

Insulting behaviour: more footnotes

Chapter 1: abuse of children – much more than a footnote, see separate article below.

Ch 1: a correction: Major Pat Reid, author of *The Colditz Story*, did not in fact go to my Catholic prep school Ladycross, though he certainly sent his son there; mea culpa.

Chapter 2: Bruce Kent and Paul Johnson died before the Tories developed the doctrine of “extremism as the arch enemy of British values”. Otherwise both of them, like many other products of Stonyhurst, might have been tarred with this brush – at different stages in their careers.

Ch 2: a footnote to the footnote in Chapter 2 on the Jesuit policy of grouping boys in same-age playrooms as opposed to all-age houses: Stonyhurst in the 1950s was strongly pro-privacy and anti-nudity. Our dormitories consisted of separate cubicles made of wood and closed by a curtain; baths were also in cubicles; showers were communal but they were cunningly sited in the same space as the indoor swimming pool – so trunks were compulsory in the showers even if you didn't plan to swim.

Chapter 3: Two literary figures who nearly got fourths at Oxford but ended up with thirds were the Poet Laureate Cecil Day-Lewis and the children's writer Philip Pullman.

“Having long ago given up hope of a First, Cecil was determined to achieve the next most distinguished class of degree, a Fourth. In later life, verbally and in print, he claimed to have contrived a place in this class: ‘...it is a mystery to me why the examiners did not fail me altogether’. The Wadham [college] records show that he actually took a prosaic Third.” See *C. Day-Lewis*, by Sean Day-Lewis, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1980

Philip Pullman, author of the children's fantasy trilogy *His Dark Materials*, graduated with a third in 1968. He later told *Oxford Student*: “It was the year they stopped giving fourth-class degrees, otherwise I'd have got one of those.”

Ch 3: an update: the two old Etonians who at Christ Church opposed affiliation to the student council lived very different lives after university.

(Sir) John Walker-Smith (1939-2024), known by his second name, Jonah, remained a Tory but had a distinguished career as a legal-aid defence barrister, notably in the *Oz* magazine obscenity trial where he helped John Mortimer defend Richard Neville et al.

Christopher Lennox-Boyd (1941-2012), lived on Guinness money, was a gentleman of leisure and collected prints.

Chapter 4: Rose Dugdale (1941-2024), the English debutante & Oxford graduate turned IRA bomber and bomb-maker, was one of those (like the journalist & City Univ ex-prof Roy Greenslade) now known to have adopted the Irish Republican cause as a direct result of the 1972 Bloody Sunday massacre.

Chapter 12: Labour's policy of imposing VAT on private school fees keeps raising questions: for example, since this wouldn't be legally possible inside "Europe" (where education has protected status from VAT), is it now Labour's policy to stay out of the EU? In which case what will *Guardian* readers' position be? In favour of VAT on school fees so, logically, against re-entry to Europe, or against VAT?

The *Times* (10/5/24) reported that foreign branches of British private schools were targeting parents with inducements and quoted an Indian woman as saying: "I may send my son to live with my mother in India." A better option surely would be somewhere closer to Britain like France where there have been English boarding schools in the past.

Meanwhile one *Times* reader's solution to the threat of rising fees was to recommend state school until after O levels, then a transfer to private school to secure good As – to which another reader replied that it would make more sense to go private first, then choose a comp on the grounds that a post-A level state school candidate would benefit from the positive discrimination said to be practised by some universities.

Abuse of children: physical, sexual – & medical

In the spring of 2024 the topic of child abuse was difficult to avoid. First, in mid-March – and with the biggest splash – came the memoir of Lady Di's younger brother, Charles Spencer, *A Very Private School* (Collins). He described being sent away to boarding school aged eight and being abused both physically – sadistic beatings etc by his headmaster – and sexually by a young assistant matron. The media were all over it – extracts in the *Mail on Sunday*, reviews, follow-ups and comments everywhere.

A piece on the book in the *Guardian* (Gaby Hinsliff, 19/3/24) was followed by letters supporting the theory of "boarding school syndrome", from Nick Duffell (author of *The Making of Them*, Lone Arrow Press, 2000) and Joy Schaverien, whose book on the subject has precisely this title (*Boarding School Syndrome*, Routledge, 2015). This sent me back to Alex Renton's review of *BSS* in the *Observer* (7/6/15) and the readers' comments that followed. One that stood out for its utter ignorant absurdity came from Nick Duffell, replying to the question: what happens (in boarding schools) elsewhere in Europe? "There are hardly any in Europe actually – mostly in the Anglosphere," he wrote.

Well, actually... in France, for example, there are many more young people in boarding schools than there are in Britain – about 200,000, divided about 3 to 1 between state and private, most of them at lycée (15-18), the rest at collège (11-15). And the fact that boarding in France isn't notorious for abuse suggests that it isn't boarding as such that has caused the problem in Britain.

