*, observed of examinations in 'O' level Literature that "on some syllabuses if the candidates are taught well they do badly in the examination"¹, and it should not be supposed that the validity of this cutting comment ceased to apply at the higher level. There really is no good reason why help and guidance should also be necessary to decipher examiner intention or to peel off layers of the question; and many teachers would balk at the prospect that they were teaching for examinations rather than teaching the processes of literary criticism; yet there is a clear implication that the process is expected – and if it is, then even more clearly than in the other areas it is teacher competence rather than innate student ability that is being tested.

These reflections are given added point by the specific emphases of the Report of the Cambridge examiners in the same year – on the Shakespeare paper for example:

"As usual, a remarkable number of candidates wrote superb scripts: mature, personal and original in approach, articulate and sensitive, with a good appetite for ideas and imaginative experience. There is a case for claiming that *at the top of the scale* this is a golden age in the sixth form study of English Literature. Elsewhere there is evidence, on the other hand, of incompetent teaching, poor understanding of the nature of the examination and the constraints of the question paper's demands, and cynical brainwashing of students (who appear to have been advised to regurgitate crude stereotypes, not their own ideas). This results in many candidates failing to realise their true potential, which examiners glimpse and comment upon, but are unable fully to reward."²

The Report goes on to make exactly the same point as that from Oxford with regard to candidates who focus on one out of two key words in a question and thus cover only half of the required answer, and then returns to criticism directed unambiguously at schools:

"A large number of candidates are entered for this examination who evidently have only minimal chances of passing, on intellectual quality and on ability to write articulate English. When they have no interest in the literature either, as is palpably the case with a substantial number, it must be asked whether schools should not exercise more discrimination in allowing unsuitable candidates to take the paper."³

When to this paragraph is added the earlier stricture on the technical shortcomings of the candidates at their worst, the picture must be described as distinctly worrying:

¹ v.sup. pp 331 and 353-354

^{2,3} Op.cit. p 15

"Standards of punctuation and spelling, as well as grammar, are still declining. Even quite good candidates were spelling words as though they had never seen them before, varying their spelling from one occasion to the next. This decline in literacy, now very marked, should be a matter for gravest concern, not only for examiners, but for schools themselves, though little enough seems to have been done to correct what is nothing short of a cultural disaster."¹

This is unusually harsh criticism, all the more chilling for not being couched in terms which suggest academic hyperbole. Taken in isolation, they can be interpreted in no way other than as a clear indication of a serious decline in standards. Yet they *cannot* be taken in isolation when the authors couple them with the previously quoted remark about the golden age in the sixth form study of English Literature. As I have remarked before, what is being noted here is a significant increase in the polarisation of standards, rather than a uniform slide downwards. Accounting for this is perhaps as much a task for the sociologist as for the researcher into educational history, but I would hazard a guess that, in addition to the problems in the teaching profession generally which were to result in the industrial action of the mid-eighties; and the problems among English teachers specifically, dealt with earlier in this thesis²; we also have here the first examiner reaction to growing unemployment and the virtual collapse of worthwhile job opportunities for the sixteen year old school leaver. The 'staying-on-rate' has risen persistently since the late 1970s, there are now far wider opportunities in sixth forms than were provided by traditional 'A' levels, and schools have adapted themselves fairly effectively to cope with the larger numbers and the wider range of ability in sixth form classes – but that there was a period when the numbers preceded both the opportunities and the adaptations must not be forgotten, nor its effects underestimated. One of those effects was a significant increase in the number of students staying on, rather resentfully in many cases, because the alternative was the dole queue; taking courses for which they had neither enthusiasm nor aptitude but for which their schools offered no alternative; and being taught by teachers (sometimes equally resentfully) who failed initially to adjust their methods to make their courses palatable, interesting, or even comprehensible in the worst cases, to students who needed more help and individual attention than they had been accustomed to provide.

¹ Op.cit. p 16

² v. sup. pp 94-98

The "cultural disaster" referred to in this survey can be dismissed: our knowledge of the ensuing eighteen years shows that it did not, in fact, occur. But it may well have looked little short of inevitable in 1980 from the particular perspective of the authors of this part of the Cambridge Report. Interestingly, the view seems to have been more encouraging from the other side of the hill: writing on the alternative (9001) syllabus, the examiners observed:

"This was quite a heartening paper to examine not merely because the general level of comprehension and expression was good (in such matters as presentation of argument, syntax, spelling, etc.) but because, more importantly, there was abundant evidence that the great majority of the candidates responded with interest and enthusiasm to the passages set; even the weaker candidates tended to offer quite substantial answers and hardly any approached the examination as a routine exercise. Possibly this has to do with the nature of a Comment and Appreciation paper where there is relatively little scope for prepared answers even with set texts. The low failure rate may also reflect the fact that the questions tended to be rather 'open' (and, I think, properly so); consequently few candidates were not in a position to offer at least partially relevant answers. It seems to be the case also that the schools who take this paper include an unusually high proportion with committed and dedicated English teachers." ¹

The implications of that last sentence are obvious – both in the sense that the correlation between quality of teaching and standard of candidate performance is acknowledged, and in the sense that such quality is clearly seen as somewhat thin on the ground. As I have observed at intervals during this thesis, it is impossible to divorce standards of student achievement from standards of teaching competence, though the former is clearly observable by those who have access to examination scripts and the latter only to members of each individual class. And even those two categories of observer cannot be relied upon for an absolutely unvarnished and objective analysis: the examiner sees only the performance of the taught in examination conditions and cannot begin to estimate the enjoyment and pleasure that may have been shared by those candidates in the various lessons of their two year course; and however gifted the teacher, he or she will inevitably make impacts at different levels on individual members of the same class. Nevertheless, the fact that we cannot accurately quantify the degree of correlation does not disprove either its existence or its importance: the conviction of the examiner that committed and dedicated teaching is not universal and does make a difference is a factor in the standards equation that must never be over-

¹ Op.cit. p 19

looked. But nor should such considerations blind us to the significance of the immediately preceding sentence of this part of the Report. In the previous section, as in the Oxford Report for the same year, the major focus was on answers that were irrelevant by virtue of only partial attention to the subject, or which were only partially relevant, as a vice to be castigated. Here, the fact that 'few candidates were not in a position to offer at least partially relevant answers' is acclaimed as a virtue.

We are back with the distinction between the optimist and the pessimist, and it is a distinction that needs to be borne constantly in mind when evaluating what examiners have to tell us about standards.

The fluctuating nature of both performance and examiner reaction is illustrated effectively by the Cambridge Report for the following year, 1981. As usual, the 'criticisms and comments' section has little of interest or significance, though one entry is perhaps worth inclusion as evidence that even agreement between teachers and subject committee is not always sufficient to bring about change:

"There were again observations that 2½ hours were insufficient for candidates to do justice to the paper.

*The committee has a great deal of sympathy with this recurrent request and constantly refers it to the School Examinations Committee, only to have it rejected."*¹

The 'Notes by the Examiners' section, however, begins as follows:

*"The work for the candidates for the Special Paper seemed better than in previous years. It would not be surprising if a larger proportion gained 'merit' or even 'distinction'. There was not quite such a large tail as has been seen in the last few years. On the other hand, quite a large number of candidates made scores which placed them just under the merit band. The principal reasons for this were as usual determined attempts to unload essays which might have been suitable for other A level papers, but which did not address themselves to the questions."*²

Clearly nothing has eradicated the typical fault, – nor, one fears, will it ever – yet the prevailing atmosphere is a good deal more positive and hopeful than that of twelve months earlier, inherently improbable though it is that any genuinely radical change could have occurred over so short an interval. The worst scripts on the standard 'A' level syllabus continue to be awful enough to merit harsh criticism:

*"...if candidates are not sensitive to their own use of English then it is not very likely that they will have much feeling for the English of others"*³;

¹ Op.cit. p 12

² Ibid. p 13

³ Ibid. p 14

"Too many schools continue.....to enter candidates who clearly have no hope of passing, even at 'O' level." ¹

On the other hand, the comments on the Shakespeare paper included:

"Candidates used their minds and there was unusual evidence of fresh thought. The best scripts were again dazzlingly good, a remarkable testimony to the value of English Literature as a sixth form subject" ²;

on Chaucer and other major authors:

"There was an impression that more candidates were writing passable English" ³

and on the period papers variously:

"In general standards were upheld. Few candidates fell below a level of reasonably detailed knowledge of the texts and the very best candidates conveyed a sensitive awareness of the subject in a precise and economical way.....Candidates responded well to the 1981 paper and examiners found that the average level was slightly higher than last year. All the set texts had been covered, and it was gratifying to find that, though it was a long and rather daunting collection to tackle, the *Elizabethan Sonnets* had been read by several schools, and one or two candidates had written remarkably full and intelligent answers on it.In the Drama section of the paper there were good answers on all the plays. The majority of candidates showed a sure grasp of each writer's purpose....." ⁴

All in all a picture which hardly justifies the strictures directed at the worst candidates. It is, of course, entirely understandable that examiners should wish not to have their time wasted by scripts which have no hope of passing, even at 'O' level, and should wish to draw attention to the kinds of limitation that characterised such scripts, but the danger that the standards of entries in general might be inferred from such remarks does not seem to have occurred to the authors, nor, incidentally, does the reflection that thirty years earlier half the scripts submitted had, by definition, no chance of passing. Within the context of that comparison, it is a matter of no surprise whatever that the worst scripts were measurably inferior to the worst of the earlier days. Perhaps, however, the most useful part of the 1981 Report is the passage from the examiners' marking-scheme that the Subject Committee asked to be included as an annexe to the commentary on the Shakespeare paper:

"Most candidates will probably not deal with the passages as fully or as closely as the following notes will do, and examiners should not approach a script by asking 'How many points should a candidate make to score 'Average'?' Rather, each answer will be weighed up on its own merits; if it makes sense, it will deserve reward, even if the approach is unfamiliar. A rough guide to the examiner's proper approach might go as follows:

^{1,2} Op.cit. p 16

³ Ibid. p 17

⁴ Ibid. pp 17-19

A mark of Pass or above indicates that the question has not been ignored completely, that the candidate knows something of the play and can organise his material. Weakness in expression may be balanced by strength in knowledge. A paraphrase may turn out to provide a kind of answer to the question (even if it does so largely by accident). Thin use of evidence may go with lively responsiveness, or lots of detail may accompany dullness and stereotyped thought. Examiners will balance these various kinds of strength and weakness, always bearing in mind that we wish to reward genuine strengths rather than begin with an expectation of 100% and then deduct marks for every mistake, deficiency or omission of some expected point. Intelligent thought, insight, original and sensitive writing, mature handling of questions, should always be marked well up.

Articulate work showing knowledge of the text but irrelevant to the question will probably deserve 3 in Section A [context questions], 9 in Section B [essays], if of adequate length. Marks below 3 in Section A are given to very short, incoherent, or stupid answers.

Every examiner may expect to see a number of Outstanding scripts, worth total marks in the high 70s or 80s. It is expected that marks this high will be used where appropriate. A prize is awarded to the best script in Paper 2; examiners are invited to let their team leaders know if they think a paper worth considering for this prize." ¹

The equation of 'Outstanding' with marks in the high 70s makes one wonder why there was a built-in resistance to marking any piece of English work at 90%, contributing, as such resistance must, to a very real difficulty in discriminating between one script and another with marks five or so on either side of 50%; but apart from this, we have a by no means unsympathetic marking-scheme here which should have proved encouraging to teachers, which is presumably why the Subject Committee requested that publicity should be given to it. Its main strength, of course, is its strong emphasis on positive rather than negative marking – for while it may reasonably be presumed that this was the standard approach at this time, this is not necessarily the impression to be derived from all examiners' reports.

The last such report which I have been able to discover in the Cambridge Syndicate Archive is that dealing with the examinations of 1983. It contains little that is new, but perhaps the attribution of praise and adverse criticism is more clearly assigned to categories of candidate, and is therefore useful in guiding our response to these Reports as a means of assessing standards of student performance over the period.

"In general standards were much as in previous years. The same skills are tested and the better candidates show considerable ability in demonstrating them. This they do by recognising, with some subtlety, the issues raised by a question, and by the ability to formulate a coherent discussion of these issues in terms of the text. Along with this goes discrimination of issues (some issues raised are more important than others) and evidence (some material

¹ Op.cit. pp 16-17

in the text makes better evidence than other material).

The less good answer falls far short of this and sometimes derives from a mechanical preparation that becomes a mechanical exercise in the exam. The candidate finds 'the topic' in the question (and this is often merely the topic that has been prepared) and then he does it! Other issues raised by the question are ignored as often as not.

At the lower end of the passing grades are those candidates who simply present all that they know about a book in the hope that the examiner will recognise enough of relevance to award marks and not be deterred by the remaining irrelevancies. The last group frequently distinguishes itself by not answering the essay questions or by almost totally ignoring the passage in the alternative. The examiners have been rigorous in penalising this approach and the answer that is *totally* irrelevant to the question cannot expect even to be awarded a bare pass.

Among the poorer candidates, but in better scripts all too often, the inaccurate use of formal English is particularly noticeable. Poor spelling, bad punctuation and a general incoherence in expressing ideas are still too evident; and for students to demonstrate these weaknesses after, usually, two years study of English literature raises doubts about what they have actually achieved in their A level studies.¹

This seems to place the range of scripts before the examiners in a clearer perspective, with the strengths and weaknesses clearly assigned to overarching categories, rather than leaving us to wonder, as other reports have certainly done, how all the various observations can be true at the same time. The picture here, in fact, reinforces the polarisation which has been suggested earlier: the best scripts continue to explore new opportunities to surprise the examiners with their skill, and the very worst similarly with their lack of it. The obvious truth about the increase in the number of candidates and the inclusion among them of pupils whose abilities would not previously have been considered suitable for 'A' level work has already been acknowledged, and is emphasised by the examiners' increasing concern about poor spelling, bad punctuation and incoherence; and I have no doubt that the observation above that these are characteristics not only of the poorer scripts, but even in better ones, would be seized upon by those looking for evidence of declining standards. But I do not believe that this is a necessarily accurate conclusion. Might it not be just as probable that candidates who labour under these enormous handicaps of expression but who can nevertheless produce something in which there is recognisable quality are those who would not previously have taken post-sixteen courses but who have nevertheless proved that they *have* achieved something in their A level studies; rather than that it should be taken for granted that they are of the familiar categories of ability but displaying a marked

¹ Op.cit. p 21

decline in technical competence? There are clearly far more candidates in the upper categories of performance than previously, and there is at least one pointer in the same Report to a general improvement in candidate technique as compared with the standard complaints from the earlier years:

"Very few candidates these days simply tell the story, as a response to the question, though many still use narrative as a base for the answer. Examiners can take virtually for granted a general acquaintance with the text beyond the level of plot, an acquaintance which expresses itself, however, as a readiness to discuss themes and characters almost invariably at the expense of, rather than in relation to, formal considerations, the treatment of which remains as disappointingly imprecise as the knowledge of relevant critical terms, such as 'dramatic', 'imagery', 'irony', 'lyric' and 'narrative art.'"¹

Clearly there is room for improvement, but equally clearly there has been a significant advance in A level teaching over thirty years if the examiners can now take for granted skills the absence of which they once lamented, and lament the absence of skills which once they did not expect.

The Oxford Examiners' Report of 1984 again adds little if anything to the picture which has been built up; its main emphasis is still on the "basic weakness – failure to see exactly what questions are asking."² On this occasion, however, some attempt is made to consider why this fault should continue, rather than maintain the assumption that the candidates are lacking in intelligence.

"The cause of the trouble is a lack of confidence. Many candidates with a good knowledge of the content of their texts seem to have decided in advance what they will write about, and instead of thinking freshly in the examination room in response to unfamiliar questions they take refuge in reproducing previously prepared work on similar (but not identical) subjects. The result is that relevance tends to be incidental instead of sustained and central. Another aspect of this lack of confidence is a reluctance to give frank expression to personal opinions when invited to do so, or to provide a real discussion of a given quotation. In the question 'How far do you find this true?' the 'you' is important: a personal assessment is expected with evidence to support it. When a question incorporates a quotation – someone else's view – and asks for discussion, candidates are expected to use it as the basis for debate, not merely to accept it as a text to be illustrated. Many candidates seem nervously to assume that the examiners as a body have a strong 'party line' about the texts set, and that it is best to play safe by not risking personal opinions and by not risking any kind of approach that they think might be unusual. It cannot be emphasised too strongly that examiners do not decide in advance on one right answer or one right approach. They recognise that a wide variety of answers and approaches is often possible, and all they stipulate is that, whatever the answer or approach, the argument should be relevant, cogently expressed, and amply illustrated."³

¹ Op.cit. p 23

² Op.cit. p 54

³ Ibid. p 55

Thought might perhaps have been given as to why the candidates should, generally if not universally, hold such convictions of the examiners. I have chaired enough meetings at which questions are set, and the way in which candidates are likely to approach them debated, to know that what is said here is true, and that the desire for original, personal reactions as opposed to the trotting-out of standard lines, is both sought and rewarded by examiners. It is precisely for this reason that they try, however unsuccessfully, to discourage the use of cribs. But I have also been a teacher long enough to know that the confidence to rely upon one's own judgement is not innate in the vast majority of candidates, and that the assumption that there is a 'right answer' and that the teacher knows it, is not only deeply ingrained but positively encouraged by some teachers, who often themselves lack the confidence to encourage the classroom discussions that can create the framework for the kind of "fresh thinking" in the examination room which this Report expects. At its worst, teaching of this kind can be positively misleading, as examiners know well enough:

"Some teaching for this paper seems to consist of the imparting of a few rigid notions, often encapsulated in critical clichés that inhibit all but the best candidates from a personal response to the literature."¹

Even at its best, it is inclined to result in the students taking the teacher's interpretations both 'as gospel' and as their own, and, in consequence, becoming incapable of seeing any point to discussion, and still less of constructing an alternative viewpoint. We are back on the problem of distinguishing between student performance and teacher competence. As every teacher is uncomfortably aware, no matter how gifted and inspired the teaching, there may well be the individual student who, under the pressure of the examination, writes nonsense which is entirely his own creation – but when the majority of a class write not only nonsense but more or less the same nonsense, or even the same dull clichés, it is difficult to acquit their teacher from responsibility. Yet while teaching may be largely at fault for this lack of confidence, the examiners, too, must accept some of the blame. If latterly their Reports were constructive, helpful and aware, to some extent at least, of the problems which some

¹ *Examiners' Notes*, Cambridge Syndicate Report 1980, p 17

candidates faced, their earlier communications with the 'chalkface' went some distance towards suggesting that there were two ways to tackle an examination paper, their way and the wrong way; and some teachers were undoubtedly not only inhibited by this, but allowed their view that "as flies to wanton boys are we to the examiners" to communicate itself to their pupils. And lastly, we have the nature of the examinations themselves and the importance they have come to play in determining the future of their candidates. It is asking a lot to expect a student to be so committed to the subject, as opposed to the grade that will result from his efforts, that he will take risks rather than play safe with a question with which he does not feel fully competent. There are, of course, candidates who would not hesitate to do so, but these are, almost without exception, those so able and so confident in their ability that they can scarcely be said to be taking risks at all.

