

Vernon Scannell at Hazelwood, 1960: teacher and colleague

The *Daily Telegraph* obituary for Vernon Scannell called the school where he taught in the fifties “part of the underbelly “ of education. Simon Jenkins, a pupil there in the mid 50s and taught by Scannell, rightly objects. The school had its oddities and was a little like the parodies of prep schools, but like so many instant judgements by those – especially opinion echoers like journalists -- with little knowledge of what and how we learn, this one was wrong.

The Openness and Freedom

I went to teach there in January 1960, before gap-years were the custom. Prep schools of the time hired young men for the year after they left public or grammar school and before they “went up” to university (though, from the working class, I simply “went” to university). I could not understand how boys could be allowed such unsupervised freedom. After classes they climbed Copper Beech like maggots, while below the tree, over decades, boys had built a two storey (sometimes three) tunnel. And all around were acres of woods and fields where they ran at will.



Copper Beech. A very silly Barry Fox, colleague of Vernon Scannell, is up Copper Beech with the boys of Hazelwood, pretending to be a monkey

Simon Jenkins says the headmaster/owner was eccentric. He certainly seemed not to let anything worry him. I was walking with Mr Parry one afternoon when a group of boys rushed up to him: “Sir, sir, Mason’s fallen down Copper Beech and broken his arm.” I panicked. What to do? “Ho, that’ll teach him a lesson,” said the headmaster and walked on. He did reach the tree eventually and quietly asked “everything alright?” And of course it was.

Another time the boys were having a swimming competition. Boys on the edge of the concrete pool were running around and laughing, and in the pool was splashing, and dozens trying to swim lengths. Through the chaos of arms and legs I could see a little boy with a very red face just coming to the surface. This happened a couple of times, then someone said, “What’s Jenkins doing?” “Pull him out.” It was not easy, and took several failed attempts, but eventually the seven-year-old ended up on the side, a soggy, crying pile – his red face bloated. Immediately the headmaster reprimanded him: “You silly boy, what were you doing in the water. I said don’t get in if you can’t swim” It turned out later that he hadn’t jumped in; someone had pushed him.



**Teacher Barry Fox again in a predictably silly pose over the pool.
One mother told me, “I’m so glad there are young teachers to teach the boys”**

Underbelly? No. These boys were healthy, intelligent, and happy, as they were prepared to go to public school – and there was a public school for everyone, even for those with “severe learning problems” (as the phrase is now).

On my first day, at the end of the first lesson, one of the seven-year old year olds said, “Sir, You should be in films.” I was flattered. I always tried to comb my hair in the latest pop singer way and one day at

grammar school I had worn pink fluorescent socks. How impressive to get such instant praise. “You sound so funny. You’re like a comedian. Your voice is so funny.” They were telling me I had a broad Bristol accent, something they would never have heard except in films with country yokels, or Bernard Miles performances (I think the egg advert with him extolling the little lion hadn’t started yet.) But the older boys were too well mannered to comment.



Sunday morning, with the boys dressed in their Sunday best, and Barry Fox with his well groomed (but vulgar) hair sticking out of the sliding sunroof of his Austin Big Seven. I was not comic. Just differently interesting.

Vernon Scannell and I taught here, I between January and July, 1960.

Waiting for Scannell

Not everyone's here, they said on the Friday when I arrived. Wait till you meet Vernon Scannell. There was great anticipation about his arrival, especially from the young matrons –Ellie, a tall blonde about to be married to a tall Norwegian pilot, Sally who talked a lot about going up to town to see *La Dolce Vita*, lean beautiful and confident, and smoking only Peter Stuyvesant cigarettes; Mrs Chippy Wood, cook, and wife of Chippy Wood, caretaker. I sensed a pride in proprietorship of their poet. Even the middle aged men teachers spoke of his arrival.



Morning Break. "Chippy" Wood (in cap) hands out bread and beef dripping to the boys.
For birthdays, Mrs "Chippy" Wood made the most delicious coffee cake ever.

Scannell rented a small terraced cottage with, it was said, a woman and a child, opposite Limpsfield Common and close to a high quality bookshop that smelt of good books. He arrived in an old Rover 14 the morning school started. The rest of us, not living near the school, had arrived early, during the weekend.

I had never met a poet before, though I'd tried to be one at school. He struck me as massive, though looking back I think he just looked strong, in a well-cut blue blazer. They'd told me he was a poet and a boxer; and he had an aura. He had slightly balding blond hair and a quiet presence. He stood firmly and spoke clearly with a sort of amused wry tone, though he was never cynical. What struck me and still does was his voice, deep and educated with none of the actor in it. It was impressively deep like that of someone on the radio. The experienced men staff told me it was deepened by beer drinking.

