

## A Ramble Through the Thickets of ETAQ's Early Days

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*In 1967, English teaching seemed to be settled in a long-standing tradition, if not set in stone. It was very different from today's arena of contested theories and political influences. Yet, under the surface, strong currents were at work, dragging the subject towards new and exciting possibilities. I will spend a little time exploring the ambiance of 1967, and then move on to recount some of the more amusing incidents in a career of teaching and lecturing that is (believe me) still an enduring passion. A passion, moreover, that pushes me to state that if an ETAQ was needed in 1967, it is needed now more than ever – in spades, as the saying goes.*

Madam President, Fellow ETAQ members,  
Distinguished Guests, Ladies & Gentlemen,

What I propose for you tonight is a set of stories, and a ramble down the early years of ETAQ's existence.

We could start with 'Once Upon a Time', but this is no fairy story. Better to begin with 'It was a Dark and Stormy Night' because it *was* one, as I made my way from the cribbed and cramped confines of the Subject Masters' Staff Room at Kelvin Grove High to the spacious Masters' Common Room at Brisbane Grammar School. Now, imagine that room, with its warm lighting, and its collection of comfortable Scandinavian-design armchairs. There are coffee tables beside each chair, and coffee is brewing at a kitchen bench not far away. The delightful aroma percolates through the air, inviting, welcoming. This is the setting for the inaugural meeting of the English Teachers Association of Queensland. It has been called by one Harry Allsopp, Head of English at Brisbane Grammar. There are about fifteen people present, including Ted Balfe of the Hubbard Academy who became the first editor of the *ETAQ Newsletter*.

(Oh, and that reminds me, I have assiduously collected all ETAQ publications over the past five decades, including most of the very rare issues of the *ETAQ Newsletter*. Tonight, I am giving those back to ETAQ as one measure of gratitude for my Life Membership.)

Also present is Brother Daniel Mooney from St Edmund's Christian Brothers College, Ipswich. He became the first secretary. Kelvin Grove Teachers' College has sent along John

Armstrong, its Senior Lecturer in 'English Method'. (We would call it English Curriculum Studies or some such title today.) There is Joe Noonan from Brisbane State High, and Pat Diamond is with him. Though not physically present, the two Vice-Presidents will be Cec Hadgraft from the University of Queensland and Merv Grayson from the Education Department's Inspectorate, while the Patron will be Professor Ken Hamilton. I realise these names will be meaningless to most of you in the room, tonight, but I do have a reason for recalling them. You will note that the group is broadly representative of the English teaching profession. Virtually all bases are covered, you might say, including the Inspectorate of the Education Department, whose interest in the governance of the new organisation was to last for some five years and then fall away.

Sitting among such august company, I felt a bit overwhelmed, and sat quietly thumbing nonchalantly through a little purple-covered book that someone had purposely left lying around. Its title intrigued me, *Growth Through English: An Account of the Dartmouth Conference*. Little did I know at the time that that book would become the most influential book of the decade in respect to the teaching of English. I had in my hands the rationale for the "Growth Model" that was to free teachers from the old 'grammar grind', and have them place the student and his or her individual interests and abilities at the heart of English teaching. I later bought my own copy, along with Brian Way's *Development through Drama*. I was on my way towards a new 'English Method' at Mt Gravatt CAE.

You can gain a quick impression of the way English was conceived as a school subject in those days by perusing some extracts from the 1968 Junior and Senior exam papers. In the Junior English First Paper of 1968, Question One called for an ‘essay’. Candidates were asked to choose one of the following and write about two pages of foolscap on it:

- (a) *A typical day in the life of one of the following: a nurse; a policeman; a shopkeeper; a mother.*
- (b) *Cut off by floods (a prophetic question indeed in the light of events in 1974!)*
- (c) *The things I like and dislike about my neighbourhood*

I was asked to mark the Junior English First Paper in that year, and I still remember snippets of one student’s response. He (I’m sure it was a boy!) chose Item (c), and began by confusing the idea of ‘neighbourhood’ with ‘neighbours’. So, he chose to write about the latter. “On one side of us”, he began, “there are *good* neighbours, but on the other side they’re shockers”, After describing the good neighbours and their habits, he continued, “And they have living with them Max Mathers. He likes fast cars and wants to get a Holden Monaro. He is a motor mechanic and he pays them board, I don’t know how much it is, but he says it is too much, because he hasn’t got enough left at the end of the week to take girls to the Drive-In.” After that revelation, he moved swiftly to a conclusion, “On the other side we have stinkin’ awful neighbours. They drink lots of Fourex and throw the bottles over our fence. They also swear at each other. They let their kids run around in the nuddy and give a lot of cheek. And they also have a yappy little dog. I think it is a paneranium” I had to mark that out of 20!