The cudgels for the candidates were taken up on behalf of the Schools Council by John Dixon and John Brown in their fascinating and detailed study *Responses to Literature – What is being Assessed?* which I cannot find to have received the attention it merits; probably because its message was one which the authorities of the day were determined not to hear. As the title page points out, this study is the "outcome of work done for the Schools Council before its closure", and was published, posthumously as it were, by the School Curriculum Development Committee; and it is largely, though not exclusively, concerned with investigation into the suggestion that coursework encourages a higher level of genuine response to the stimulus of contact with literature than does the formal examination method of assessing what students have gained from their studies. In view of the determined restrictions placed upon coursework by the previous government, still in place today, and apparently unthreatened by proposed reforms, there is little point in pursuing this particular approach to standards – but it remains worthwhile to pay some attention to this investigation because of the way in which it illuminates for us the content of examiners' reports, and perhaps clarifies the degree to which we are justified in placing faith in their pronouncements on the standards of attainment of the candidates whose scripts they are assessing.

Dixon and Brown offer us an extremely useful statistic, and with it a very simple justification for their work:

"In 1977-8, the year in which our research began, over 60,000 students sat GCE A level English Literature – the largest single group entered for any A level examination. Only 4% were likely to go on to read Honours English; a further 40% would go on to read other subjects at university. We wanted to represent not only those students but also the majority now taking a two-year course in English Literature as a voluntary continuation of their full-time education before leaving to try and find work." ¹

and it is on behalf of these students that they advance a response to a wide range of critical comments by examiners on their candidates, similar to, and actually including some quoted in earlier pages of this chapter. That from the London Board is typical:

"Many candidates.....recount little more than second-hand reactions, expressed in lifeless or careless English." ²

The response from Dixon and Brown does not seek to dispute this judgement – rather to place it in a less absolute context:

"Many teachers we worked with during the Schools Council English 16-19 project might well have agreed with the examiners' comments, but believed they were a reflection of certain traditional examining methods. Severe constraints were habitually imposed upon candidates; they felt:

1. There was little or no time to prepare the answer to a question, and none to revise the first draft.
 2. Without the text available, it was difficult for the student to bring relevant passages vividly to mind again; too much depended on a memory under stress.
 3. The time limit forced discussion of major novels, plays and longer poems into generalities, without the weight and fullness these derive from an opportunity to dwell on key moments.
 4. Adjustments to three or four successive tasks in three hours was against the whole spirit of reading literature for understanding and enjoyment.
- Given the joint effect of these constraints, the examination was unlikely, in their view, to produce work of sufficient value from any but the most exceptional student." ³

There is, of course, nothing new in any of this, and set down unemotionally and factually like this, few objective readers would quibble with these findings. But it does help us to remember, when we read a comment from the Oxford examiners such as this from the Report of 1976,

"Much present-day reading of English literature seems to be done in the spirit which for many years has bedevilled attempts at unseen translation from a foreign language, namely a simple lack of expectation that what is read will make sense", ⁴

that in 1976 the Oxford Board dealt with 9180 candidates, of whom, statistically,

¹ Op. cit., Part II, *Introduction*, p 3

² Ibid. Part I, p 3

³ Ibid. pp 3-4

⁴ Op. cit. p 42

only 367 were going on to read for an honours degree in English, the path for which the examination in question was designed as a suitable test for admission. It is perhaps worthy of note that in that year 881 candidates were awarded grade A by the Oxford Board, the majority of whom, clearly, had an interest greater than English literature to dominate their further education, since this puts in perspective the extremely narrow focus of the examination in relation to the enormous range of personal benefit which those entered for it might have expected to derive from the two year course in the study of literature.

It is only fair to point out, and Dixon and Brown are at pains to do so, that some University voices were firmly behind a movement for reform, and for the introduction of a coursework approach that would remove the aforementioned constraints from the progress of those disturbed or hindered by the nature of traditional examinations:

"Like yourselves, we are consistently troubled by conventional A level syllabuses.' 'Our students' success now depends a good deal on their ability to undertake substantial projects in which the choice of topics, and the motivation to complete the work, come largely from themselves.....and we have felt for some time that the existing A level syllabuses do not sufficiently develop the skills and the confidence necessary for work of that kind'; 'Plenty of research has been done over the last twenty years showing the various inadequacies of assessment conducted only through traditional three hour examinations, and our own method of assessment shows that in principle we are totally in accord with the developments you suggest.' " ¹

As Brown and Dixon point out

"teachers of our generation have always had high expectations of what might be gained in reading and discussing literature with students of that age" ²

It is vital to remember that there is not universal agreement as to the benefits which might be expected to accrue from the study of an A level course in English literature, as the Dartmouth Conference established, and as the rift between English teachers in the 1970s was to underline all too clearly. What seems to me significant to the purpose of this thesis in that protracted argument I have dealt with already³, and I have no wish to revisit the dispute here. Yet the following observations, isolated as they are from their context by my quotation, from the case that Dixon and Brown build up, seem to me to be sensible and important and relevant to our purpose into the bargain.

¹ Op.cit., Part I, p 4

² Ibid, p 12

³ v.sup. pp94-98

"Torn to pieces; they lost their magic' commented a not untypical English teacher to us, discussing her sixth form books. It is not easy to make close reading and re-reading 'a creative process'."

"How effective are teachers and examiners in keeping 16-19 year olds alive to the poem as subjective inner experience while helping them 'to dwell with a deliberate, considering responsiveness to this, that or the other node or focal point in the complete organisation that the poem is.....This is the question Leavis and others have taught us to ask."

"As things are, for all these reasons, it is hard for the 16-19 year old either to dissent scrupulously from the writer, or to offer a considered assent. And yet, as Denys Harding has said, 'fiction is a social convention, and institutionalised technique of discussion, by means of which an author invites us to join him in discussing a possibility of experience that he regards as interesting and to share with him attitudes towards it, evaluations of it, that he claims to be appropriate.' "

"The students are learning 'to dwell with a deliberate, considering responsiveness' on some node or focal point in *Lear*, let us say. This sets up the possibility of using language to express the movements of feeling and thought perceived in that scene and to seek connections with what has gone before or what follows. Thus, the student will possess the moment and begin to understand its significance for the experience as a whole. But remember that the students, still under the impact of Shakespeare's language, must find words that are in some sense their own to communicate the most subtle shifts of feeling and attitude. On the face of it, there could hardly be a more challenging situation in which to achieve adequate articulacy."

"Unfortunately, students too often meet writing as a demand for an 'essay' – a word that has totally lost its original sense and come to signify a finished product. The planning of this tightly organised form, with its opening and closing generalities, frequently leaves no time for second thoughts or feelings as we shall see. There are even indications that where these do emerge, they are felt to be a danger to the original 'structure' and are therefore set aside." ¹

What follows is a detailed and complex analysis, thoroughly illustrated by student material, of 'reading for evidence of literary response' – that is to say, reading in such a way as to expose underlying thought-patterns and influences displayed by the writer in order to establish the degree to which he or she was clearly genuinely responding to a stimulus provided by the author, even if such response would not be immediately apparent to an examiner marking conventionally.

It is obviously expecting the impossible to require this level of analytic scrutiny from an examiner confronted with a pile of scripts and a deadline to complete their marking: indeed, confronted as he also is with the demands of internal and external comparability and consistency, validity and reliability; and trained as he is to adopt a professional remoteness and objectivity to the material before him; to consider even those matters

¹ Op.cit., Part I, pp 10-13 passim

which are touched upon in the above extracts from the Introduction, is expecting too much of him. This matter is, of course at the root of the whole debate on the suitability of English literature as an examination subject, and further comment would be superfluous, beyond a reminder of the earlier quotation from the teachers consulted by Dixon and Brown that

"the examination was unlikely, in their view, to produce work of sufficient value from any but the most exceptional student."¹

One thing about which every Report from an examination board so far studied is in complete agreement, is the high quality of the best scripts which are consistently described in the most glowing terms. Clearly the examination is doing a superbly discriminatory job in distinguishing the candidates for whom it was primarily designed and whose exceptional qualities so delight those who have the task of marking their scripts. The purpose of this digression is to focus attention upon the fact that such candidates were always a small minority and have progressively become an even tinier minority as the A level literature paper became the most popular of all 18+ subject examinations and as more and more students stayed on into sixth forms. Confronted with such massive numbers it is hardly surprising if the examiners react by deploring the entry of students for whom the course seems inappropriate, but this must not mislead us into assuming that this is a clear indication of falling standards. What Dixon and Brown wish to do is to convince us that it is not so much the course, but the examination that is inappropriate for the overwhelming majority of candidates; and that a significantly higher proportion of coursework, which would permit a more measured and considered response, would bring about a radical change. As I have already observed, this argument was politically doomed to long-term impotence before they could publish it, but initially it was by no means without influence on both examination boards and English teachers and contributed substantially to the awareness of the vast improvement that well-designed course-work could effect in the understanding and enjoyment of candidates whom the traditional examination had failed to inspire to anything beyond stodgy reiteration. Moreover, in the process of constructing it they amassed a considerable volume of material originally written both as coursework and as

¹ Op.cit., Part I, p 4 and v.sup. p 467

responses to traditional examinations, and it is the work in the latter category which is of interest to us, providing as it does examples of graded scripts from a period in which such material is not otherwise available. The following are all extracts from essays quoted in full in *Responses to Literature – What is being Assessed?* and printed as illustrations of work which was graded D by the examiners and subsequently confirmed by specialist readers re-examining for 'evidence of literary response' as showing 'negative evidence of that quality.' In other words, what we have here is work from the early eighties which is, from two separate viewpoints of assessment, significantly below the average level of performance and only obtaining an 'A' level pass grade by a narrow margin.

"It is said that in presenting Coriolanus Shakespeare stands dispassionately from his character, observing from the outside. The reader cannot do this, as Coriolanus is a controversial figure, arousing various emotions. Coriolanus arouses disgust in the spectator. His first appearance illustrates his intense anger at and hatred of the Plebeians –

'What's the matter you contentious rogues...give yourselves sores' variously throughout the play, he refers to them as the 'rank-scented meinie', 'the mutable rank', and the tribunes, the representatives of the people are referred to as 'the tongue of the common people' Coriolanus is unable to control his hatred or his anger.One of the faults that Coriolanus displays is that of pride and arrogance, seen in his treatment of the people. He also displays a certain lack of modesty. When his followers praise him, he says he does not want to stay to hear his 'nothings monstered', and this does not sound genuine.

Coriolanus therefore arouses disgust in the spectator, because of his treatment of the Plebeians and the aspects of pride, arrogance and immodesty in his character.

The spectator can however feel admiration at Coriolanus bravery.

'He is a soldier even after Cato's wish'

comments Lartius.....However it can be argued that Coriolanus fights because he enjoys fighting, it is a patrician value –

'it is held that valour is the chiefest virtue'.

He is not brave, it can be argued, because he has so much pride and arrogance that he does not have to overcome fear. It is therefore uncertain whether feelings of admiration can be aroused in the spectator....."¹

This is a fairly obvious example of the kind of essay that we have seen castigated in Report after Report. It shows little sign of real involvement with the text or enjoyment of the contact – yet the candidate has clearly done some work, he has understood the dilemma Shakespeare poses for us at a basic level, and shows some facility at the inclusion of vaguely relevant quotations from the text. Standards would indeed have fallen dangerously if this kind of stuff were receiving any kind of plaudit, but as an example of D grade material, it hardly seems an instance of debased currency.

¹ Op.cit., Part III, p 137

" 'The Yearning Passion I have for the Beautiful'

Keats made this abundantly clear in all his poems. His 'mighty abstract ideas of beauty in all things' is revealed firstly in 'I Stood Tiptoe' in which he catalogues all the beautiful things around him.

It seems a great pity that death should cut short Keats' development as technical poet and philosopher. He had appreciated the chamber of sensation, had entered the chamber of Maiden thought, but as yet had been unsuccessful in finding a way out.

His first notable work was 'Ode to a Nightingale' His desire to be one with the birds leads him to exclaim 'O for a draught of vintage'. This is comparable to his later 'Ode on Melancholy' where he begs the reader not to dwell on the symbols of death but to 'glut thy sorrow on a morning rose.'

He continues the drugged atmosphere in the Nightingale and wishes to be transported 'on the viewless wings of poesy.'

Keats' first epic poem - 'Eve of St. Agnes' is highly charged with vivid descriptions and appeals to the senses in many ways.

The cold house is described in detail with its 'purgatorial rails'.

The antagonism of the family is depicted in all their actions, even their argente revelry; contrasting with this is Porphyrio with 'heart on fire'.

The description of Madeline undressing is both sensual and sensuous as she 'panted'. Keats conjures up a picture of the perfumed garments rustling to the floor. It is unusual for Keats to appeal to the sense of taste yet he does so by the rich mouth-watering foods he lays out before Madeline.

Throughout the poem there is constant reference to warm and cold, for example it is a cold moon outside but warm inside Madeline's bedroom.

Keats also makes frequent use of transferred epithets and hypallage, e.g. 'woolly fold.'

Finally the lovers make a very dramatic exit out of the house, yet we cannot feel safe in the knowledge that their future is secure.

'And they are gone,
Ay, ages past.' "1

The reviewing reader says of this, reasonably enough, that "it is littered with observations on Keats which he has heard but not understood", that there is a total lack of exploration in depth, and that 'nowhere is evidence presented in a convincing fashion'; and finally that "There is very strong evidence that this student has not engaged with the material in any meaningful way"² - which provides us, if we needed it, with evidence that the reviewers knew their trade, and that their desire to change the examination procedures did not stem from a desire to make life easier for inadequate candidates. This is clearly a substantially worse essay than that on *Coriolanus* and I am personally surprised to find it classified as D rather than the E which I believe it would have received today; but again I find myself asking whether an outright failure would do better justice to such work as the candidate has done on Keats? Even more importantly from the viewpoint of an investigation into standards, I find myself asking how much better candidates prepared for the old Higher

¹ Op.cit., Part III, pp 143-144

² Ibid. p 145

Certificate might have been expected to do, prepared as they were for questions of fact rather than critical appreciation?

As a final example from this source I take the concluding half of an essay on Wilfred Owen.

" 'Futility' is a very moving poem. it is aptly named because the poem gains a cosmic effect from using the sun as a symbol for knowledge and the man they drag out is seen as the symbol of the waste and uselessness of war. The poem starts off in a pastoral way reminding us of home and fields and that it 'awoke him once' to go out and tend his crops. It ends much more powerfully although not with any shock imagery. We see the sun as futile in bothering to shine any more, because even if it does this man, who is the ever recurring symbol of all those who die is hopelessness embodied. The reader almost prays that he will not come back to life because we know that he must only die again. This style that Owen takes for himself is much more powerful and universal than hurling shocking images: because some people, myself mostly, cannot feel the depth of the emotion and message if we are faced with visual horror.

Another distinctive feature of Owen's style is that although he has lost faith in his orthodox religion this appears to have been replaced by what could be called a faith in humanity. His language is influenced very much by religion and I feel that 'Strange Meeting' which is a metaphor for a meeting in Hell illustrates this point.

In this poem I feel we have a microcosm of Wilfred Owen the Soldier Poet. We are introduced to his dilemma when he comes face to face with the enemy but can only say 'You are the enemy I killed today my friend' to juxtapose enemy with friend shows his deep sense of duty towards his fellow man. He tells that 'there is no beauty in the poetry' and that he is only concerned with the 'pity of war, the pity war distilled' has the effect of making the experience static for the reader and we are able to feel with Wilfred Owen the passionate effect the war had on him.