Hinsliff's piece also mentioned an alternative academic approach to that of Duffell and Schaverien (hence their critical letters): the idea that problematic parenting could play a bigger role in why some children might suffer the trauma of "boarding school syndrome" than the schools themselves (see *The Psychological Impact of Boarding School*, Penny Cavenagh et al, Routledge, 2023). And the published extracts from Spencer's memoir certainly suggest that he experienced "problematic parenting". He writes: "I felt I'd been sent away from home because I'd somehow fallen short as a

son” and he cites as examples of his childhood misery “my mother leaving home when I was two, my parents’ bitter divorce, my father’s subsequent depression, his marrying a hard-to-like stepmother”.

Spencer also quotes Princess Diana, when she was taken to boarding school by her father, saying: “If you loved me, you wouldn’t leave me here.” This *cri de coeur* occurs again and again in modern misery memoirs about boarding school life and is echoed in the rhetorical question asked by so many critical commentators: why have children if you then abandon them to strangers? Joy Schaverien quotes the experience of her father who in 1916, aged six, was sent to a Brighton boarding school wearing a velours hat tied under the chin that “ensured he was savagely bullied from the first minute”. He wondered many years later: “If I was so precious that Mother dressed me this way, why then did she part with me?”

I can only speak (from the child’s point of view) about the 1950s but I have to say I do not recognise this culture of complaint. My recollection is that going away to boarding school was seen by us, our parents and people in general as the norm for those families who could afford the fees: it was privilege not punishment. It was supposed to be “doing us good”, “character-forming” and so on; “love” had nothing to do with it either positively or negatively. What helped to make this attitude acceptable in my case was the fact that Seaford had so many boarding prep schools you could hardly see yourself as having been singled out for persecution. (Now, of course, they’re all gone: my school, Ladycross, closed in 1977 and Newlands, the last Seaford survivor, in 2014. Boarding prep schools have been in decline for decades.)

The early 1950s was still very much a matter-of-fact, post-war world where whinging wasn’t what we did. We complained to one another, of course – about the food, about the teachers, about being beaten, about being told what to do all the time – but we didn’t see ourselves as victims. For example, I can’t remember a single case of a boy crying himself to sleep at night. What I do remember is talkative and boastful boys telling the rest of the dormitory the plots of films they’d seen in the holidays.

Also, for the first three years I was at prep school (1950-3), there was a war on – in Korea. And if, like me, you saw yourself as a soldier-to-be, you followed the exploits of the “Glorious Glosters” (two VCs at the Battle of the Imjin River) and the legendary Private Bill Speakman, who won his VC for throwing hand grenades at the enemy as though they were cricket balls. By the way, the “stiff upper lip”, meaning insouciance under fire, is a phrase I certainly recognise from that time (as in the tale of Sir Francis Drake insisting on finishing his game of bowls before taking on the Spanish armada). I think we saw it as our birthright as lucky English boys (after all, we’d survived the war and our fathers had helped win it), as opposed to the foreigners who’d either lost the war or come into it late in the day.

I can remember one case, only one, of boys running away from Ladycross. There were two of them, both from Devon, called Wilkins and Ferens; they got as far in the direction of the West Country as Brighton, which wasn’t very far. I don’t think the escapade was taken very seriously. In fact Ladycross seemed quite a calm and settled school, with key members of staff staying in place for years. And there were probably more women teachers than there were at most boys’ schools; for example, Miss Harnett was both my English teacher and the administrative head of the junior school.

But here's a discordant note. When Antony Roper retired as headmaster, a public tribute to him by Father McCurdy, an ex-school chaplain, included the following words: "Ladycross boys will remember him by the Revue, by the Choir...by his tolly classes..." Tolly classes? For "tolly" read "blipping" – that's what we called it. In a blipping class you stood in line to answer Mr Roper's questions on the Latin grammar prep you'd been set the day before. If you got something wrong, you held out your hand for one strike of the ferule. As a Scottish woman, who had a similar experience many years ago at the hands of a (female) French teacher, told the *Times* (22/4/24), "it certainly concentrated the mind".

Well, that would presumably be called "abuse" now, though I'd forgotten all about it until I reread my school magazine report of McCurdy's speech. Importantly, it took place in plain sight and, as I've said, it was referred to light-heartedly on a most public and prestigious occasion in front of parents, old boys and guests.

In looking at the abuse question dates are vital. As I've said in Chapter 9, I edited the psychiatrist Derek Miller's book *The Age Between*, subtitled "Adolescents in a disturbed society", which was based on his work at the Tavistock Clinic dealing with young people with psychological problems referred there in the years 1959-68. So was the book full of reports of physical and sexual abuse? Hardly. True there's one reference to the "seduction" by a master of a 10-year-old boy at his boarding school and the resulting psychological damage to the boy – but that's the extent of it: the word "abuse" doesn't even appear in the index.

But if we move on to the 1970s (Spencer went to his prep school as an eight-year-old in 1972), the picture changes dramatically. A key aspect of the "counter-culture" then was the demand for "children's rights" (there was a magazine with this title) and "children's liberation" including sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll. The infamous *Schoolkids Oz*, edited by 15 to 18-year-olds, was published in early 1970 and prosecuted for obscenity – essentially for "attempting to corrupt youth" – the following year. Then *The Little Red Schoolbook* with its 20 pages on sex for young people, with tips on how to masturbate, 30 pages on drugs – and quite a lot on "subversive", ie anti-authoritarian, politics – was translated from the Danish original and published in Britain in 1972 (it was banned under the Obscene Publications Act). Most notoriously, an organisation called Paedophile Information Exchange, which was affiliated for a time to the NCCL (now Liberty), openly advocated sex between adults and children and campaigned for the abolition of the age of consent. It operated for 10 years from 1974.

