

Report on the U3A Founders Lecture

Jim and I attended this first Founder's Lecture, given by the only surviving founder member of the U3A, Eric Midwinter (above), which was intensely thought provoking and controversial.

He started by outlining the insidious effect the explosion of pre war "boys' school" books and comics had on public consciousness. It enabled performers like Will Hay and Jimmy Edwards to be understood by a largely working class audience who had no direct contact with the privileged atmosphere, jargon and ethos of the enclosed boarding school. Everyone had read about such places because they were the standard fare of schoolboy comics. These comics were born out of the muscular Christian publications of the late 1800s the predominant aim of which was to inculcate stoicism and prepare boys for the hardship of adulthood. They would be expected to serve king and country in the military, the church and the colonies.

Schools adopted sterile and repressive patterns of old-fashioned rote teaching because no one expected or realised teaching could be different and, more importantly, better. Learning in an ideal world should be so attractive a pupil wants to attend instead of being compelled to do so. Compulsory education produces teachers who go on to instil in pupils the same values and knowledge base they have been exposed to. Jim only realised why he'd learnt simultaneous equations in school after forty years: it was to be able to help his daughter with her maths homework. That was exactly the same example Eric Midwinter used, saying he'd spent years wandering around London waiting for someone to ask him to perform a simultaneous equation, but so far he's never found a purpose for a good many of the skills he was taught in school. Whilst I'm far less cynical about the value of the education I received at school I would agree it has little practical application.

He then outlined the aim of compulsory education introduced in 1870, an aim I've often subliminally suspected but found quite shocking when it was stated as baldly as Eric Midwinter did. The technology of the Industrial Revolution had by this time advanced to such a degree child labour was largely redundant. This left large numbers of children and aimless young people with nowhere to go and nothing to do. Such individuals were readily seen as a potential revolutionary or insurgent threat. "Satan makes work for idle fingers" was a sentiment dear to Victorian hearts. Compulsory education wasn't intended to improve the lot of the working classes but to keep them off the streets in a penitential and closely controlled environment. It was a means of social control not the act of social altruism we've been conditioned to see universal education as being.

We're also fed the myth that the middle class has expanded because of improvements in education but it's far more the case that the increase in upward social mobility resulted from increased room for workers in the public

sector after the introduction of the Welfare State. It's likely that increased higher education was the result of an enlarged middle class rather than the cause of it. Class structure is self-perpetuating and education a means of maintaining distinctions rather than eroding them. It's statistically demonstrated that social mobility is a one way process. The place vacated by the occasional working class individual joining the ranks of the middle class isn't filled by one falling from the class above any more than a middle class individual who rises to the upper echelons isn't replaced by a failing aristocrat. The royal family didn't demote one of its members to accommodate Kate Middleton. Education is credited with much more than its due and academic achievement owes more to nurture than nature. Our home environment dictates what we will actually achieve far more than our educational one does. Traditional education is largely redundant in later life and rote learning actually counter productive since the recognised key to learning is enjoyment. The U3A might provide the paradigm for an education system that's satisfactory to students, is voluntary rather than penitentiary and actually relevant to the needs of employers.

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