And also ironically he says in this poem 'the truth untold' perhaps he is right that we will never know the full extent of the suffering but through his poetry we can gain a fuller and more lasting concept of the horrors of war and the dilemma that a poet must involve himself in when trying to tell the world his own particular heartfelt message from the front line of a war that can only be seen as an unnecessary slaughter of mankind. " ¹

This essay too illustrates effectively some of the more disturbing criticisms by the examiners over the years: as, for example, in the total absence of any form of punctuation in the final paragraph; the misquotation of a vital line which wrecks the scansion; the clear parroting of half-understood comments, the uncertain vocabulary, and the sense at times that the writer has changed intention in mid sentence – all of these, in the smoothly dismissive tones of an examiners' report present themselves as a devastating catalogue of inadequacies. Yet would the critic of standards hold that this effort should be failed outright, rather than be allowed the narrow pass that has been adjudged its merited level? Are there not clear signs here of exactly those problems in examination methodology that Dixon and Brown laid down at the beginning of their research? I believe that if this candidate had been allowed to take Wilfred Owen as

¹ Op.cit., Part III, p 147

a coursework topic, many of the inequalities of this piece would have been ironed out, and the response to Owen which is clearly struggling for recognition might well have appeared unmistakeably, granted appropriate teacher supervision and advice. Alternatively, if he had been allowed to bring the text into the examination room, there are grounds here for supposing that this passage would not have read quite so breathlessly, so ineptly, so far short of the response we would all feel to be Owen's due.

One reviewing reader in search of evidence of literary response feels that

"The writer has perhaps suffered from inferior teaching, for he fails to respond to the important lines in 'Futility'

'What made fatuous sunbeams toil

To wake earth's sleep at all ?'

....*Hopelessness embodied* points perhaps to some awareness but I'm not at all sure. The writer has not grasped the real hopelessness, and like *cosmic* this might be a half-remembered comment from a teacher. ...I don't know. He may have had some true feelings about 'Futility' (without fully understanding it) but he can't understand 'Strange Meeting' sufficiently to have true feeling." ¹

The second reader observed more briefly:

"Notice the striking mixture of styles. On the one hand a sort of wooden clarity, going through what he has been told; on the other, places where a more personal style emerges, clumsy and obscure...I can't decide whether the last para. results from haste or from this ineffective effort at expressing feelings and responses of his own." ²

"I don't know" from one, and "I can't decide" from the second of two experienced readers specifically trying to determine the validity or genuineness of a candidate's response – this is, in fact, a very suitable point to conclude the Dixon and Brown survey, which, in point of fact, it does. There are so many times in the marking and assessment of English work that the quality seems uneven and inconsistent. More than once I have heard an examiner at an Award meeting observe "I really don't know about this one – it's really an A/C. What did he do on his other papers?" and the fact that, in the last resort, the assignment of a mark has to be an informed or inspired guess is a fact of life, if not a widely acknowledged one. This is unquestionably a borderline piece of work, but my own conviction is that the original examiner's assessment of Grade D pass standard is absolutely accurate, and that no evidence of sloppy marking

¹ Op.cit., Part III, p 148

² Ibid.

or declining standards can be derived from it. But we are reminded yet again that standards are not absolute measurements, and that examiners do not always by means of their reports create in the minds of their readers the picture that exists in their own. There were, in fact, only two more such Reports from Oxford during the period in which GCE 'A' level served as the natural continuation from 'O' level, in 1986 and 1988, and while there were almost certainly equivalent issues from Cambridge I was unable to find traces of them in the Syndicate Archive. The first of the Oxford documents marks a substantial if somewhat belated change from the Reports of the previous thirty years. In 1986, English got a booklet to itself, covering both 'O' and 'A' level examinations, and running to 48 pages, with a detailed specification of marks and grade distributions.¹ Despite its length and the detailed attention to every separate question on the paper, however, there is little either new or of genuine significance, and the opening two paragraphs convey much of what needs to be recorded.

"This year's paper.....succeeded in eliciting a wide range of responses. There was the usual small number of scripts of superb quality with four answers...completed in three hours showing a mastery of the texts and a full understanding of the terms of the questions, analytic, selective, skilfully argued, stylishly expressed, with an assurance that one examiner described as 'breathtaking'. At the other extreme there was an equally small group of candidates, still too many, although their number seems to be dwindling, who should not have been entered for Advanced level. The majority of candidates showed evidence of having studied the texts and attempted to deal with some at any rate of the issues of questions that were often complex and far-reaching in their full requirements.

There was perhaps less irrelevant story-telling or character sketching than in previous years. This said, the continuing weakness....lies in the response to verse, not only that of the prescribed poems but also the dramatic verse of Shakespeare himself.Blank verse and prose are confused; terms such as 'enjambement' and 'caesura' are often used but seldom understood. The invitation to comment on language and verse is often treated perfunctorily. One could read many essays on Shakespeare without discovering that he is a verse dramatist.....Answers were, on the whole, more soundly constructed this year."²

This might almost have been written in any year, but as it is in fact the Report of 1986, the grudging acknowledgement of an improvement in performance and a minor reduction in the number of entries judged to be really hopeless must be acknowledged. The faults on which the detailed attention to questions concentrate are often a matter of failing to include all the relevant points, and must be read in conjunction with the comment that candidates were often left at the end of their first question "with too

¹ v.inf. Appendix p 486

² Op.cit. pp 18-19

little time to write three more full answers and many scripts were left uncompleted or finished off hastily in note-form." ¹ This serves as internal evidence that candidates are in fact suffering from the difficulties that Dixon and Brown enumerate: that the students simply cannot do themselves, and the questions, justice within the time allowed. The purist response would be that they should learn brevity, and that the best scripts distinguish themselves by being concise:

"...the very best candidates conveyed a sensitive awareness of the subject in a precise and economical way"

from the Cambridge Report of 1981 is a typical instance.² The problem is that brevity is a very difficult skill to acquire, and the ability to knock a nail firmly on the head with one deft blow is, within an academic context, a rare one. Only the best and most confident candidates can resist the temptation to 'gild refined gold and paint the lily' and these are not the ones that concerned Dixon and Brown, and should concern us, however much they may gratify the examiners. By and large the point has now been conceded, and four-question three-hour papers no longer feature generally in contemporary 'A' level examinations, but there were no signs of this in 1986, and what we have here is yet another instance of the examiners citing candidate inadequacy rather than acknowledging that the examination system was asking too much; though to be fair, the Cambridge Examiners Report of 1981 did also acknowledge precisely that.³ As was demonstrated at the beginning of this chapter, the Higher Certificate papers demanded even more in terms of the number of questions to be answered, but the questions themselves were less taxing in terms of demanding that candidates thought for themselves and put an argument together, rather than demonstrate that they had acquired knowledge and could reproduce it within a specified format.

The essential moral of the evidence in front of us is that examiners were conscious of a slow but perceptible improvement in the ability of candidates to tackle the papers in front of them, despite the ever-growing number of those candidates and the ever-widening range of abilities, backgrounds and interests which that growth represented. At the same time they were also conscious of a series of defects in presentation that

¹ Op.cit. p 19

² v.sup. p 458

³ v.sup. p 457

remained stubbornly constant throughout the period; and that new faults appeared and perhaps new depths of inadequacy were plumbed. It is not surprising if they were inclined to pay more attention to the latter aspects of their work – after all, the fundamental purpose of the Examiners' report is to focus attention on faults in order to bring about improvement – but the constant drip of adverse criticism, punctuated occasionally with more splenetic outbursts, can entirely obscure the overall improvements and convince the casual observer of a decline which has no basis in fact. The great function of the research by Dixon and Brown is that it shows positive evidence that even where the focus of examiners on shortcomings is superficially justified, these may well be shortcomings in examination technique rather than, as is usually inferred, in appropriate response to the literary stimulus provided; and that, with effective teaching, the standards of student involvement in literature and in critical analysis had substantially advanced even where limitations in the opportunity to express that involvement had disguised the advance from examiners.

Perhaps ironically, the key sentence from the 1988 Oxford Report on English, a brief document of 7 pages issued in typescript rather than printed, reinforces precisely the strength of the 'A' level English examination and its impact on a more numerous and more socially disparate entry.

"Some of the work this year was of a very high standard, and examiners commented on the pleasure it gave them to read work of such quality. Furthermore, it was apparent that candidates of all sorts and conditions had genuinely responded to what they read." ¹

Yet again, the conclusion of this study of 'A' level material from various sources over a period of thirty-seven years must be that there is absolutely no solid evidence of a decline in standards, and a good deal of circumstantial evidence of an improvement. The original purpose of 'A' level was to provide an intermediate and discriminatory examination between the universal 'school leavers' test in English and admittance to a University course in the subject or a related one – and this it performed extremely effectively throughout the period: good candidates were tested effectively yet given an opportunity to display individual talent, and the examiners exclaim over and over

¹ Op.cit. p 1

again at the brilliance and virtuosity of the skills displayed. It was always unrealistic to expect the same examination papers, taken in the same conditions after much the same preparation, to measure also the degree of personal benefit conferred upon thousands of sixteen to eighteen year olds who had no academic aspirations at all, from following the courses designed to this end; still more so that it should measure them accurately – and it is an indication of the power of the literature itself rather than the skills of teachers and examiners which made this subject, rather improbably one might think, the most popular of all 'A' level subjects. Dixon and Brown have produced satisfactory evidence that the course can produce the benefits claimed for the study of literature almost despite the examination, and it behoves us not to take too literally the examiners' comminations on those who failed to acquire mastery of exam. technique as well.

The years since the Education Reform Act of 1988 have involved modifications to the shape and nature of the 'A' level examination which would be approved by the teachers who helped with the compilation of *Responses to Literature – What is being Assessed?* : 'open text' examinations are now common, papers are commonly shorter and cover fewer texts, and a coursework component is now a popular option in every 'A' level syllabus, despite the external limitations imposed upon it. It has been argued, and doubtless will continue to be argued, that the restriction to 20% of the total mark for such coursework is arbitrary, unduly restrictive and counter-productive; and that devoting perhaps 50% of the available marks to work produced in the course of two years study, rather than in either terminal or periodic modular examinations, would significantly improve both student involvement in literature and the quality of response. Certainly the 'background reading' which the old Higher Certificate assumed, and which was the basis for the final questions on the earlier Oxford period papers, can be taken for granted in a coursework based approach as it cannot (at least to anything like the same extent) in teaching for an exam-based syllabus. There is, however, still quite enough of the 'traditional' examination requirement to provide comparable examples of examination questions, mark schemes and specimen answers from the 1990s; and although they are strictly outside the boundaries of this thesis I append such material as a conclusion to this chapter to illustrate the direction to which 'A' level was moving

at the time of the 1988 Act in the confident expectation that they will provide yet further illustration of my contention that standards of both expectation and achievement have gone up rather than down since 1951.

In the interim, however, it is appropriate to look at some of the research conducted since 1987 which bears directly upon 'A' level teaching, examining and our understanding of the methodology of assessment. At the end of Chapter 3 I referred to two pieces of research carried out under the auspices of the Research and Evaluation Division of the Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate.¹ One of these was *A Study of Comparability between Options in A Level English* by Mike Forster, carried out in 1993 and updated in the following year; the second was entitled *'A' level English Literature : A Reliability Study* by Alison Green and Alastair Pollitt carried out in 1994. The function of this latter study was to determine "the reliability of assessments of student's essays made by examiners of English 'A' level".² The study was carefully set up using a volunteer sixth form college which agreed that the end-of-year exam in English for its 171 candidates could be specially set by an experienced Cambridge examiner and marked for the purposes of the study by a team of ten examiners, "five very experienced and five who were relatively new to examining." Two papers were set, one containing two compulsory questions on Shakespeare, the second containing five questions on unseen texts of which the candidates were required to answer two. Scripts were distributed between examiners so that each of the ten had to mark one question from each paper, or two from each candidate; and three months after the first marking the examiners were asked to score the same scripts again, not having been informed previously that this was an intended part of the experiment. The study was thus carefully designed to cover a number of different suspect grounds of variability in grading. Each paper (and each question from each paper) was marked by a number of different examiners to demonstrate the range of marks that a given piece of work might attract; the unheralded re-mark after three months allowed a study of the 'internal consistency' of each examiner; the contrast between a paper with no choice and one with the freedom to select two questions from five allowed some investigation as to

¹ v.sup. p 250

² Op.cit. p 2

the effect of choice on candidates; and also as to whether, in a choice situation, one question, or combination of questions, proves to be of a different level of difficulty, in the sense of producing consistently higher or lower marks than the others.

In point of fact, this detailed study produced no startling results – no aberrations from the norm which might cause us to place a worried question mark over the validity of the results of A level examining in general. In the survey of examiner comparability, for example, there were so many possible variations in the marks allocated to any one student that one might have supposed that significant inconsistencies would be inevitable:

"All the figures presented in the tables are based on 40 ratings per student – that is, each student completed four essays and each essay was graded twice by five examiners. In real life, each essay would be graded once only" ¹

yet the number of 'misfits' (students whose assessments involved marks widely enough disparate to have resulted in significantly different grades) was no more than 15 out of the 171. The study established that the more experienced examiners tended to be less severe than the new recruits which suggests that a second marking should be given to a substantial sample of each new examiner's scripts until his reliability is established, but overall the statistic interpretation of the information was that

"...we could be confident that 68% of students are marked within plus or minus two fifths of a grade of their true measure, and 95% within plus or minus four fifths of a grade. Equivalently, about 1% of students will be misclassified by more than one grade." ²

The researchers specifically warn that great care is needed in transferring these results to English examinations generally, so it by no means necessarily implies that some 600 candidates a year finish with a grade at least one adrift from their 'true' entitlement, but even if this were a legitimate inference it could hardly be grounds for concern as applied to an academic discipline as notoriously subjective as English literature. One only has to consider the draconian restrictions that would have to be imposed upon the current freedoms of examiners in order to create a marking system that would significantly reduce that figure, to realise how very satisfactory it is.

On other matters the study showed that giving pupils a choice did not always mean that

¹ Op.cit. p 5

² Ibid. p 14

they would exercise it wisely or in their own best interests. It also showed a tendency for the selection of a particular question to have an undue effect upon the final results of those who did so – and produced the following recommendation at the end of the document.

"Care should be taken that questions do not vary too widely in difficulty. This could be monitored by an adaptation of the *subject pairs* analysis that is routine in UCLES for comparing different examinations. For each question, this would compare average grade to the average grades the same students got on all the other questions they attempted. If a question turns out to be significantly harder or easier than the others, then consideration should be given to raising or lowering the scores awarded on it." ¹

in exactly the same way, presumably, that examiners can be classified as plus or minus 1 or 2 in order to compensate for their relative leniency or harshness.

As I have said, there is nothing startling in these findings and reference to this study is included not because of changes that it has brought about, but because it reinforces the integrity of the current system, and increases the reliance that we can place upon the results awarded every year, and upon the standards which they represent. It is positively encouraging to know that examination boards are carrying out research of this kind upon their own procedures on a regular basis.

Indeed, the only aspect of this research that causes me a moment's concern is the footnote to the recommendation: "Alternatively, or additionally, the amount of choice in the paper should be reduced".² It seems to me that there is a possibility that Examination Boards will become so obsessed with comparability in all its forms, that flexibility in course construction will disappear altogether, and the impact of recent government pressure does nothing to remove that doubt from my mind. While it is obviously true that an injustice is possible if you test two students on different questions, in that the assessment of performance on the one may differ slightly in quality from that on the other, what seems to be overlooked is that a very similar injustice is possible if you insist on testing both on the same questions, if, as is very readily possible, the questions are more suited to the one student than the other. It is, for example, easy to imagine a sixth form group that would thrive on *Hamlet* but flounder with *The Winter's Tale* ; cope satisfactorily with *Paradise Lost Book IV* but

¹ Op.cit. p 22

² Ibid.

be totally switched off by *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, enjoy Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale* or perhaps *The Wife of Bath's Tale* far more than the *Knight's*. It is part of the function of the effective teacher to make an appropriate selection from the syllabus to suit the particular strengths and weaknesses of his group, and I believe it is also part of the function of the Examining Boards to provide sufficient flexibility in the syllabus to allow that appropriate selection. That the flexibility may also admit a degree of variation in the absolute mechanical accuracy of a mark scheme is a sacrifice I find well worth while in the interests of preserving those qualities of English Literature that distinguish it from every other subject and almost certainly account for it being the most popular of all 'A' levels. The difficulty, particularly for those to whom the application of rigid 'standards' is an end in itself, is that very popularity, which spreads the impact of any fragmentary departure from strict comparability over a wide proportion of examination candidates in any given year.

The same mixture of relief and concern must arise from Mike Forster's *Study of Comparability between Options in A-Level English* which studied the Cambridge examination for 1993 and 1994 with particular reference to the different component options available to candidates:

"There were three main areas of concern. Firstly, the difference in performance between the components generally. Secondly, the difference in performance between the two Shakespeare options, and thirdly, the difference in performance within one of the Shakespeare options (between components 12 and 13)."¹

The structure of the Cambridge syllabus gives candidates (or their teachers) a wide freedom of choice in constructing a two year course. All candidates must do Shakespeare, but there is a choice between a straight examination (component 1) and a mixture of examination and coursework (components 12 and 13). In addition, all candidates must take two of the remaining papers, (components 2-8,10,11) though certain combinations of these are not permitted. An immediate area for possible concern is the distribution of candidates across these options. In an examination which attracted just over 9000 entries, 6038 chose Component 1 and 3067 the alternative 12 and 13; while the remaining options attracted numbers varying between 5250

¹ Op.cit. p 1

(the School Assessment or coursework component) and 395 (The period c.1720–1832), and the matter is further complicated by the revelation that different components attract different types of school in uneven proportions. Paper 3, (Chaucer and other major authors) attracts an above average proportion of grammar schools while Paper 6 (Literature c. 1900–1960) attracts an above average entry from the independent sector. For what it may be worth, 'Chaucer and other major authors' is the only component of the five dealing 'traditionally' with set books to attract an entry in four figures; and the most popular are the 'open text' paper and the two dealing with the comment and appreciation of literary passages. One might reasonably have predicted that there would be some inconsistencies of performance over so disparate an approach to an 'A' level grade, and this was in fact the case.