The Senior English Examination in 1968 required candidates to sit for two three-hour papers. The second paper (the literature paper) had five questions. One was based on the set Shakespearean play, another on the set poetry text, a third on the set novel, and so on. The set novels for 1968 were *Vanity Fair* and *Far from the Madding Crowd*.

I am led to observe that those exam papers and the thinking on which they were based would now be seen as narrow, canonical, and almost totally divorced from the reality of today’s Year 10 and Year 12 students. While some avid young readers would still enjoy Thackeray’s sophisticated satire, I am led to ask what experience of life and literature the average Year 12 student on Thursday Island might bring to the reading of *Vanity Fair* or *Far from the Madding Crowd*? That’s the trouble with set texts: however well they are chosen, the choice inevitably marginalizes some students, especially when the candidates are drawn from 80% or more of the relevant age cohort. What often happened, of course, on T.I. and elsewhere, was a travesty of teaching. The English teacher simply obtained a copy of “Coles’ Notes on *Vanity Fair*”, and dictated these to the class for regurgitation in the examination. There was little or no genuine engagement with the text.

Of course, the Radford Scheme was designed to change all that. But to be successful, Radford required teachers *who had vastly more expertise, and a vastly different view of their roles in the education system than most of those teaching in Queensland schools at the time*. From being technicians, hired to implement the master plans of an employing authority, *all teachers were now required to become true professionals, devising their own teaching plans (within a general framework) to meet the needs of their clients (the students in their classes) and taking on the responsibility of carrying them out effectively*. And how would they know how effectively the work had been done? Well, that part of it was assessment – which is what the Radford scheme was designed for in the first instance. By a sad twist of irony however, the assessment tail was to wag the pedagogic dog (as it always does). Yet, there was this to it: in the process of providing for school-based assessments, *Radford transformed the nature of teaching and turned many former technicians into professionals. Especially so, once the legendary John Pitman became Director of the Board of Secondary School Studies*.

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English teaching was changing fast. The arrival of a new secondary English Syllabus in 1973 recognised the new professionalism. English was a different subject from what it had been. It rapidly became a 'different' subject from every other in the school curriculum, and it still is. Schools were given the freedom to choose their own texts and to devise their own programs of work and assessment. The ETAQ was joined by a set of equivalent subject associations – and government recognition of their important teacher-development functions quickly followed. At least at the Federal level. Teachers were now to be three- or four-year trained, in semi-autonomous CAEs and Universities. Gone were the days when the Department of Education could order up a given number of graduates to meet its needs for the next year.

In Queensland, however, there was no small amount of obstruction and opposition. By then, the Bjelke-Petersen government had been in office for some years. Fears that teachers had been given too much freedom quickly surfaced, especially in the backwoods, and the flames were fanned by perennial attacks by the press on the teaching profession. A certain Rona Joyner was actively campaigning against the curriculum changes in the new syllabus, particularly the choice of texts. I remember one event of particular significance. Mrs Joyner had befriended Flo Bjelke-Petersen (or maybe it was the other way round), and the latter had invited a self-styled curriculum expert from the United States to visit Queensland. Notables in Queensland education from near and far were asked to attend a meeting at Bardon Professional Development Centre where they would be addressed by this 'expert'. (In reality, she ran the Texas Book Depository which bought and issued all the texts permitted for use in Texas schools.)

Rona Joyner did the introduction and as the hubbub died down, the 'expert' launched into her diatribe against the teaching of arithmetic in modern schools.

"Why, ah tell you," she whined in her Southern

twang, "they use calculators now for everythin'. They don't do mental arithmetic in schools any more. An' when it comes to the girls in the checkouts, do you know they have machines that tell them how much change to hand out? They can't work it out for themselves."

After a good deal more in this vein, she began in on spelling and grammar instruction, complaining that it was "not what it had used to be", and then, in response to a question about the choice of Peter Terson's 1967 play *Zigger Zagger* for Junior School study, she launched into a new diatribe about the choice of set texts, saying that she much preferred Shakespeare to this modern stuff with all its squalor and violence.

"What's wrong with *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*?" she concluded

Now she was on my territory. Without intending to, I brought the afternoon's entertainment to a swift conclusion by stating the perfectly obvious.

"Mrs X," I began. "You say you are against violence and squalor, yet you would permit a play that has a trusted lieutenant and his wife conspire to kill a king, and then follow through with a trail of death and destruction throughout the land. You would permit another in which another man kills his brother to gain power, then in a matter of months marries his wife who has long lusted after him; at the end, the stage is strewn with bodies. How do you reconcile those views?"

"Aah," the lady shrieked in anger. "You'all is just out to get me. Well, ah'm not goin' to play that game!" And she stomped off the stage, abandoning the meeting half an hour before it was due to close and leaving Rona Joyner to pick up what pieces of it she could retrieve.

