

CHAPTER 5

The Thirties Generation



Ronald Gurner in 1917, the year he was wounded and won the MC, and in 1937. He brought some outstanding young masters to the new school in the 1930s.

The school set high intellectual standards and the boys were lively...
It was a joy to teach those boys – they were brilliant.

DICK WHITE, FUTURE HEAD OF M15 AND MI6,
QUOTED BY TOM BOWER IN *THE PERFECT ENGLISH SPY*.

Mr Ewen gave a much appreciated lecture on the psychology of politics, enunciating the modern theory of social psychology, and drawing interesting if disturbing conclusions regarding the policy of Nazi Germany.

WHITGIFTIAN, DECEMBER 1938.

Gurner, SRK, MC (The Beer) 1928–39

Andrew retired ten years after the First World War. His successor Ronald Gurner was and is the only Whitgift headmaster who had fought in a war. He'd been seriously wounded leading an attack at the Battle of Arras in April 1917, for which he was awarded the MC. A sniper's bullet severed an artery in his arm, and he was lucky to survive the loss of blood. After convalescing he finished the war in Military Intelligence. He first taught at Marlborough then became the headmaster of Strand, a state secondary school in Brixton, where he was immensely popular: 'Julius Caesar and Hadrian rolled into one.' He came to Whitgift from the outstanding day school King Edward VII, Sheffield, where he fell out with the Labour-controlled Education committee, among other things because they wanted to abolish the 'militaristic' OTC. It's that school he describes in a book entitled *I Chose Teaching*.

He had earlier used his war experience to write *Pass Guard at Ypres*, and followed it with *Reconstruction*, about the return of a teacher from the war. He himself had been a day boy at Merchant Taylors, and his first book had been called *The Day Boy*. His schools and own upbringing – his father had abandoned his mother when he was twelve – had given him a considerable empathy with day boys from modest homes, and a desire to challenge the monopoly of the top boarding public schools and their stranglehold on Oxbridge entrance and the professions. But, well-hidden at this point, he suffered mental problems. He had two nervous breakdowns, the first at Oxford in 1912, the second after his wartime recuperation.

Gurner believed that the suppression of individuality and personality, together with the worship of convention, were the public school system's greatest failures. The future leaders must learn to think for themselves while still at school, and to do that they must have a wider experience of the world than could be enjoyed by boys at a boarding-school. His radical way of thinking may have been ahead of his time. Gurner turned his extrovert personality upon the boys, preaching to them, scolding them, confiding in them. He sought familiar terms with the younger masters and with the Senior boys, and quickly introduced minor but popular reforms. Percy 209 & 195.

He was a remarkable character, and I have some vivid remembrances of him. He had a marked stammer, which caused him to say 'What what', in the middle or at the end of a sentence. For instance my name, VALLE, which should be pronounced VARL, came out as 'Valley what what'. This disability didn't prevent him from giving a long address at the beginning and end of term Assemblies, which meant it lasted for the whole of the first period, so was not wholly unpopular.

One innovation Gurner introduced was to abolish weekend homework. Instead we had to read English literature. We could choose our own books, but they had to be approved by our form master.

Gurner was a great proponent of the day school, and determined to make Whitgift one of the best. I think he did. To my dying day I shall be grateful to Whitgift.