"The report gives evidence which suggests that some components were of differing difficulty. Most notable were the relative 'ease' of component 10, and the slight 'harshness' of components 5 and 6. Of the two Shakespeare options.....Component 1 seemed the 'harder', a phenomenon not attributable to the quality of the candidature taking the options. The evidence offered in this report suggests that the two options were of differing difficulty, in favour of those who took the coursework option. Within the coursework option, component 13 was found to be 'easier' than component 12." ¹

The conclusions reached by the author of this study touch upon the problems arising from course work, having regard to the fact that performance was better on the 'Shakespeare including coursework' approach than on 'Shakespeare by examination only.'

"The ability of the candidates taking the two options was not thought responsible for this difference. There is an argument which states that candidates benefit from taking course work, because they have more scope to do themselves justice. Potentially course work candidates have more expertise at their disposal than examination candidates (e.g. reference books, teachers, parents, other pupils, etc.) The argument can be made that if course work candidates produce work of a higher quality than do examination candidates, they should get the credit for it. The alternative view is that is that candidates should not be advantaged solely on the basis of their option choices. It would appear that in the case of UCLES English the former argument was applied, since the difference in performance could not be explained fully in terms of the ability of the candidates. As this report has shown, it would be possible to eliminate the apparent advantage associated by choosing the course work by adjusting the Component 13 boundaries." ²

The situation was further complicated for the follow-up study of the following year, by the fact that in 1994 those candidates who chose the course work option again

¹ Op.cit. p 1

² Ibid. p 14

performed better than those who did the examination, although they were deemed to be less able:

"...candidates who chose component 1 tended to find it slightly 'easier' than their other components. Those who chose components 12 and 13 tended to find them noticeably easier than their other components, despite performing worse overall in comparison with Component 1 candidates."¹

Again the final position is that compensation for a slight inequality of papers should be contrived by means of an adjustment to the grade boundaries, which means, very much simplified, that if the judgemental grade boundary marks determined by the awarding committee result in one particular component having a distinctively higher or lower than average proportion of candidates at one or more of the key grades, that boundary should be adjusted to a figure which would bring the distribution more nearly in line with other components. It is clearly undesirable that the choice of one particular combination of optional papers should seem to offer an easier chance of higher grades than another and where it actually happens it is obvious that statistical compensation should be provided. What must, however, be guarded against is the assumption that the awarders have erred on the side of leniency simply because one component has produced a significantly higher number of A grades, or even of total passes at grades A to E, than the others. With entries for individual components as low as 166, as happened in 1994, it takes only a single class of very able and well taught students to distort the proportional grade distributions significantly from the average. It is for this reason that in such cases the performance of each individual candidate across all three of his or her options is considered as well as the performance of the candidates collectively in each option. It is this kind of attention to detail that makes the final A level results in successive years so reliable, and justifies the integrity of standards that was argued from so many angles in the course of Chapter Three. If there had been a real and meaningful decline in standards the Examination Boards could not be unaware of it; and these days every part of their normal proceedings, and of their regular testing of those proceedings, is under the scrutiny of the appropriate external body (at the time of writing the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority). This means that knowledge of this kind, if it existed,

¹ *A Study of Comparability between Options in A-Level English - 1994 Update*, p 1

could not be suppressed.

In conclusion I present some material from the 1990s; questions and marking schemes designed for candidates whose introduction to 'A' level was through an established GCSE course rather than 'O' level, together with excerpts from scripts submitted by such candidates. I believe that, contrasted with similar material as it appears throughout this chapter, this material will reinforce my contention that there has been no significant decline in standards.

Questions on *The Tempest*

- (a) In what senses may the play *The Tempest* be seen to be about education?
- (b) 'Although the play is set on a magic island, its focus is on the passions and conflicts of ordinary existence.' Discuss.
- (c) By close reference to the language and dramatic action, consider what the thoughts and feelings of an audience might be as the scene below unfolds. [Act II, Sc. ii, lines 1–42]

The marking scheme provides a detailed description of the kind of answer which corresponds to each of the final grades and the range of marks to be awarded (out of 25) to a candidate who would warrant such a grade, supposing this answer to be typical of his or her work across the whole examination. Thus:

B. Proficient work, soundly argued with insight into the significance and effect of the work studied. The candidate may be articulate, capable of challenging the question and able to support by detailed reference to the text the views put forward in the essay. Some individuality of approach may be apparent – other answers may be very thorough. Work may not be highly incisive but will be more than just sound. [16, 17, 18]

C. Essays will display competence in framing an argument in response to a question and in showing appreciation of theme and character in the literature studied. Sensible discussion in a generally sound style with occasional moments of personal insight and perceptive comment. [13, 14, 15]

D. Stolid work marching determinedly through text and question, though failing to perceive some of the implications of both. Nevertheless, there will be occasions when ideas or personal response seem to be developing. Perhaps slightly flawed by omission, weakness of structure or lack of purposeful selectivity. [10, 11, 12]

E. More than just a factually accurate knowledge of story, theme and character and powers of expression adequate to its communication, however plainly. The beginnings of a relevant response to the text showing some attempt to deal with meaning, but partial or simplistic [7, 8, 9]

Extract (approximately the middle third) from a specimen answer to question (b):

"I don't think that the focus is mainly on the passions and conflicts of ordinary existence because without the magic of the island, none of Prospero's ideas would come to light. All of the characters being in the right place at the right time depends on the spirits, especially Ariel, enticing them to follow or stay accordingly. It is Ariel's work as a slave to Prospero that brings everyone together when he commands.

Ferdinand is enticed by his music and the song 'Full fathom five...' which makes him remember his father Alonso, who he believes is dead. Following the sound of the music Ariel has enchanted him with, Ferdinand meets Miranda, whom he later marries with Prospero's consent.

With the use of Ariel being invisible Prospero was able to foil the murder of Alonso by Sebastian and Antonio, and also learns of Caliban's betrayal and plot to kill him with Stephano and Trinculo.

The statement that there are the passions and conflicts of ordinary existence is true to, not only the play but also everyday life. The passion of two people meeting and being married, as Ferdinand and Miranda were and also a conflict between Prospero and the royal party and also the two countries Milan and Naples. "

The examiner who originally marked this script has noted *v. shallow grasp of play's complexities – but must gain credit for doggedly keeping q. in mind and trying to structure an answer*, and he has awarded six marks, which would place it in the N grade. In other words, this represents the top of the failures by modern standards. It is true that the last sentence of the extract loses the thread completely, but it is noticeable that apart from this there are very few illustrations of the kind of technical error about which examiners in earlier reports constantly complained. Apostrophes are not used in—correctly though one is omitted, and even the relative 'whom' is correctly deployed once out of the two opportunities in the passage. Hardly the illiteracy that we might feel we have been led to expect from a candidate in the bottom 8.9% of an 86,000 entry.

Extract (approximately the opening third) from a specimen answer to question (c):

"As this is only the second time the audience would have met the character Caliban, they may instantly take a disliking to him, or even may feel pity on him, as we only know he is a slave to Prospero and has no other freedom.

Caliban's language used is horrid and repulsive. Very short phrased with hard hitting words.

'All the infections that the sun sucks up
From bogs, fens, flats on Prosper fall and
make him By inch-meal a disease!'

All his language seems dirty, as he uses muddy Bogs Fens and Flats and 'infections' which you know can cause harm, hurt, or even kill, and as he continues his speech we can see that its Prospero he wants this to happen to

as he feels the need for revenge and comfort for his mind.

He understands the magic world in this book as he says

'his spirits hear me
yet I must needs curse'

So he knows that Ariel is listening, but he cannot hold back what he wants to say. It is so important to him it must be spoken.

He feels so much hatred towards Prospero and how he has treated him and talks of how they torment him for nothing and punish him and he shows how he is not scared of the spirit world by what he says.

At the beginning in Caliban's speech the mood seems very tense, hot and angry but as it continues the mood changes so its more lighthearted and calm when Trinculo speaks, and would make the audience less tense and find the rest of the extract amusing."

The original marker's comment is *Very limited and naive but just sufficient to pass* and he awards the suggested minimum pass-mark of 7. Again, weak though the writer is, none of the more obvious technical errors, except the omission of apostrophes, mars the natural clumsiness of style, and some material points are made. As an illustration of the bottom end of grade E, I do not feel that many observers would feel this to be an indication that standards have fallen to an unacceptable level.

Excerpt (approximately the middle third) from a specimen answer to question (a):

"However, one most important lessons[sic] that we are taught throughout the play is that of forgiveness and retribution and repentance, natural Christian ideas.

It is through Prospero seeking to gain back what is rightfully his that these lessons are learnt. Ariel is Propero's servant and so by acting on his wishes is the mouthpiece for retribution. He points out to the 'three men of sin' the way to atonement

'You and your ways where [sic] wraths to guard you from,
Which here, in this most desolate isle, else falls
Upon your heads, is nothing but heart's sorrow
And a clear life ensuing.'

This speech by Ariel evokes an immediate reaction of guilt, within all three, but within Alonso we see something else, penance.

'Methought the billows spoke, and told me of it
.....it did bass my trespass'

He is truly sorry for his part in the crimes, and so he will be forgiven by Prospero and all will be forgotten. This isn't the case with Antonio and Sebastian, although Propero forgiveness [sic] an air of bitterness remains.

'For you most wicked sir, whom to call brother
Would even infect my mouth, I do forgive.'

As well as teaching an audience about forgiveness it also teaches us about power over the self. Prospero is able to reject his baser and natural instincts of vengeance [sic] and instead prefers virtue and the forgiveness that we have seen. Propero makes a public show, by way of a long soliquay [sic] rejecting vengeance."

Despite the careless errors this is obviously an answer from a higher category and one is not surprised to find the comment *Enough points for a C* and the mark 14. I included this piece because the mark awarded places it almost exactly half way down

the candidate list; or to be precise, a completed examination performance in which the questions collectively produced an equivalent average mark would have been so placed. In other words, if we think back to the early marking schemes devised by the Oxford examiners, instructed to draw the pass/fail boundary at half the candidature, then, if the same standards had applied, this would have been a borderline script; though, to be fair, the pass-rate went up to something in the region of 75% fairly rapidly. Now I do not believe for one moment that the same standards did apply, and I cannot suppose that work of this quality would have been considered marginal in the early 1950s. If I am right, we have here a persuasive illustration that standards have in fact gone up; but even if I am wrong, and a paper at this standard¹ would actually have been a borderline pass then, as it is a borderline grade C today, we still have the situation that nationally speaking more than 40,000 students a year are capable of producing work of this standard nowadays whereas in 1955 the total number passing was 10,600. It is very difficult indeed to see this change as evidence for a decline.

¹ This extract and the preceding examples were all taken from the recently established Cambridge Syndicate Archive designed to assist Awarders in maintaining comparable standards.

APPENDIX TO CHAPTER SIX

The statistics below relating to the performance between 1951 and 1988 of candidates in English Literature at the Advanced level of the General Certificate of Education, as administered by the University of Oxford Delegacy of Local Examinations and by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate, are derived from material in the archives of the relevant board. Those relating to the performance in the same examination nationally between 1989 and 1995 are taken from the SCAA publication *GCE Results Analysis*, 1996, (pp. 53, 55).

UODLE

Year	Candidates Entered			Cumulative % Passes				
	Boys	Girls	Total	A	B	C	D	E
1951			1374					
1960			3012					
1968	2577	5416	7993	←	←	72.7	→	→
1970	2342	5687	8029	10.2	25.6	37.1	52.7	76.0
1972	2477	6187	8664	12.6	28.2	39.5	55.1	75.5
1974	2494	6291	8785	9.8	25.5	37.0	52.2	72.6
1976	2358	6822	9180	9.6	23.0	38.4	53.1	71.4
1978	2253	6548	8801	8.5	23.7	34.9	51.8	69.4
1980	1865	5796	7661	7.4	23.2	35.5	50.8	71.2
1982	1996	5878	7874	6.4	21.6	34.0	50.2	70.7
1984	1698	5250	6948	7.4	23.5	35.2	52.0	71.8
1986	1307	3956	5263	7.0	24.1	39.6	55.8	75.3

UCLES

1951			1294	←	←	76.7	→	→
1953			1426	←	←	73.8	→	→
1955			1532	←	←	75.9	→	→
1957			1829	←	←	74.7	→	→
1959			2097	←	←	71.9	→	→
1961			2774	←	←	75.4	→	→
1964	1588	2598	4186	←	←	72.9	→	→
1966	2282	3482	5764	←	←	72.7	→	→
1968	2258	3899	6157	←	←	73.0	→	→
1970	2332	4431	6763	←	←	77.4	→	→
1972	2623	4916	7539	←	←	75.6	→	→
1975	2355	5128	7483	←	←	75.7	→	→
1977	2564	5403	7967	←	←	73.2	→	→
1979	2037	5311	7348	9.8	22.7	33.7	45.7	74.7
1981	1731	4852	6583	9.5	22.1	33.9	46.7	75.5
1983	1612	4638	6250	7.4	20.4	31.0	44.8	75.7
1985	1410	4008	5418	9.2	25.4	38.4	52.5	80.8
1987	1892	5082	6974	10.0	26.6	44.8	65.0	83.2
1988	2080	5223	7303	9.0	25.4	44.7	66.8	84.9

NATIONAL STATISTICS

1989			68846	9.2	27.1	46.7	67.2	83.2
1990			74182	9.9	27.8	48.7	69.5	85.2
1991			79187	9.9	26.4	46.1	68.0	85.6
1992			86779	11.2	28.9	48.9	69.9	86.5
1993			89238	12.9	31.0	51.3	72.2	87.5
1994			88214	13.5	32.5	54.1	74.9	89.5
1995	26141	60326	86467	14.1	33.1	54.9	75.3	90.0

CONCLUSION

"It all depends what you mean by standards....."

Gillian Shepherdhas decided that duty ministers should pour scorn on the "moaning minnies" who refuse to take the better results at face value as a reflection of rising standards. "It is about time these doom and gloom merchants shut up and recognised the achievement of the candidates and of the parents and teachers who have supported them. This is the culmination of two years of hard work and we should be celebrating the better results, not whingeing" said one official. However, Mrs Shepherd is said to recognise that the annual round of criticism about falling exam standards is unlikely to be quelled. Once the results season is passed she is expected to resume active consideration of proposals to change the examination boards to remove suspicion that they might have a vested interest in lowering standards to increase the pass rate.

The Guardian, August 14th., 1996

In the course of the preceding six chapters I have sought to demonstrate that while there have been enormous changes in education in the course of the twentieth century, changes which have both reflected and influenced changes in the wider society within which the educational process operates, there is no evidence to support the contention that those changes reflect a decline in standards.

Within the narrower focus of the teaching and examining of English in schools over the course of the last fifty years, I have touched, in the first section, upon changes in the expectations which society has of teachers and which teachers have of themselves and of their pupils; changes in teaching methodology; and changes in the actual material being taught in both language and literature; relying for evidence largely upon the volume of material listed in the Endpiece to that section.¹

In the second section I have concentrated upon changes in the approach of public examination bodies to their task, and changes in the understanding and assessment of what examinations can tell us about student performance. In this section the evidence has come largely, though not exclusively, from my own researches in the archives of the examination boards, and on material made available to me in the course of my work as Chairman of Examiners in English for one of those boards.

On the definition of "standard" which I laid down in the Preface to this thesis²:

"A definite level of excellence, attainment, wealth or the like, or a definite degree of any quality, viewed as a prescribed object of endeavour or as the measure of what is adequate for some purpose"

I am unable to find any evidence of decline in any of these areas: indeed, it is my

¹ v. sup. pp 251 and 252

² v. sup p 15

personal conviction that relationships between teachers and those whom they are helping to learn are generally better than in the past; that the general atmosphere in the majority of schools has improved and is more favourable to learning; that the majority of students have responded well to the challenge of taking more responsibility for the outcome of their education; that public examinations, at any rate during the period from 1951 to 1987, slowly but progressively improved in relevance and in the reliability of their assessments; and that performance in those examinations got steadily better despite a very substantial increase in the number of candidates, and despite the evidence that suggests a possibility that they are still not fully reflecting the actual involvement and commitment of students in the classroom.

We come, then, to the really important question – if there has, indeed, been no decline in standards from some unspecified period of the past to the present time, why is there a widespread conviction that the reverse is the case? What is the underlying reason behind this determined denigration of the advances of the last fifty years?

The quotation which stands at the head of this chapter, from the *Guardian* of Wednesday August 14th. 1996, one day before the publication of the A level results for that year, is taken from a front page article on the theme of amalgamating the examination boards "to eliminate the possibility of competitive devaluation of standards". The author, the paper's education editor, specifically excludes the Secretary of State from responsibility for the witch-hunt, and portrays her as seeking to encourage endorsement and celebration of the better results, but as resigned to failure – "Mrs Shepherd is said to recognise that the annual round of criticism about falling exam. standards is unlikely to be quelled" – and the moves which he forecast to change the 'examination boards' have already resulted in the reduction of the examination boards from the eight referred to in the *SCAA GCE Results Analysis* of 1996 to four in the Spring of 1998, with further amalgamation expected.