On 23/4/24 ITV showed a documentary, *Glitter: The Popstar Paedophile*, about Gary Glitter, the glam rock singer of the 1970s, who was jailed for 16 years in 2015 for sex abuse of three underage girls. "Details to make your skin crawl," said the *Times* while the *Guardian* called it "a most sickening nostalgia trip". Inevitably, there were references to the late DJ Jimmy Savile, revealed after his death to have been a serial sex abuser, and to various pop stars, such as David Bowie and Jimmy Page, who were reported to have had sex with underage girls in the 1970s.

The day after the Glitter programme (24/4/24) the *Guardian* referred to the case of 92-year-old Lawrence Hecker, an American Catholic priest accused of abusing children, and quoted an interview published in 2023. Hecker "acknowledged engaging in sex acts with multiple underage boys in the 1960s and 1970s, something he attributed to the era's 'sexual revolution'". His words reported then were: "People were saying 'Oh look, we were bound all these years, all these centuries – now we're

free'." (23/8/23) A week or so later the *Guardian* printed an extensive and detailed report on the Hecker case citing numerous examples of the church authorities failing to act and covering up his abuse (10/5/24).

Clearly, the celebrated "sexual revolution" that started in the 1960s had the unfortunate effect of increasing the chances that children would be abused. All sorts of people, not just priests and other clerics but sports coaches and scoutmasters, youth club organisers, teachers of just about anything from school subjects to music, dance, art, drama, now seemed unable to control themselves in the presence of attractive young flesh. And the assistant matron who abused Charles Spencer at his prep school in the 1970s wasn't a bizarre one-off: women can be abusers, too. On 22/4/24 the *Mail* reported that in 16 American states in the past 12 months 25 female teachers had been arrested for "sexually abusing" underage students. A few days later (26/4/24) Stacy Kaiser, a psychotherapist, told *Mail* readers: "The typical physical profile of a female sex predator is a Caucasian woman in her 30s, according to new research." To adapt a familiar slogan: "They/them too."

On 7/5/24 the *Guardian* reported that two Australian men, aged 25 and 30, had been given hefty prison sentences for hundreds of cases of serious sex abuse including "aggravated sexual intercourse with very young children". One man was guilty of abusing children where he worked – at a child care centre. The other's victims included "family members".

"Family" is the elephant in the room: you don't need to go to boarding school, summer camp, choir practice, the local park – or even next door – to be abused. I think everybody realises that now. But what people don't necessarily know is where the most likely threat comes from. For me the most shocking story on this subject was in the *Sunday Times* of 17/3/24 which calmly stated: "Siblings are responsible for more sexual abuse of children than any other family member; the studies indicate that a child is three to five times more likely to be abused by an older sibling than a father or stepfather." The studies, by Rape Crisis, suggest that up to 5 per cent of children have sexually abused a sibling.

Various case histories were quoted in the article: "Lily" was six or seven when the abuse by her elder brother "Charles" began; it ended when she was eight and after the parents divorced the children were packed off to different boarding schools. So there's an irony if you like: saved not savaged by boarding school.

This piece in the *Sunday Times* by Decca Aitkenhead was the only one I came across on sex abuse by siblings. As she pointed out: "For the media, sibling sex abuse lacks the moral clarity of other sex abuse stories and the simpler narrative of an adult monster harming a child. Unlike other child sexual abuse stories, such as the crimes of the Catholic Church or the Rotherham child sexual exploitation scandal, there is no institution obviously at fault for the media to blame."

In mid-April smacking by parents was in the news when the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health recommended that it should be banned in England and Northern Ireland, as it has been in Wales and Scotland. Children who'd been smacked were said to be much more likely to suffer poor mental health, do badly at school and be physically assaulted or abused later (16/4/24). Meanwhile at school, where teachers are no longer licensed to hit their pupils, most reported violence was the other way round. According to a BBC survey (28/3/24), nearly one teacher in five in England has been hit by a pupil; 5-6-year-old children were reported as spitting, swearing, throwing chairs...

Finally in mid-April we had the Cass Review of gender identity services for children and young people, which were supposed to ensure that they received safe, holistic and effective care. Clearly, in the period studied, they did not. As Sonia Sodha wrote in the *Observer*, Dr Hilary Cass, a retired consultant paediatrician, “laid bare the devastating scale of NHS failures of a vulnerable group of children and young people, buoyed by adult activists bullying anyone who dared question a treatment model so clearly based on ideology rather than evidence” (14/4/24).

Not to mince words, the conduct of the transgender ideologues was a clear case of abuse of young people. And unlike most cruelty and sexual interference, the physical effects of drugs delaying puberty and the mutilation of sexual organs are likely to be permanent .