As matters drew to a head in the late 70s, the ETAQ once again stood firm in support of the professionalism of its members (a tradition that has been admirably pursued in latter years by Gary Collins in particular). It hired the disused Legislative Council chamber to house a forum on English teaching. Parliamentarians and Department Heads were invited and the

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proceedings took the form of a Senate enquiry with the politicians quizzing the teachers on such topics as their choice of texts. Gilbert Case (then President) and I were the ETAQ representatives at the forum: and we were convinced that our phones were being tapped by Special Branch officers. We kept hearing a series of clicks during our conversations.

Proof sheets of the proceedings were given to us after each session, and in one of them a stenographer had typed the name, “Sir Henry Handel Richardson”. The next day, one of the politicians picked up on this, and asked me if I could recommend a book by this gentleman for Year 12 students to study. I was only too pleased to recommend *Australia Felix*, the first in the trilogy, *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. The politician followed up with another question:

“Would you say he is a good author?”

“Certainly”, I said, “she is a very good author and her work should be much more readily available than it is now.”

*(Note: The book was out of print at this time, but has been rescued and is now available in paperback and eBook form from Text Publishing in Melbourne)*

Fortunately for Queensland teachers and students – and us – the text-book furore died a natural death, and the reforms of the Radford years remained in place.

During the mid-80s, an attempt was made by Bjelke-Petersen government to limit the range of subject English, by dividing it into a *compulsory* and a *non-compulsory* part. The compulsory part (English Expression, perhaps) would have to do with functional reading and writing (business communication, report writing and the like) while the non-compulsory part (English Literature and Media) would cover the imaginative, creative aspects of the subject. The English Syllabus Advisory Committee was asked for its view about this proposal. No prizes for guessing its response; the syllabus committee would have no part of the division. With the support of the ETAQ, the proposal was

firmly rejected as reactionary and divisive. The Bjelke-Petersen government and its Education Minister lost office shortly afterwards – and the proposal, like its sponsors, faded into irrelevance.

Now to move from the taught to the teaching.

The English Teacher of 1967 was likely to be two-year trained or even one-year trained, having completed a Diploma at the Kelvin Grove or Kedron Park Teachers College. Many were former primary teachers who had ‘come up’ to the secondary school when Grade 8 came up in 1964. One of them, I’ll never forget, asked me to teach him all of English grammar over a long weekend! Only a sprinkling of English teachers was fully trained in the subject (i.e. they had graduated with a 3-year Arts Degree and a Diploma of Education).

English was regarded as a ‘generalist’ subject, which meant that it could be taught by anyone who had trained to be a teacher – a Phys Ed specialist, or a Music Specialist, for example. It was often said that if you were warm-blooded, upright, and could speak English, then you could be an English teacher. *It irks me that that is still true to a large extent today. In my view, English (or any of the Englishes we have created since 1967) is as much a specialist subject as Biology, or Japanese, and deserves teachers who have been immersed in the study of linguistics, literature, and the media for at least as long as it takes to create expertise in those subjects.*

Here endeth the second section of my talk. By the early 70s, I had become a lecturer at Mt Gravatt Teachers College, and as I moved around the prac schools observing their English classes, I became something of a zealot for the spoken word. Inevitably, this interest led to a broader concern for the assessment of spoken English, but that’s not a topic for tonight.

Let me take this opportunity, though, to point out that the Radford Scheme allowed spoken English to be taught and tested for the first time in Queensland high schools. Before 1972, all the testing that was done was on *written* responses.

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Radford also made possible a whole range of oral genres for teaching and assessment. Among them were Public speaking, Debating, and (my favourite, Readers' Theatre, or the Oral Representation of Literature).

And so on to the last story. It so happened that I was asked to entertain a gathering of the ETAQ in the mid-eighties. After racking my brains about the content of my talk, sure in the realisation that I was no stand-up comic, I hit upon the idea of using Readers Theatre with a snippet of Clive James's *Unreliable Memoirs*. The performance was much appreciated, so for my conclusion to this set of ETAQ stories, I thought you might like to hear a repeat of that piece tonight. It comes at a point where the young James's Kogarah neighbourhood is having one of its periodical billycart crazes. He has built one out of old pram wheels to compete with all the others.

Glyn read the story of 'The Great Billycart Race' from Clive James's book *Unreliable Memoirs* for the great amusement of all present.

(PAUSE)

Here endeth the third section. I think your response indicates that there is still a place in our English classrooms for the considered presentation of literature by the teacher. And for the practice to be taken up by the students as well. Indeed, the very soul of English is to be found here. So, I am emboldened to say that fifty years from now, when robots and computers have taken over many of the functions of today's living teacher, there will still be a corner of that foreign curriculum where the expert professional teacher will engage small groups of students in exploring language and literature that is uniquely tailored to their needs. And the ETAQ will be there to support those teachers. It can face the future with strength and confidence.

(ENDS)