One can forecast fairly confidently now, that both such steps as have been taken already in the direction of a single examining authority, and any further moves in the same direction, will be ineffectual in significantly reducing either the pass-rate or the annual round of criticism about it: the former because it genuinely reflects an improvement in standards; and the latter because, I suspect, it is actually the

improvement which causes the resentment, and not the alleged devaluation of those standards at which it is ostensibly directed. What has in fact been devalued, I suggest, is a set of social beliefs and understandings which require, for the peace of mind of those who hold them, a degree of exclusivity which is seriously threatened by a situation in which an ever-increasing number of students stay on into the sixth form, take A levels successfully, and proceed to university. Education is power – and too many people are becoming empowered for the taste of those who are most vociferous in their parrot cries of "falling standards". For them, whether they admit it to themselves or not, an 86% A level pass-rate makes A level a qualification not worth having – the declining standards are not those of the examinations themselves, but of a society in which any Tom, Dick or Harry can aspire to graduate status, and no Jude is too obscure to dream of Christminster. The suggestion that the question of educational standards is not an educational question at all but a ideological one is a serious matter, and I make it seriously. It seems to me that no objective assessment of the progress of education in the period since the 1944 Education Act could reach any opinion other than that there had been a vast improvement of standards over the intervening half-century. We have moved from a situation in which only half the candidates for an examination deemed suitable for only the top 20% of the nation's sixteen year olds could achieve a pass in five or more subjects, to one in which half the entire year group can expect a similar qualification; and from a situation in which 3% of eighteen year olds took A level, to one in which 30% of this age group qualify to read for a degree. By any normal standards of definition, the question as to whether or not this represents an improvement in the quality and success of educational provision ceases to be arguable. What urgently needs scrutiny is the reason for the widespread failure to recognise and acknowledge this, and the widespread conviction, despite the evidence, that the reverse is actually the case. We are, in fact, not dealing with normal standards of definition, but with an Orwellian situation in which Success means Failure. An interesting aspect of the situation lies in the fact that, on the surface at any rate, the rate of educational improvement cannot be ascribed to one political party or viewpoint. The progressive transfer of nearly ninety per cent of pupils in state secondary schools to the Comprehensive system

undoubtedly played a major part in the process, but to some extent progress had reached a complacent stagnation by the 1980s; and the spirit of the Education Reform Act of 1988, whatever opinion one may hold of some of its provisions, had a galvanising effect in terms of accountability and productivity. 'Appraisal', 'assessment', 'competition', 'league tables', 'parental choice' – these are not, by and large, phrases from a terminology beloved of educationalists, but they have been part of a successful drive to make schools more aware of their responsibility to bring out their pupils' potential – more successful than some of those schools would readily admit. Yet these reforms come from the other end of the political spectrum to that which provided the impetus towards the comprehensive school, and their success ought therefore to have been the source of rejoicing in the party concerned, and in normal circumstances would have been so. That the Secretary of State for Education and Employment has to take to task her own supporters for their refusal "to take the better results at face value as a reflection of rising standards" when to do so would be politically advantageous, and a potential vote winner, provides very clear evidence that we are not dealing with normal reactions.

A further indicator as to the nature of the ideological or political phenomenon with which we are dealing lies in the fact that those in the forefront of the clamour about falling standards are also those loudest in their demands for a return of grammar schools. If the last government had ever realised its prime minister's dream of a grammar school in every town, the ultimate result would have been a massive reversal of the current trend towards ever growing numbers of successful candidates at both GCSE and A level, and a return to the prevailing standards of the 1960s and 1970s – on the surface, and by normal standards of reference, a totally unacceptable, even unthinkable development. Those local authorities which loyally sought to lead the field in this direction have found the concept to be an electoral disaster, as in Solihull and Lincoln, though both are in areas where grammar schools still exist. Yet that concept still continues as the unwavering conviction of a minority for whom, it would seem, the substantial reduction which I forecast in the A level pass-rate would be as welcome as the re-institution of the selective educational

system necessary to achieve it; and which may well be, consciously or unconsciously, part of the hidden agenda of their campaign.

To substantiate this argument it will be necessary to move on from the Education Reform Act of 1988 to scrutinise the introduction of the National Curriculum, and the almost endless disputes between the politicians and those they appointed to oversee the practical business of putting that curriculum together; and back to the period around the 1944 Act when Grammar Schools had a virtual monopoly of state sector teaching leading to success in public examinations, to consider both the academic achievements and the educational ethos of the typical grammar school.

Such scrutinies will, I suggest, demonstrate firstly the overt political interference in educational matters and the direction in which that interference remorselessly pointed, together with the widening gulf between the perspectives of those involved in education and those determined to impose upon it their own concept of 'reform'; and secondly the dishonesty of the nostalgia for the notion of standards as represented by the grammar school tradition, since the reality was not only a substantially poorer performance than would be tolerated today, but an attitude and methodology which, if it did not actively set out to discourage many pupils and to inhibit their chances of realising their potential, rather than aiming at any kind of general fulfilment, was signally indifferent to the fact that this was the result it achieved.

The story of the inception and development of the National Curriculum, combined with the reaction of those professionally involved with education in its early years, as revealed in the various assessments which have begun to appear in recent years, casts further and useful light upon the educational aims and intentions of the Conservative government in the second half of its recent eighteen year administration.

It would be difficult to find much fault with the concept as it was originally outlined by Kenneth Baker, the then Secretary of State, to a House of Commons Select Committee:

"The government wants the National Curriculum to be as good as the best minds in the country can make it. The level of attainment to be aimed at and the content of what is taught should reflect the best practices of our good schools. The duties placed upon the schools should leave full scope

for good teaching and for this country's tradition that teachers use their professional talents and skills to adapt the work to each pupil and to develop new approaches as the new needs arise." ¹

It was this kind of visionary zeal that persuaded Duncan Graham to accept the key rôle in the newly established National Curriculum Council:

"it was his enthusiasm and commitment that really sold the job to me" ²

and had the work of that Council and its various subject working parties been able, or allowed, to produce a curriculum to match that vision then there might well have been a matching enthusiasm from teachers and educationalists throughout the country. Such a reaction, however, is distinctly harder to find than this response from 1993:

"It is increasingly obvious to all but thegovernment and their small band of education lobbyists, that the present National Curriculum Tests are likely to do enormous damage to the motivation of students and teachers, and to cause a narrowing of the actual curriculum taught and a serious depression of the real standards achieved. In our analysis, this is because aims to do with enforcing the programmes of study, of monitoring and controlling teachers and schools and of driving for the return of selection have dominated the development of the Tests and, even more, their implementation." ³

Lest this extract from *Assessing the National Curriculum*, edited by Philip O'Hear and John White, seem an absurd, even paranoiac, exaggeration of the impact of the National Curriculum and its associated assessment devices, it should be stressed that it is by no means atypical:

".....the inadequacies of a highly specified National Curriculum are clear. Claiming its relevance to all students, it in fact neglects the specific conditions of their lives and the interests which motivate their learning. It presents to students a model of knowledge which, in its particular orientation towards their lives, is unlikely to be attractive. Thus its claim to deliver a better education is, and will continue to be, contested at the level of the classroom." ⁴

In particular, it is noticeable that it is not resentful outsiders, excluded from the corridors of power in which the real educational decisions are taken, who are most vociferous about the shortcomings of the National Curriculum and the pupil progress assessment system inalienably associated with it; but those who were directly involved in the creative process.

As Philip O'Hear puts it, in *Assessing the National Curriculum*

".....within this book, two of the chief architects of the present National Curriculum, Eric Bolton and Paul Black, express grave concern that their achievements are being undermined by the crude assessment system now being imposed." ⁵

¹ Duncan Graham with David Tytler, *A Lesson for us All*, 1993, p 24

² Ibid. p 8

³ Op.cit., 1993, p 20

⁴ Ken Jones, *English and the National Curriculum*, 1992, pp 127-128

⁵ Op.cit., p 16

Yet the grave concern of the Senior Chief HMI from 1983 to 1991; and of the Chairman of the Target Group on Assessment and Testing from 1987 and Deputy Chairman of the National Curriculum Council until 1991, pale into insignificance beside the wrath and indignation of Duncan Graham, Chairman and Chief Executive of the National Curriculum Council until his resignation after three years – frustrated by the bungling interventions of civil servants, the inconsistencies and vacillations under political pressure of ministers of state, and a growing sense of a hidden agenda determined to reverse the influence of those who actually understood something of the workings of the educational process.

Eric Bolton is succinct:

"The debate about assessment.....is of necessity one about, on the one hand, the validity or reliability of the assessments carried out, and, on the other, the manageability of conducting the assessments in the classrooms and schools. The snag is that..... the question is seen by many of our politicians as only satisfactorily resolvable via a large increase in tests, wholly externally set and marked. Many teachers and observers of the scene find it a worrying emphasis that seriously questions and undermines the place of teacher assessment in the system.There are, of course, things that are best assessed via pencil-and-paper tests, but there are serious concerns about such testing becoming universal. The most serious of these is that what is tested and assessed always comes to be regarded as more important than what is not. Furthermore, if the testing itself is confined to only that which is conducive to pencil-and-paper tests, the backwash onto the actual business of teaching and learning in classrooms will be disastrous.In effect, what will have happened is that the assessment cart will have been put before the curriculum horse. If anyone wishes to see how disastrous that can be for curriculum coherence and continuity, the education of individuals and the health and well-being of the nation, they need to look no further than the American school system's experience of test-led curricula" ¹

Bolton, of course, is saying nothing new. These 'serious concerns' have been covered over and over again in the earlier chapters of this thesis and the most serious aspect of all is that the Senior Chief Inspector feels the need to restate them for the benefit of politicians wilfully and determinedly blind to the advances and improvements made in the educational process through enhancing both the relationship between teachers and pupils, and the receptivity of the latter to learning when classroom activity becomes a joint operation and pupils have some shared responsibility for the educational outcome. The vital contribution of these aspects of the educational process to the improvement in standards is also charted in the earlier chapters of this thesis: and there seems to have been no shortage of those

¹ *Assessing the National Curriculum* pp 48-49

by no means blind to it among those charged with the creation of the practical reality rather than the theory of the National Curriculum. Paul Black was, perhaps, not foremost among those whose appointment to TGAT and the NCC was welcomed by teachers, seen, as he was, as an enthusiastic voice of the right. Nor does his lengthy and detailed description of the tribulations of the target group whose task it was to devise an appropriate system of assessment for the National Curriculum suggest that he had suddenly changed his coat. He observes, for instance:

"...we also believed that classroom assessment by teachers was an area of weakness.....and that those who complained about the work-load were actually struggling with getting hold of a more stringent model of teaching and assessment than they had been used to." ¹

Hardly the remark of a good teachers' union man; and Black goes on to make it abundantly clear that it is not the insistence of politicians and bureaucrats on 'rigour' that concerned him, so much as their inability to understand the implications that must accompany it:

".....critics in government do not really understand the deep difference between those who want to break away from traditional tests in order to improve assessment and teaching because they care about it, and those who want to abandon it altogether. The result of such indiscriminate arguments will be a return to tests of poor validity, dangerous unreliability, and with a heritage of damaging effects on pupils' learning. It is not clear why these traditional tests are so preferred – it appears that they bear the image of 'traditional values' in this field, that they might have the advantage that teachers who are not to be trusted are not involved with them, perhaps even that they must be good because the 'pedagogues' and/or the 'left wing' don't like them." ²

One can readily imagine the annoyance that Black must have felt, not only at being bracketed with this despised group by those in government circles who thought he had 'gone native', but at the realisation of just how low the understanding was as to what constituted reliability and validity in the measurement of standards, and how great the contempt for the concepts of scholarship and valid research that he had been at constant pains to uphold. Quite clearly he is now by no means at ease with the party with which his earlier ideas had been associated:

"Eric Bolton has drawn attention to the overwhelming influence, on current government policy in education, of the right-wing pressure groups, notably the Centre for Policy Studies.It is now clear that the changes to the

¹ 'The Shifting Scenery of the National Curriculum', in O'Hear and White, Op.cit., p 63

² Ibid.

membership of the NCC and [SEAC] give each of these an increasing bias toward that particular element....Because of this, the teaching profession is rapidly losing any serious respect for these councils. The hopes of many that the Government would exercise their sole power to appoint to the councils in an impartial way have been sharply disappointed. Those who gave dire warnings that the ERA would be an instrument for direct Government control in which the opinions of ministers would be insulated from professional opinion and expertise have been proved correct." ¹

Duncan Graham puts this more tersely:

"Mrs Thatcher and her group...took a simplistic view of education and set the Conservatives on the path of government by prejudice." ²

and it was precisely this prejudice (as specifically expressed by Kenneth Clarke) that was to derail the proceedings of the Target Group on Assessment and Testing. What Black and his colleagues were seeking to do was to find a method of measuring progress which could reflect with reasonable accuracy those techniques of modern educational practice which everyone outside government circles recognised as holding the key to a successful improvement in general educational standards, and which have been referred to frequently in the course of the previous six chapters as evidence of the way in which educational methodology was moving towards the encouragement of ever more pupils to more positive and effective response.

These techniques may be variously defined and expressed, as, for example, by Tim Brighouse, during his period as Professor of Education at Keele:

"To some extent, the reform of the GCSE, with its express intent to establish what candidates 'knew', 'understood', and 'could do' was a step in the right direction, reinforced by an increased dependence upon 'coursework' as a vital means of assessment. It shifted the balance away from information. Nevertheless its initial gains were politically unacceptable: in consequence, during 1991-2 there was a decision to reverse the trend and reduce the proportion of coursework assessment. In a similar fashion, the attempts of the TGAT group to give priority to teacher assessment of children's progress at the end of each key stage were eventually frustrated" ³

and also by Stewart Ranson, Professor of Education at Birmingham:

"Quality in teaching and education will only be achieved by responding to the way children learn and by using the National Curriculum more as a set of guidelines than as a straitjacket.....quality focusses on programmes of study rather than attainment targets.....We see education as a process of 'drawing out' as well as 'putting in'. We think children learn best when:

¹ Op.cit., pp 68-69

² *A Lesson for us All*, p 6

³ 'Getting Beyond Mastermind in the National Curriculum' in *Sense, Nonsense and the National Curriculum*, ed. Barber & Graham, 1993, p 116

- doing not merely memorising
- learning through first hand experience
- encouraged to use their imagination
- encouraged to experiment with a variety of responses
- allowed time to produce work of quality and depth
- engaged 'actively' in their learning
- they exercise choice in learning
- they take responsibility for their learning

Such a process places the emphasis upon children learning rather than teachers teaching. These values lead us to look at the worrying things in past practice: an over-reliance on published schemes of work; too much front of class teaching; too much closed learning – that is, children being asked questions that imply 'right' or 'wrong' answers with too little exploration, speculation and diversity of inquiry. There has, moreover, been too little opportunity for group work and discussion, and too much emphasis on children working alone. Good practice involves group work to plan, challenge, support, help and amplify the learning process. This does not mean that group work is a panacea.....but it frequently is undervalued as a learning strategy. We find that good teachers use a range of methods as appropriate: individual, pair, group and whole class, according to the nature of the activity. Excessive reliance on any of these denies learning opportunities to children." ¹

Philip O'Hear offers a very similar approach:

"We identify four levels of possible student choice within the curriculum: within a given sequence of work, i.e. choice over the order between options in a sequence of work, e.g. a compulsory core task, then choice between extension tasks; between options, where one of a variety of possibilities is required; between voluntary activities. All Key Stages should include student choice at the first two and the fourth levels which are, of course, extremely important as motivators and supports for active learning as well as providing experience of choice. We.....argue that 15% of the timetable at Key Stage 3 and 30% at Key Stage 4 should be reserved for options." ²

All three of these contributions might legitimately be termed illustrations of the strides made in education over the last twenty years or so, particularly in the primary sector and in the most effective Comprehensive schools. There is no room here for the "mechanically soporific" grammar school stereotype which Halsey castigated³ and for which the Conservative administration seemed to have such nostalgia; and there is an emphasis on 'understanding' as the basic purpose of education rather on 'knowledge' which appears to have been the be-all and end-all of the proposed right-wing reforms.

What is unquestionably true is that such emphases as these do not lead to pencil-and-paper syllabuses or pencil-and-paper assessment tests, and it was against this background of fundamental conflict that Paul Black had to struggle to produce the

¹ 'From an Entitlement to an Empowerment Curriculum' in Barber & Graham, op.cit., p 100

² Op.cit., p 19

³ v.inf. p 512

ill-fated recommendations of the Target Group on Assessment and Testing. Despite the impatience of Kenneth Clarke:

"The British pedagogue's hostility to written examinations of any kind can be taken to ludicrous extremes. The British left believe that pencil and paper examinations impose stress on pupils and demotivate them. We have tolerated for 20 years an arrangement whereby there is no national testing or examination of any kind for most pupils until they face GCSE at the age of 16.....This opposition to testing and examinations is largely based on a folk memory in the left about the old debate on the 11 plus and grammar schools"¹

the problems of the valid and reliable test are, unfortunately, by no means as straightforward as he clearly supposes them to be. Caroline Gipps, one of the country's foremost experts on the business of testing and measuring pupil progress, has this balanced contribution to make to the anthology *Assessing the National Curriculum*:

"Recent trends in assessment generally towards open-ended performance-based forms of assessment are now being reversed: the Government is not in favour of coursework assessment, time consuming SATs, or teacher assessment dominating at certificating or reporting stages. The move is therefore back towards traditional examination procedures.....with all that will mean for classroom practice.Neither are 'elaborate, time-consuming' tasks proposed by TGAT considered appropriate. The formal, unseen examination has served the system well in the past, so the argument goes, and will do so again. It is seen as more objective, reliable and cheaper.The notion that one programme of assessment could fulfil four functions (formative, diagnostic, summative and evaluative) has been shown to be false: different purposes require different models of assessment (and different relationships between teacher and pupil). It may be possible to design one assessment system which measures performance for accountability and selection, whilst at the same time supporting the teaching/learning process, but we have not yet been able to do so."²

It is this kind of expert professional writing and thinking which seems most readily to baffle the political and bureaucratic mind and produce a reaction of total incomprehension, such as the predictable response of Kenneth Clarke referred to above. While it would probably be unfair to suggest that his views are as simplistic as those of Lord Powis³, it is almost certainly no exaggeration to suggest that the idea of different relationships between teachers and pupils would not fall on receptive ears, since the two are obviously and clearly established: teachers are there to teach, and pupils to learn, and the rest is part of the British pedagogue's hostility to common sense. Similarly, the concept of four functions of assessment may be credibly assumed to have made no impact: examinations 'which measure performance for accountability and

¹ quoted by Paul Black, op.cit., p 62
O'Hear and Jones, op cit., pp 54-55

² "The Structure for Assessment and Recording", in
³ v.sup. p 54

selection purposes' are perfectly adequate, and concerns over 'supporting the teaching/learning process', like a preference for course-work, are at best a chimaera and more probably a symptom of the deeply engrained folk-memory of the 11-plus examination in the British left, of whom, apparently, the teaching profession is very largely made up, particularly in higher education.

Paul Black can clearly neither be included in that category nor even assumed to be so included by the simplistic assessments of the right, yet his summary of his experience as Chairman of the Target Group on Assessment and Testing might well lead the uninformed observer to precisely that conclusion. He begins

"No other country in the world has a system which gives such comprehensive control to its government over the curriculum with such a frequent and closely controlled system of national assessment.There are ample reasons to be fearful about the way in which these sweeping powers may be exercised. ... This might all be justified if our education had been in a state of collapse before 1988 [he goes on to indicate some of the statistics covered in Chapter 3 of this thesis, in particular the massive decrease in the number of pupils leaving school with no graded examination results and the concomitant increase in the number of those obtaining five or more 'O' level or GCSE higher grade passes and concludes] This hardly looks like the story of dire failure."¹

Black has, however, more serious concerns about the imposition of the National Curriculum than that the doctrine of the necessity for government intervention was carefully nurtured rather than self-evident, and foremost among these is the rapidity of change, even total reorganisation of teaching schemes without any justification in terms of evaluation or evidence of practical weakness.

" 'Teachers' own assessments are an essential part of the system'; 'Pupils' achievements will not be displayed against each attainment target but the report will show the level they are at in terms of the overall profile component'; 'Assessment should be by a combination of national external tests and assessment by teachers'; 'Standard Assessment tasks will be designed to be a support for learning and will be drawn up under the direction of SEAC with the classroom context very much in mind.'

In setting out this summary, I have not used the TGAT Report but the Government's own publicity commitments as a point of reference. I do this because the point to be underlined is not that TGAT lost the argument. We won the argument. The chilling feature is that in the world of political pressure to which education is now subject, that was of no consequence. It could still be argued that all of these retreats are indeed improvements won by hard evidence of the impracticability of the original proposals. I would argue to the contrary that the current ideas are based on prejudice and are set fair to do serious harm to children's education."²

¹ Op.cit., p 57

² Ibid., pp 58-61

This reaction from one whom Philip O'Hear has described as a 'chief architect' of the National Curriculum, and who joined the Council, as did Duncan Graham, with a firm conviction that this was a necessary and desirable reform, is disturbing enough: it becomes even more so when one learns the basis of the argument which TGAT won, only to discover that logical argument had little or no impact upon right wing prejudice.

"There is substantial literature on innovation and change in education.One clear lesson from many studies is this: changes imposed from outside which teachers are not able to take to heart and make their own are ineffective. ... A teacher is in sensitive, personal contact with many individual children, and has to develop his or her rôle by fashioning a personal style to deal with the multiple and exhausting pressures that bear in the classroom, both inside it and from outside it. You cannot treat such a person as a robot to be programmed.

.....

Any external tests are bound to exert pressure on teaching methods; teachers will be tempted to drill pupils to perform in the tests. The aim therefore must be to make the test such that preparation and rehearsal is a good way of learning. So the assessments [advocated by TGAT] were designed to be models of good learning with assessment firmly built in." ¹

Again, one is driven to the conclusion that the reaction to such a design, once teachers had learned to operate it effectively, might well have been enthusiastic and supportive, rather than to see it as negative, inadequate and formulaic, which is the general response to the system which the government imposed in preference to that of the committee appointed for the purpose; a response which is clearly mirrored in the feelings of foreign educationalists, particularly in America, where, as Black points out, the retrogressive tendencies of government impositions are regarded with incredulity.

"The work of many agencies here, and particularly the reports of the APU (Assessment of Performance Unit) are well known and much used.....They are astonished to hear what is now happening here – they see us as marching backwards into unprofitable ways from which they are now escaping. Ironically, one of their chief objects of admiration – the APU – was an initiative of our Government. Its lessons had a profound effect on the TGAT deliberations. They are influencing USA policies. They appear now to have little, if any, effect upon our own Government's policy." ²

So little in fact, that the APU was soon after to be disbanded. What is under threat here is academic freedom, and Paul Black, for all his support for the Government's initial position and his opposition to the Luddite response of some teachers and their union spokesautomata, is a genuine scholar. His disillusion is not just at the abandonment of so much that was clearly promising for teachers and students, and

¹ Op.cit., pp 61-63

² Ibid., p 64

genuinely moving towards an improvement in standards; but at the crude betrayal of what lies at the heart of every educational system:

"In the pressure groups' rhetoric, the so-called educational establishment has been elevated to the status of bogeyman, and the terms 'expert', 'academic', 'researcher' have been turned into terms of abuse. As an expert academic researcher who saw the Act as a force for good, and who has given much of his time to trying to help its development, I am deeply disappointed and fearful of the outcomes." ¹

Duncan Graham, Chairman and Chief Executive of the NCC, was similarly a victim of the monster which he helped to nurture, something after the manner of the Fool's hedge-sparrow in *King Lear* which "fed the cuckoo so long that it had it head bit off by it young".

The original offer, from Kenneth Baker, was clearly tempting:

"He said what he was offering was possibly the most important job in education and certainly one of the most influential.....He was determined that the national curriculum would make a quality education available to all our children." ²

and Graham himself was ready to be convinced that government intervention had become necessary. His reaction to the state of the education system at the beginning of the eighteen years of Conservative administration was that:

"..the disadvantages of the decentralised English system now outweighed the benefits. When I came south the best schools were better than I had ever seen, being more imaginative and less subject-orientated than Scottish schools. Equally, when it came to the worst, I had never seen schools so depressingly poor." ³

He was also aware that

"whatever the reality, many parents thought that nobody was doing any grammar, nobody was doing any tables, nobody was being extended, expectations were too low.....The public perception was of a system going rapidly downhill....Industrialists said that education was irrelevant to modern needs in not teaching sufficient practical skills....The politicians were beginning to believe that education should be more geared to the world of work" ⁴

and while he realised that to some extent this chorus had taken on the characteristics of a carefully choreographed witch-hunt ("the familiar litany had spawned the battle slogans of the right wing.....the household-name industrialist who was convinced that 83% of children left school illiterate" ⁵); he was unable to dismiss from his mind the stubborn refusal to acknowledge that something had to be done about the worst

¹ Op.cit., p 69
4,5 Ibid. p 2

² *A Lesson for Us All*, p 8

³ Ibid. p 4

shortcomings among teachers ("educationalists took the view that education was so pure that it must not be sullied by entrepreneurial nastiness"¹). What he failed to see was that the hidden agenda behind the 'battle slogans of the right wing' had far more to do with imposing an external discipline and control on teachers and the content of the syllabus, and with putting back the clock to the familiar values of the immediately post war years, than with anything to do with what the professionals would recognise as education. Graham saw that the initial steps of the education reform had been effective, and supposed that the government intended to build upon these in creating the fabric for the 'quality education for all our children' that Baker had so lyrically envisioned:

"...there is no doubt that GCSE coursework and the changes it brought to teaching methods motivated less able youngsters in a way that the previous examination system had not."²

Although he recognised that

"..it can be argued that many of the 1988 reforms were already in place without some of the prescription and detail which was to plague the introduction of the national curriculum. There is, therefore, a valid case for saying that in 1988 the need for a national curriculum was less urgent than it had been in the early 1980s"³

he remained a convinced recruit to Baker's cause:

"I believed then and still believe that the country needed a national curriculum and that there was enough in the Education Reform Act to make state education very much better than anything that had gone before; that it would set and raise standards in schools without imposing dull conformity."⁴

Nevertheless, it was not long after his introduction to the corridors of power that he became uncomfortably aware that the intended practices differed sharply from the theory expounded to him:

"My theory is that somebody, either in government or in the Education Department decided to head off that group [Mrs Thatcher and her inner circle] from leading state education into total disaster by inventing the national curriculum."⁵

The position still appeared to be recoverable, in that the original membership of the NCC was of likeminded people who believed in the idea as a force for positive development, and Graham is at pains to argue that the initial position of the Council was by no means as blinkered as it later became:

¹ Op.cit., p 2

² Ibid., p 5

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid. p 10

⁵ Ibid., p 6

".....members of the first group were largely educational professionals and were not, on the whole, political appointments. The first council meeting did not have a political feel except that all the members had indicated that they were in favour of a national curriculum. They subscribed to the general philosophy but did not come as political nominees as was to happen later on. There was no suggestion at that time of any of them reporting back to ministers or of them being in inner circles. The education profession had very little to worry about." ¹

Nevertheless it did not take long for disillusion to set in.

"While described by some people outside the council as the man in charge of the curriculum, I was in reality a prisoner of the system, trapped between a council which was beginning to believe that it was being sidelined and a civil service able to organise events to meet its own ambitions." ²

It is fascinating but not really material to follow Duncan Graham through the levels of frustration which he was to face in 'the most important job in education and certainly one of the most influential' until he realised just how little importance was attached to the recommendations of his council and how little influence he could bring to bear on decisions. One part of his account deals with an incident in which a letter from Kenneth Baker appeared peremptorily to order a stop to developments which had the support of industry and Baker's own previous backing, whereupon he sought and obtained a personal meeting with the minister to confront him with the problem:

"He looked at it and could not believe that he had signed it.I undertook not to make it an issue and at NCC's next meeting a senior civil servant made a speech stressing the council's independence." ³

This does read rather like one of the fictions of C P Snow, and the upshot was to be the predictable and appropriate Pyrrhic victory:

"Cynics might believe that in the same way as football managers are given a vote of confidence before being sacked, the council ceased to have any real importance once it had been assured of its independence." ⁴

It did not take long for Graham to become a cynic, and within three years of his appointment, it had become obvious that the National Curriculum, as the right-wing pressure group was determined to have it, could no longer command his allegiance:

"Frustration with the growing gulf between practical reality and political imperatives led me to decide that the time had come for me to leave the post of Chairman and Chief Executive of the National Curriculum Council." ⁵

Perhaps the best that can be said of the National Curriculum from the standpoint of an investigation into educational standards based upon the teaching and examining of

¹ Op.cit., p 1

⁴ Ibid.

² Ibid., p 19

⁵ Ibid., p 1

³ Ibid., p 21

English is that treatment of the subject did not turn out as badly as it might have done or as the politicians had intended that it should. As this thesis has illustrated, governments have an interesting capacity to ignore the reports of the successive committees that they set up to examine the teaching of English, and the last of these prior to the establishment of the National Curriculum Council was that chaired by Sir John Kingman, which was still sitting when the Council began its deliberations, thus delaying the establishment of a subject working group beyond the date of the parallel groups in maths and science. When it was finally published, the Kingman Report was a marked disappointment to the government, since it failed to demand the 'rigour' and the 'back to basics' approach which had become the *sine qua non* of government reform. As described by Duncan Graham

"Kingman was by no means an extremist report but it is fair to say that while it made some concessions to the need to raise standards it rejected a return to formal grammar teaching, making it clear that the only way to teach children English, including grammar and spelling, was by stimulating their interest and correcting mistakes as they went along. The structured form of teaching, where children learned one thing in one lesson and another in the next, had gone."¹

As was to be expected, the Kingman Report received the minimum of acknowledgement and publicity, being regarded by the politicians as a further instance of the inability of educational professionals to face reality. In consequence, the minister determined to secure a more palatable reaction, or, as Duncan Graham puts it:

"Baker.....deflected interest by setting up the English working group on 29 April 1988, the day he published Kingman, in the hope that the working party would share his views.

The working group chairman was Brian Cox of Manchester University, who had served on the Kingman committee. He had also been a member of the pressure group which had produced the right wing Black Papers on Education in the 1980s and it was widely believed that Baker had chosen him in order to bring English teaching back to the more traditional approach. The unspoken brief was to undo Kingman."²

Certainly it was with some apprehension that many English teachers awaited the Cox Report. Like that of Paul Black, his appointment was seen as further evidence of the influence of a reactionary determination – and as was the case with Paul Black, there was a failure to appreciate the significance of academic integrity. In the words of Duncan Graham:

¹ Op.cit. p 46

² Ibid.

"...the working group reported: 'We find ourselves in agreement with the underlying assumptions of the Kingman report and in essentials with its conclusions'. " ¹

Not surprisingly, such a conclusion did not meet with the approval of either the Secretary of State or the Prime Minister – as Ken Jones expresses the situation:

"The crucial point is that 'Cox' rejects the definitions of English offered by the radical right, and endorsed at one time by the Secretary of State.Traditional models of grammar are criticised; the canon has lost its centrality; 'basic skills' are a concept which has no currency in the report. Instead it validates some themes that have been closely associated with progressive traditions in English teaching: the importance of talking and listening; the centering of classroom teaching on 'response' rather than 'comprehension'. " ²

Graham puts the matter in context from a government perspective:

"Baker labelled it as being too woolly, particularly in regard to grammar and any systematic teaching of reading. He could hardly be blamed: the working group had simply failed to grasp that nothing less than a firm commitment to grammar, however it was described, would be acceptable to the government. Instead they echoed Kingman." ³

And what the Kingman report had said, in a section of its opening chapter specifically labelled 'The National Curriculum' was

"Nor do we see it as part of our task to plead for a return to old-fashioned grammar teaching and learning by rote. We have been impressed by the evidence we have received that this gave an inadequate account of the English language by treating it virtually as a branch of Latin, and constructing a rigid prescriptive code rather than a dynamic description of language in use. It was also ineffective as a means of developing a command of English in all its manifestations." ⁴

Clearly this would not make welcome reading to a group who regarded 'a rigid prescriptive code' as a virtue rather than a fault – and there are other lines in Kingman which would have rubbed salt into the wound – for example:

"People who would reduce English teaching to 'basics' misunderstand the nature of written language" ⁵

and

"Many people believe that standards in our use of English would rise dramatically if we returned to the formal teaching of grammar which was normal practice in most classrooms before 1960.....Research evidence suggests that old-fashioned teaching of grammar had a negligible, or, because it replaced some instruction and practice in composition, even a harmful effect on the development of original writing. We do not recommend a return to that kind of grammar teaching." ⁶

And it was with such conclusions that the Cox committee found itself essentially in

¹ Op.cit., p 47

² *English and the National Curriculum*, p 10

³ Op.cit., p 47

⁴ Op.cit., Chapter 1 §11

⁵ Ibid., Chapter 2 §19

⁶ Ibid., Chapter 2 §27

agreement. In doing so, they almost certainly saved English teaching from a considerably worse position than that in which it eventually found itself. As Graham puts it:

".....despite the pressures, including those from Downing Street to toughen up the final report, the working group managed to prevent the real and deep changes that I had expected.....The national curriculum was therefore given an English blueprint that was softer and less rigorous than that of either mathematics or science".¹

Ken Jones sees this very specifically as a victory for classroom experience over lay dogmatism and prejudice, observing of the contributors to the Cox Report that they:

"reflect on what their own experience as teachers of English and Media Studies has taught them about learning.....In doing so, they point to forms of curricular and pedagogic practices which, being based on a kind of dialogue with students, have little in common with the extraordinarily prescriptive 'relevance' of the DES."²

Perhaps more importantly, he seeks to stress the way in which this emphasis by the English working party breaks away from the generality of government changes since the Education Reform Act:

"They have shifted the focus of curriculum initiative away from the classroom.Since innovation in, say, secondary school English was in the past closely related to teacher autonomy, this change in school culture has had important effects. For their full impact on the commitments and priorities of teachers to be understood, the curriculum and assessment proceedings of the new system have to be grasped in this context – to which they add a new level of prescriptiveness. In keeping with the passivity of this process of great change, teachers become the deliverers of systems whose general purposes they have no rôle in developing."³

This change is symptomatic of the dangers which every writer on the national curriculum quoted in this chapter has sought to underline in one way or another, and over a significant period of time the loss by teachers of autonomy and of control over the curriculum will play into the hands of any government which might see fit to manipulate education for its own ends. As this thesis has sought to make clear, the whole debate on declining standards can be seen as a pretext for wresting that control from teachers and into the hands of government appointed bodies; and recent experience does not suggest that they will prove superior guardians of the torch. Despite acknowledged weaknesses and shortcomings, the over-riding trend since 1944 had been towards equality of opportunity and, increasingly, towards equality of provision;

¹ Op.cit., pp 50-51

² Op.cit., p 2

³ Ibid., p 9

towards a greater degree of pupil involvement in responsibility for the outcomes of education; towards a greater fluency and freedom of expression; towards greater flexibility of imagination and response; towards a happier school environment which stresses encouragement rather than conscription; towards a vastly improved range of teaching techniques; and, whatever ways one tries to measure the results, towards higher standards. There is much to admire and much on which the teachers of the last fifty years can congratulate themselves – and comparatively little of which they must justly feel ashamed. But the events of the last decade do not provide convincing evidence that such a trend will continue, and do provide serious instances of the alternative which might replace them. When Duncan Graham observed of the NCC's proposals for English that

"The only major changewas the requirement by Baker, a poetry lover, that primary school children would have to learn poetry by heart" ¹

he calls it "the first and most harmless example of direct ministerial interference in what should be taught", and we, perhaps, are reminded of Matthew Arnold on the subject of the recommendation of the late Lord Lyndhurst.² Then Graham goes on

"Harmless as it was, Baker's intervention was the first indication that ministerial whim could be enshrined in law"

and the real danger becomes apparent. As Ken Jones is at pains to emphasise

"Conservative education policy rests on different principles: [from the trends which I have outlined above] the strong elements of 'choice' embodied in 'opting out' and 'open enrollment', and the promotion of inter-school competition and cost-cutting through 'local management of schools' suggest a system in which differentiated and unequal provision will be the norm." ³

It is, I suggest, in precise and direct accord with the needs of that policy and those principles that the concept of a general decline in standards has been sedulously nurtured and propagated in defiance of a substantial body of evidence pointing in the opposite direction.

Yet the history of the period to which this policy so eagerly harks back, when selection according to "aptitude and ability" was the order of the day, and schools were unquestionably ranked in an order of social acceptability within their catchment areas, simply does not suggest that the system was a success in any other than the most

¹ Op.cit., p 51

² v.sup., p 21

³ Op.cit. p 3

paltry and unworthy scales of judgement. As I suggest in my examination of the Norwood Report and of the implementation of the 1944 Act which followed it, the rigid 'tri-partite' divisions which bedevilled education for the twenty years before the move towards comprehensive education became almost irresistible were not in the spirit of the Norwood Committee's projected reforms¹, and the ills of those divisions remain clearly apparent in those corners of England in which the selective system still survives. As, for example, in the case of the Lincolnshire County Councillor who told me that grammar and secondary modern schools were necessary to keep farmers' kids away from farm-labourers' kids. Yet it is not the detriment to the excluded or deprived, serious though it undoubtedly was, which condemns the grammar school system, so much as its failure to educate effectively many of those it admitted. In his detailed analysis of the workings of a northern grammar school in the early 1960s,² Colin Lacey sets down among his conclusions that

"After the second world war the fee-payer/scholar distinction was abolished in local authority schools, and all grammar school places were thrown open to competition. The expected flood of able working class boys who were previously prevented from taking up grammar school places never materialised."³

To some extent, he sees the cause as endemic in the English class structure itself: that the academic educational process depends for its belated fruition on a clientèle which accepts the idea of remote and delayed goals, and is prepared to delay the opportunities of employment and income for five or more years in the expectation of greater fulfilment and enrichment in both spiritual and economic senses at the end of the extended educational process.

This dependency, he argues, means that the resultant clientèle will be substantially middle class because the mores of this class, unlike those of the working class, willingly embrace this philosophy. He quotes the American sociologists Schneider and Lysgaard:

"A more important point is the *normative* character of the deferred gratification pattern. Middle class persons feel that they *should* save, postpone and renounce a variety of gratifications"⁴

whereas, at the other end of the social scale, the normative pattern is a

¹ v.sup. pp 49-51

² *Hightown Grammar - The school as a social system*, 1970

³ Op.cit. p 189

⁴ Op.cit. p 189

"relative readiness to engage in physical violence, free sexual expression, minimum pursuit of education, low aspiration level....free spending, little emphasis on being well mannered or polite." ¹

Lacey is, however, not prepared to see the whole picture of educational class bias conveniently dismissed as inevitable. The possibility existed then, as it exists now, to minimise the effect of sociological tendencies. But then, in the world for which, apparently, such nostalgia exists, and from which our current standards have allegedly so declined, that possibility was resolutely ignored.

The conclusion of his report makes it movingly clear just how much damage was being done to so many of those who started with such high aspirations after their triumph in 'passing the 11+'.

"[This] study has uncovered evidence of tremendous energy and drive towards academic achievement. Much of this energy is frittered away because the effects of relative failure in the competition process are allowed to demoralise a large section of the competitors. An anti-group sub-culture develops which constantly erodes the competitive ability of a high proportion of the students." ²

The same basic point is made rather differently, and in a way more directly relevant to the purpose of my argument by John Pearce, in his book *School Examinations*.

"Historically, school examinations in England have developed as an instrument of the selective secondary school deeply set in its nature and purpose. This was the sedulous imitation of the private boarding school's function of mobilising the bourgeoisie for leadership roles.Because the demand for access to leadership status was intense, the secondary school adjusted to a situation where optimum success was available only to a handful of its already selected intake. The upward mobilization of the most readily socialized pupils became only one of its functions. It had to perform the concomitant function of socializing many more of its pupils into acceptance of lower status roles. This curious duality in the real outcomes of secondary schools may account for parental and employer insistence on the grammar school pupils' common possession of uniform patterns of speech and dress. If the children could not come out alike, they could at least come out looking and sounding alike. But in the examinations which evaluated these outcomes the incidence of 'failure' was an index of the school's efficiency in its task of differentiation. It would be no matter if only one or two ever gained the highest grades, but an examination which did not fail many candidates was regarded as a 'weak' or 'lax' one." ³

My case for the reason underlying the constant parrot-cry of "declining standards" could hardly be put more simply – but I recognise that Pearce's argument of more than twenty years ago cannot be allowed to stand unsupported, liable as it would

¹ Op.cit. p 189

² Ibid. p 192

³ Op.cit. p 9

then be to be dismissed as a typical rant from the politics of envy. Fortunately, however, support is readily forthcoming. One example of the difficulties, the divisions and the resistances imposed upon pupils who did not take easily to "upward mobilization", and were not among the "most readily socialized" of pupils, is provided by Dennis Potter, who was never really able to square the values of his beloved Forest of Dean with those of Oxford intellectualism and its concomitant values; or to forgive himself for being able to move between the two. What may seem the more difficult section of Pearce's argument to substantiate is his assertion that the grammar school "had to perform the concomitant function of socializing many more of its pupils into acceptance of lower status roles". This line of thought has a less familiar ring to it now than it had twenty years ago – but it should not fail to awaken echoes altogether. From literature, for example:

"Alpha children wear grey. They work much harder than we do, because they're so frightfully clever. I'm really awfully glad I'm a Beta, because I don't work so hard. And then we are much better than the Gammas and Deltas. Gammas are stupid. They all wear green, and Delta children wear khaki. Oh no, I *don't* want to play with Delta children. And Epsilons are still worse. They're too stupid to be able....."¹

In rather more subtle and insidious ways the theme "I'm glad I'm a Beta" has undoubtedly had its part to play in the education systems of the real world, and, I fear, still does. There must, for example, be forms of very similar indoctrination still busily at work in the schools of Northern Ireland, though the fact that the Province produces both the best and the worst results in the United Kingdom at both GCSE and A level is not a matter that I propose to dwell upon here. Rather, I propose to return to Colin Lacey's original statement as it was outlined in the Preface to *Hightown Grammar*.

"I lay bare the social mechanisms within the school in an attempt to explain the disappointing performance of working class boys in grammar schools since the 1944 Education Act. I do so in the belief that to understand this problem within the grammar school is to assist in solving the problem of the working class pupil within the comprehensive system which is likely to replace the tripartite system. The shape and character of the processes described in Hightown grammar school are in part the result of pressures emanating from society. These same pressures will affect the comprehensive school. While the comprehensive system may provide an organisational framework more likely to achieve equal educational opportunity for all sections of the community, it will not happen automatically."²

¹ Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, Penguin ed. p 33

² Op.cit. pp xi-xii

The verdict of history, I think, as it looks back over the thirty years since Lacey's research period at 'Hightown', will be that it certainly wasn't automatic, and that initially those same pressures were apparent in the comprehensive school; but that, eventually, something a good deal nearer equal educational opportunity is being achieved. And that, I suggest is the heart of our problem with the public perception of standards: the fear of real equality.

Lacey, in setting out his case for the way in which

"the school becomes the major avenue of social mobility in the community for a professional/managerial class of national dimensions"

and

"academic competition within the student body intensifies and working-class students become the least successful of the class groupings in the school"¹

relies for support upon the sociological work of Professor A.H.Halsey and others, citing a variety of relevant material in the notes to each chapter. The titles concerned include Halsey on 'The Sociology of Education' in *Sociology*, edited by N.J.Smelser; *Education, Economy and Society* by Floud, Halsey and Anderson; and *Social Class and Educational Opportunity*, by Halsey, Floud and Martin.

What Lacey was not in a position to use as supporting evidence is Halsey's autobiography, which was not to appear until a quarter of a century after *Hightown Grammar*. This, indeed, was published in the course of 1996, with the significantly relevant title of *No Discouragement*, though the author permitted the earlier publication of an extract from it under the title of *Drop an Aitch and All is Lost*, which varies slightly from the 'authorised' version, in an anthology of memories from former pupils of Kettering Grammar School, to mark the closure of that school in 1993.² So far as I am aware, in over four hundred years this institution has resisted the temptation to make any mark on history at all. Indeed, it is typical of the school that, despite having been founded by an endowment of land and property from Queen Elizabeth in a decree of 1577, it never occurred to anyone at any time to use the style "Queen Elizabeth's Grammar School." The only ex-pupil of the school to make any significant impact on the world's affairs was William Knibb, whose work for

¹ Op.cit. Preface p xv

² *Cytringian Farewell*, Old Cytringianians, 1995

the abolition of slavery is commemorated in the Kettering Borough arms, one of the supporters of which, with some heraldic individuality, is a negro with broken chains. It may help to make a point that, at a dinner in 1938, John Alfred Cotch¹ was described by the then County Secretary for Education as the school's most distinguished old boy. On the school roll at that date, though certainly not at the dinner, was A H Halsey, who, together with H E Bates, might qualify for the description if such a speech were to be delivered now. Bates died well before the editors of *Cytringian Farewell* compiled their surprisingly substantial text, but had contributed his reminiscences, many years before, to another anthology called *The Old School – Essays by Diverse Hands*² in which, apart from a generous tribute to his English master to which I referred in Chapter One,³ he is fairly scathing about a place which "I longed most of all to leave and never see again"⁴, which is the one quotation from Bates which Halsey uses. He might have gone on to illustrate the depth of that detestation:

"Now when I look back on the utterly useless and dreary yearsI begin to feel almost furious –with the school itself, its unnecessary attempts at conformation with public school standards, the constant talk of tradition and the honour and good name of the school, with the little personal tyrannies, with the examination system, with the whole complete system that enslaves masters and boys alike by its insidiously foolish rules and conventions."⁵

It was not only the atmosphere and values of the provincial grammar school that Bates came to detest, but the futility of the curriculum:

"In four years by doing as I was told and thinking as I was supposed to think, I had learned nothing. My Latin was atrocious, my French ludicrous, my chemistry quite childish. And the fault was not my own. Most of the masters, products of the same system to which I was being subjected, were hopeless, teaching by rule of thumb without a spark of intuition or imagination."⁶

"Indeed, looking back, I don't remember anything that was taught me at that establishment of higher education, unless it is simple arithmetic, which I suppose I knew before I went there, and the foundations of what I know of English literature."⁷

The conclusion is predictable, if not inevitable: "It was not, indeed, until I left the school that my education began"⁸, which might seem no more than a conventional diatribe against the schooling of the period during and immediately after the first

1 President, Royal Institute of British Architects

2 ed. Graham Greene, 1934

3 v.sup. pp 18 and 103

4 Op.cit. p 28

5 Ibid. p 29

6 Ibid. p 30

7 Ibid. pp 31-32

8 Ibid. p 25

world war; save that there are two observations contained within this essay by Bates, unrelated in the passage and probably in his thoughts, but which bring us back to Lacey's theories and Halsey's sociology: "My parents were decidedly not well off and they were no doubt very pleased and proud when I won a scholarship"¹ and "It was a singular blow for me therefore when I began to come out very much nearer the bottom of the class than the top."²

What we have here, in short, is a unusually articulate study in alienation, and what Lacey calls "the formation of the anti-group sub-culture"; and it is somewhat fortunate that the future Professor Halsey was not to provide another, similar example. In his case, however, the English master who had provided Bates with the school's one redeeming feature and with the "foundations of English Literature", was to have a wider-ranging influence:

"Suddenly I knew the magic and majesty of the English tongue"³

– and the boy who could describe his early years at the school in Bates' words, as "dreary and apathetic" and observe of them:

"I was doing badly and had quarrelled already with the Headmaster, a small Liverpool and Oxford snob who taught some Latin and who had caught me in the first term reading the *Magnet* in one of his mechanically soporific lessons "⁴

had been saved for a future career in sociology. It is interesting to note that an early speculation in this area was why the man who "for me was the perfect complement to my parents and the home kitchen"⁵ should have been a mere subordinate of the "small Liverpool and Oxford snob" and should later have taken the matter up with the man himself:

"Kirby was different. He had taken his degree externally at the University of London and saw himself as ineligible for the headmastership because of a social deficiency in his educational background and despite a war record of exemplary bravery. A rigid hierarchy of class was maintained both between the elementary and the grammar schools and the grammar and the so-called "public-schools". The grammar school was, however, an indispensable social lever into mainly the lower-middle, but also for a minority into the middle-middle and even upper-middle professions."⁶

Halsey, like Dennis Potter, clearly never lost contact with, and respect for, his roots and his sympathy with Bates' anger and disillusion is unmistakeable, but his

¹ Op.cit. p 21

² Ibid. p 25

^{3,4,5} *Cytringian Farewell*, p 60

⁶ Ibid. p 61

reaction to the same environment is more reflective, and perhaps enables us to understand the reaction of the man who was to go on and write *The Darling Buds of May*, as well as the evaluation which Lacey provides of the influence of the provincial grammar school; for the purpose of this introduction is to emphasise the ordinariness, the typicality, even the ubiquity of schools like Hightown, apparently dedicated to the production of generations of mute inglorious Miltons, Cromwells guiltless of their country's blood, and, latterly, John Majors fortunately content with the family business in garden gnomes. Hightown is, of course, a pseudonym: Kettering provides a local habitation and a name from which Halsey can put the flesh of personal experience on the bones of Lacey's sociological conclusions. Under the title "Drop an Aitch and All is Lost", which speaks for itself, Halsey soon moves to the essential conflict which creates the effect on which Lacey reports, and which explains the importance of his ability to see a brilliant English teacher as a "perfect complement to my parents and the home kitchen":

"I thus began a double life, connected by the ever present railway, with eight miles between a home at one end and 'a seat of learning' at the other. They were in vital respects worlds apart. The school was seen by me as a sustained cultural assault on my family. You don't say "we was", and you modify your home dialect. You prefer Latin to Anglo-Saxon..... Class, I mean social class, suffused it all

It was a double life, rather like the old film in which Alec Guinness appears as a sea captain shuttling backwards and forwards between Gibraltar and Morocco and changing his personality and his wife and, of course, the photos on the cabin wall each crossing. Certainly the assault on my parental culture was there and painfully felt. But...I knew that my parents were in the end superior to my grammar school masters.¹

Lacey makes absolutely clear why comparatively few students from working-class backgrounds embark upon an education in academically selective schools, and even fewer complete them successfully. He is obviously aware of, but less clear about, the way in which two separate backgrounds are not so much in direct opposition but rather two sources of conflicting ambiguities – and this is important because it serves as a paradigm for the difficulties in understanding educational standards to which this thesis addresses itself. Halsey gets rather closer to the matter:

"You could say instead that School and home conspired to create confusion. Both ends urged us to ambition as workers by brain rather than hand. Yet though all my uncles were heroes, railway clerks were despised. Wood-

¹ Op.cit. p 57

work at School was essentially for duds just as Art and Domestic Science were for girls. Yet again the lower forms were for "thickies" and many of these were middle-class fee-payers. Brute strength was at a premium in the rugger teams. But cricket offered an escape into respected craft skills ruled by a gentlemanly code of conduct." ¹

And these confusions led to an awareness that instinctive loyalties to the home environment cannot always be justified.

"Hollywood cut a cross between the village and the school. For example, there was John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. I thought it was wonderful. But the village audience was restless and sniggered loudly at Lemmie's idiocy: they showed a coarse peasant insensitivity to unfamiliar frailty, which made me ashamed of my parochial identity. Once again I longed to escape." ²

The strange declassé world which Halsey describes here, in which he can think of his fellow-villagers' response as "coarse peasant frailty", while being aware that the "middle-class fee-payers" whom he could regard as "thickies" would despise him as a scholarship boy from that same coarse peasant stock, is an area which Dennis Potter has made familiar – but perhaps too little attention has been paid to the fact that it is one which must be successfully traversed by the working class boy, or girl, ambitious and determined enough to wish to take full advantage of every opportunity which academic preferment has to offer. In its crudest form the impact of the British class structure serves to emphasise that the "middle class fee-payers" know their own superiority and are confident in it, even within a temporary context which forces them into a subordinate position, and the scholarship boy can never be allowed to forget that, while his scholarship may make him acceptable in the corridors, halls and chambers of power and privilege, he can never claim that absolute right which is reserved for those whose claim is based on heredity. As Halsey puts it:

"The structure of learning gives the school a feeble and limited independence from the forces of class, race, status and gender which act upon it from outside. Even today the class chances of children when expressed relatively, that is in terms of the gambler's odds of reaching an advantaged educational or occupational position from a particular social starting point, are what they were in my own youth. I don't mean that there have been no changes. Absolute educational chances have risen in all strata and sections.But many advantaged jobs are controlled by other factors such as personality or family influence, so that privileged parents find ways of turning their privileges into opportunities for their own children even in a system which is nominally meritocratic. Class still counts." ³

It is, I suggest, an awareness that the ever-improving results of state education might eventually result in a system where the meritocratic concept is more than nominal, which has resulted in a tide of counter-attacks on declining standards. Education is seeking at last to exercise more than a limited and feeble independence of the external forces of the state, and those forces are striking back. It is the standards of society, of class-structure, of the stability of privilege which are, if not as yet declining, at least aware of a potential threat to their hegemony which demands an immediate response – and examination results, which are increasingly the "indispensable social lever" into upper middle class preserves, provide a convenient cover. It is important to recognise that A H Halsey, though the most eminent contributor to *Cytringian Farewell*, is by no means a lone voice. Others, unconsciously, echo his theme:

"I owed my place to the 1944 Education Act, coming, as I did, from a working class family. No previous member had attended a grammar school, so my success in the 11+ examination was greeted with great joy. My parents gave me all the support any youngster could wish. Money was short but never so short that essentials could not be funded. We never ran to white trousers for cricket, but they were luxuries and could be done without. Sadly, my success took me away from my old primary school friends, most of whom failed the 11+ and went elsewhere. Our paths rarely crossed. I felt superior to them. Only in later life as a teacher did I realise how divisive the selective system really was. It explains why I became a staunch advocate of the comprehensive school serving its local community. In the meantime, the priority was to do well in fortnightly class lists. " ¹

That extract comes, of course, from a survivor, with a history degree from Durham and an OBE. This from another survivor with a Cambridge blue:

"I can still feel the weight of my satchel, home-made by my father, as it was crammed nightly with books for homework. Unrelenting, ever-present homework. We didn't think or worry about it; it was just there, part of life. " ²

A strange memory to carry for very nearly half a century. And I cannot help but wonder how much of the weight was a consciousness of the origins of that satchel, home-made rather than the conventional product from the school outfitters.

The mixture of pride in parental craftsmanship and fear of being the odd one out can be all too readily visualised, especially when the nature of the isolation relates to the inability to afford a standard item. It is not just a school with its expectations and its codes of practice that puts pressure on pupils – the other pupils, with their own cultures of conformity, can do just as effective a demolition job on the

¹ Op.cit. p 122

² Ibid. p 126

confidence of the individual, particularly when the school lends them support:

'Weaky' was shocked. He told me that he understood that K.G.S. was reputed to stand for "Kettering Cutter Scrapers" in the uncouth mouths of certain local louts, but that he had never imagined that I would be the one to lend any sort of credibility to such a despicable slander. He was deeply disappointed in me. That was all he felt able to say. I could go. I went, and a sense of utter degradation went with me. 'Weaky', I expect, after I had gone grinned and forgot all about it. I did neither. My delight in Latin had come to an end there and then. It never returned.¹

That extract, at least, came from an admitted non-survivor in the competition which Lacey describes – one of the very few who contributed to the anthology.

But this is hardly surprising, and indeed one contributor explains why very succinctly:

It is the great weakness of the traditional selective system that, having sifted out the considerable majority for whom its approach and methodology is unsuited, it then so often proceeds to "switch off" a substantial proportion of those for whom those qualities were actually designed, by an insensitive approach, an inflexibility of standards, and a positive rubbing-in of comparative inferiority of intellect.

This weakness is not inevitable,but that K.G.S. was guilty of this approach during my time there is a truth which cannot and should not be suppressed. I do not mean invariably, of course, but sufficiently frequently for it to be improbable that any contemporary of mine would be unable to recall instances of classmates being treated with sarcasm and derision when they had been obliged to reveal their failure to grasp what was going on in the lesson. Small wonder that so very few voluntarily admitted that a point had escaped them and asked for repetition and assistance, even of those members of staff who would, in fact, most probably have responded positively to such an appeal.In this respect K.G.S. unquestionably betrayed some of its pupils year after year, and this will be one of the factors to explain why some of those who attended the school will not buy this book, nor read it, nor care a damn what any of those who contributed to it have to say.²

Here we have an exposition of the truth which Lacey establishes at such length, and an explanation of why the typical grammar school of the years after the 1944 Act performed so badly by comparison with the modern comprehensive school – or, indeed, in the case of such few as survive, of the modern grammar school. In the period of twenty or so years before selective education largely gave way to the comprehensive system, schools like K.G.S. were content with annual results of around 60% of their fifth years obtaining five or more O level passes. To provide an actual example, from an annual intake of ninety boys Kettering Grammar School obtained this standard of performance from 41 of the candidates in 1951, the first year of GCE O level; 59 in 1952; 54 in 1953; 58 in both 1954 and 1955, and 56 in 1956.

¹ Op.cit. p 54

² Ibid. p 278

A remarkably consistent record, and, one suspects, equally consistent internally; though it was not until the last two years that the school took to publishing its results in fifth form groups rather than alphabetically across the entire year. In 1955 it is observable that out of Form V Science 25 boys out of 28 obtained their five or more passes; and since what distinguished the scientists from the rest was that they took Physics Chemistry and Biology separately rather than general science, the 'or more' meant up to 10 or 11 in twelve cases. In Form V Modern 22 boys out of 28 obtained five or more, nine recording a maximum of nine such passes. In Form V General, however, reserved for those less academic and probably still referred to, in the phrase Halsey quotes, as "the thickies", only 13 boys out of 28 got five passes or more, and the 'or more' in this case refers to a tiny handful.

In the following year, the contrast was even more clearly marked: Form V Science recorded 27 successes out of a possible 30; V Modern 25 out of 33; and V General a pitiful three out of 25. Since any pupil who obtained no passes at all is excluded from the record, it may be assumed that this was the fate of the balance of the original ninety admitted in each year, whether through actual failure or by leaving school early.

Such figures are a perfect illustration of the picture Lacey paints: the school was perfectly able to educate effectively its brightest pupils, producing a talented sixth form and an annual crop of Oxbridge successes, yet it failed abysmally to encourage its average students or to extract from them anything remotely approaching their true potential. All ninety of these pupils were, after all, in the top 20% of their age group, all of them had doubtless been successful at their primary schools; and proud, enthusiastic and determined to be successful when they made the transfer at the age of eleven:

"...in a state of high excitement, (they) stretched their arms and bodies to the utmost as they eagerly called "Sir!", "Sir!", "Sir!" every time the master gazed in their direction. " 1

A characteristic description of a first year class, but not accurate for very long.

As I have observed above, it is unfortunate but hardly surprising that there is a lack of

1 Lacey, *Hightown Grammar*, p 52

contribution from the disillusioned and damaged to the *Cytringianian Farewell*, but Lacey's researches make perfectly clear along what lines such contributions might have run.

For instance, the following account in *Hightown Grammar* of the way the school dealt with pupils who did badly in the annual school examinations illustrates the point perfectly:

"The masters emphasised the technical and diagnostic functions of the school examinations. ...Their approach led them to talk in terms of the 'best interests' of the individual pupil, even when relegating him to the bottom stream. They could point out that his examination results showed that he was quite unable to profit from teaching intended for boys who would be moving ahead even faster over even more difficult ground in the next year and that, if he were to remain in their company, he would either hold them up or, more likely, become demoralised and fall further behind.¹"

No thought at all, one notices, of any possibility that the teachers might have any part to play in the process, or any responsibility towards a boy falling behind in their classes. Their function, clearly, is to cover the syllabus mechanistically and at the retention speed of the most gifted – and devil take the hindmost:

'So quick bright things come to confusion.'

Lest it be supposed that Kettering Grammar School, however much its statistics bear out the findings of Lacey at 'Hightown', was none the less atypical of the performance of a small town boys' grammar school, I approached the Headmaster of a school of similar history and size in Lincolnshire, who was kind enough to allow me access to the actual results information provided by the Examination Board for as much of the period covered by this thesis as had been preserved; and the relevant statistics are printed on the following page. The only difference between these two schools in adjacent counties is that the Lincolnshire example is still a three-form entry boys grammar school today: Northamptonshire became fully comprehensive in the 1970s and the last selective entry at Kettering Grammar School was examined at 'O' level in 1978. As Kettering Boys School, it suffered from the competition of neighbouring co-educational comprehensives; failed to take the obvious step of allying itself as closely as possible with the former Girls' High School half a mile away; and closed in 1993.

¹ Op.cit. pp 74-75

Table illustrating the performance ¹ at the Ordinary level of the General Certificate of Education in two Boys' Grammar Schools between 1958 and 1987		
% of ENTRY OBTAINING 5 PASSES or MORE (at Grade C or better from 1975)		
YEAR	KGS	LINCS
1958	61.1	18.0
1959	53.3	27.5
1960	62.2	17.6
1961	53.3	25.9
1962	48.8	27.5
1963	54.2	38.0
1964	Not Preserved	35.2
1965	46.7	26.7
1966	43.3	39.9
1967	36.3	34.1
1968	50.3	37.5
1969	Not Preserved	26.8
1970	44.9	27.4
1971	51.8	46.2
1972	57.8	32.5
1973	59.8	38.9
1974	Not Preserved	55.5*
1975	" "	62.3
1976	" "	48.3
1977	" "	53.2
1978	55.5	60.0
1979	42.2	63.9
1980	Non-applicable	54.7
1981	"	57.3
1982	"	63.6
1983	"	53.9
1984	"	69.5
1985	"	73.0
1986	"	83.3
1987	"	68.7
*The reason for the improvement in this year and thereafter is the raising of the school leaving age to 16. Prior to that date it had proved impossible in a predominantly agricultural area to persuade farming parents to keep their sons at school regardless of ability		

This careless, or indifferent, 'writing off' of up to half of the pupils selected for a grammar school education is mirrored by the progress of the public examination system over the near half century with which this thesis concerns itself. The introduction of the GCE in 1951 may have been the necessary complement to the abolition of fee-paying and the opening of all grammar-school places to competition, but apart from the transition from the subject-group concept to that of passes in individual subjects it made no difference in teaching styles or, initially, in styles of examining.

¹ The information on Kettering G.S. is preserved in The Northamptonshire County Archive, Boxes 193-8

As has been shown in preceding chapters, the archives of the University of Oxford Delegacy of Local Examinations make it clear that for some time papers were set and marked on exactly the system previously employed, and that system presupposed that the examination was only suitable for the top 20% of the age group, and that the pass 'norm' in each subject should be about 70%. When CSE was eventually introduced the same school of thought held that it would be appropriate for no more than half the remainder hitherto uncatered for; still leaving some 40% of the age-group deemed incompetent to cope with any national system of public examinations, and with a very rigid hierarchy between the two elements of the system thus created. The UODLE archives again emphasise this, with an indignant letter to the Secretary complaining that an O level English literature paper demeaned itself by setting for a context question a passage which "two years previously had been deemed appropriate for the candidates of a regional CSE Board".¹ And when, in 1988, after years of anticipation and delay, the dual system was finally replaced by GCSE, the hopes that the greater flexibility of the CSE approach might penetrate into the upper strata were answered by the reality that the rigidity of GCE had, in fact, penetrated downwards. The emphasis of the system throughout the period under review has been exclusive – to value success and to rate its importance by the proportion of those unable to share it. The success of the comprehensive system in enormously reducing, if never quite eliminating, the discouragement factor and its resultant tendency to form an 'anti-group culture' is manifested in the current pattern of GCSE results – where only a tiny proportion of sixteen year olds leave school with nothing at all (8.1% in 1995); where more than half of the grand total of subject entries result in a performance at a standard at least equivalent to the old O level pass-mark; and where nearly half the entire age-group obtain five or more passes at this level. But, not entirely unexpectedly, the success of the comprehensive system is reflected also in the enormous improvement in the performance of the surviving grammar schools. In an age when quite ordinary comprehensive schools can boast a 60%+ rate of pupils obtaining five or more GCSEs at grade C or better, there can be no excuse whatever for a grammar

¹ Oxford University Archive, Ref: LE 10

school, with an intake restricted to the top twenty or so per cent of eleven year olds within travelling distance, failing to obtain a similar response from every pupil in the school – nor can there be any convincing explanation other than a defective selection system on the one hand or rank bad teaching on the other; neither of which, even if accurate, is likely to be offered. Instead, the emphasis has shifted from the contented streaming of Lacey's Hightown into a new determination to achieve the necessary hundred per cent. And it has been successful: of Lincolnshire's thirteen grammar schools, two actually did manage 100% in 1995, five more were over 95% and only three were below 90%. Results like those illustrated earlier are a thing of the past, and very much need to be when one acknowledged Secondary Modern (and Lincolnshire has a habit of calling its Sec. Mod.s Comprehensives where it can get away with it) managed 51%. Faced with results like this, the school of thought which cannot visualise success without exclusivity is bound to call foul and demand a recount – and the inherent class consciousness which underlines their approach is further eroded by a very real decline in the numbers of those who could confidently be labelled "working-class". In the days when most grammar school places were reserved for those who could pay for them, financial circumstances still served as a further barrier to advancement even for those who might win one of the few scholarships or special places available. A.H Halsey again:

"It was a further blight that refusals of offers of grammar school places would come to schools or education offices written in pencil on blue paper torn from a sugar bag. Poverty heavily loaded the dice."¹

It would be a foolishness to deny that there are still areas of deprivation, and, more insidious, pockets of exigency within areas of relative financial stability and comfort; nevertheless, abject, grinding poverty such as that recalled by Halsey in the 1930s is uncommon. And though they still exist, the barriers to social and professional advancement, to a true meritocracy, have never been lower.

It is, I believe, this sense of a lowering of the barriers that has provoked the attack on standards, in a battle to retain age-old privilege and advantage for the British class system; or perhaps 'caste-system' would better describe the way in which the

¹ *Cytringian Farewell*, p 62

determinants of 'in-crowd' and out-crowd' actually operate.

Certainly the most recent changes in educational practice can be given a sinister interpretation without undue effort. The introduction of the new A* grade at GCSE restores at a stroke the same kind of exclusivity as used to characterise the possession of the School Certificate fifty years ago. The introduction of SATS replaces the lost cause of the 11+ examination with an alternative stress test, and an alternative means of imposing a sense of failure and inadequacy at an early age, and may well serve to segregate pupils into groups requiring separate treatment, thereby converting parents into demanding that range of 'choice and diversity' which they have hitherto stubbornly refused to embrace.

And at the end of that road lies John Major's dream of a grammar school in every town – and the clock put firmly back forty years, in much the same way as his dream of a privatised railway network has significantly damaged the opportunities to travel offered by public transport.

An even greater threat would be that, under the domination of league tables, a National Curriculum and a single Examination Board, we shall revert to the days of Matthew Arnold and the idiocies he so effectively pointed out in the prescribed education of Victorian elementary schools. At the moment a mere nightmare – a thought from science fiction. But it is important to remember that the most disturbing aspects of Matthew Arnold's Reports are those which deal with the training of teachers; and that forty years later H E Bates was still making similar criticisms on the performance of practitioners who had learned to pass tests rather than to understand, and to pass on that single skill to the children entrusted to their care. Yet there is a growing interest and involvement of H M Government in the business of teacher training: it may be no more than a feather in the wind, but it is important for the future to watch which way it blows.

The attack on the improving standards of education in our schools is unquestionably misguided and ought to be irrelevant – but it is also symptomatic of a move of real social importance and some genuine potential danger.

The result of the General Election in May 1997 swept away much of the accrued

dogma and prejudice of the previous eighteen years, but it did not restore responsibility for standards to the teaching profession nor, as yet, signal any stepping back from an ethos of government interference on the basis of ill-defined premises. Most of the research and much of the writing up of this thesis precede that electoral change – but nothing in the ensuing fifteen months has suggested a fundamental change of direction. I am satisfied that, so far, there has been no decline of standards; but, like the Norwood Committee, I will look neither closely nor confidently into the possibilities of the future.

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Frequent reference is made in the course of this thesis to the publications and informal papers issued by various of the examination boards which administered the School Certificate and Higher School Certificate Examinations before 1951, and the General Certificate of Education at the Ordinary and Advanced levels thereafter. Where such references are to the former University of Oxford Delegacy of Local Examinations (now subsumed into the Oxford and Cambridge Examinations and Assessment Council) they may be verified in the Oxford University Archive, where they are filed in the series LE 1-49. Where such references are to the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate, they may be verified in the Syndicate's own archive, though there is, at the time of writing, no classification system. Where such references are to any other examination board, the information in question derives from material in my personal possession.

In the course of the Conclusion, some detailed reference is made to the performance in public examinations of the former Kettering Grammar School. The information here derives from material held partly in the archive of the Old Cytringian Society, and partly in the Northamptonshire County Archive, boxes 193-196.

Frequent reference is also made to the Reports of various committees of enquiry into relevant aspects of the state education system in the course of the twentieth century and to similar official publications, usually published by HMSO. The most significant (so far as this thesis is concerned) are listed below in chronological order.

Board of Education

Report of the Consultative Committee on Education in Secondary Schools	1911
<i>The Teaching of English in England</i> (The Newbolt Report)	1921
<i>The Education of the Adolescent</i> (The Hadow Report)	1926
Report of the Committee of the SSEC on Curriculum and Examinations (The Norwood Report)	1943

Ministry of Education

Circular 259	1955
15 - 18 (The Crowther Report)	1959
<i>The General Certificate of Education and Sixth form Studies</i> (The Lockwood Report)	1960
<i>Secondary School Examinations other than the GCE</i> (The Beloe Report)	1960
<i>Half our Future</i> (The Newsome Report)	1963
<i>The Examining of English Language</i> (The Eighth Report of the Secondary School Examinations Council)	1964

Department of Education and Science

<i>A Language for Life</i> (The Bullock Report)	1975
<i>Ten Good Schools</i> (A Secondary School Enquiry)	1975
<i>School Examinations</i> (The Waddell Report)	
<i>Aspects of Secondary Education in England</i>	1979
Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Teaching of the English Language (The Kingman Report)	1988
<i>English for Ages 5 - 16</i> (The Cox Report)	1989

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<i>Choice and Diversity</i>	1992
<i>The National Curriculum</i>	1995

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