I put this into a text box not to draw attention to it but because I couldn't make it cohere with the rest of the piece.

On 4 May, the day I drove back to Hazelwood in my new 1938 Austin Big 7 with leaking sun roof and pneumatic seats, Princess Margaret was married. "Chippy" Woods greeted me: "Why did Anthony Armstrong Jones get married on a Friday?" "Because he wanted fresh meat for the weekend."

I'm afraid I didn't understand, but smiled as if I did.

The Scannell World

I got to know him during the morning and afternoon breaks of the second and third terms of 1960. At recess he came into the staff room and when I went up to him he talked easily with me. Early on, when he was alone I told him I wrote poetry, too. My school had told me under no circumstances to stay at the school beyond the two terms, -- young men teaching in prep schools could be swallowed up and drowned -- so I thought he and I had something in common. (This was before the notion of the gap year) He and I were not in this as a career. We both had important intellectual things to deal with. He smiled. Ah you write about big things like love and life, I suppose. How did he know? His amused and knowing attitude sank me. I thought that was what poetry was for. I had read TS Eliot and been taught Browning by a man who thought of him as one of the moderns. Anyway he didn't dismiss me.

During our discussions in the term he asked if I'd like to see how he prepared his poetry for printing, and brought in galley proofs from the *London Magazine* and *Encounter* (nobody knew of the CIA then), one I remember had the word "plap."

How it happened I don't know but a couple of the young teachers (young public school men, waiting to go up to Oxbridge) were talking about how the rear wheels on cars worked. I appealed to Mr Scannell to support my notion of a differential in the rear axle so that the wheels could go round corners at a different rate (the public school men did not know about this). He drove a cheap pre-war Rover 14, the sort with a special knob in the dash you turned to allow the car to coast down hill, saving petrol, and all sorts of gadgets to govern the choke. And I'm pretty certain it had a tab on the centre of the steering wheel to adjust the richness of the fuel and another to adjust the timing -- all way past my understanding. Just the car a poet with an aura should have, dashing around the countryside. My friends from school knew about cars and could tell whether it was a Ford 8, Morris 8, or Hillman was coming round the corner just by the sound. Mr Scannell would surely know far more than that. But he didn't. He had no idea about the problem of rear wheels going around corners, he had never thought about it and clearly wasn't interested, though he did know of the freewheeling knob, but couldn't use it. As with so many practical things I noticed he was more bemused than ashamed at his ignorance. Yet he looked a real man. All the women I spoke to thought so. For him, it seemed, a car was just an old banger he used for getting to school.



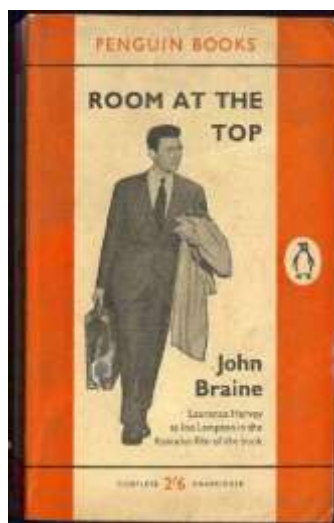
The steering wheel and dash of this Rover 14 have gadgets and twisters for controlling richness and air and other things while on the dash is a small wheel to be turned to enable free wheeling down hill. It seemed to me that it was all beyond him. He seemed to drive it very little

He opened my eyes to a lot of things.

Once he asked me what I had read recently. I told him *Room at the Top*. This was angry young man time, though I didn't know what the phrase meant. (I soon learned and was flattered, 2 years later, when a *TLS* reviewer called me, archly, I think, "an angry young man . . . though it's not quite clear what he is angry about." A teacher at my old school, trying to characterize the *Look Back in Anger* approach said all you had to do was for a character to say "you've got a face like a lavatory seat" and your play was a success. Trying to be trendy I had just read *Room at the Top*, and when I got off the train at Oxted Railway Station, 17 years old, I was Joe Lampton, walking along the road like the photo on the Penguin book, but bemused; lost, with none of his confidence and with a thin cardboard suitcase, five times bigger than Joes's. (I walked the 3 miles to the school from the station carrying my suitcase because I was too shy to take a taxi, or even to ask directions -- as I look at the Google map, now, I see I followed two sides of a very big triangle on a very very hot afternoon in January, and me sweating.)

At this time I had never taken a taxi or a train journey alone, eaten a meal or even a coffee by myself, and didn't know how a pay phone worked -- even though we had no phone at home. I was away from working class parents for the first time, entering a world that was superior and rich.

Scannell told me, quite matter-of-factly, as one man to another, that he knew John Braine --and he dismissed him. This was a new universe. How could such a writer known to all my forward-looking friends be dismissed? But Braine was, and very quietly too. And I was happy to hear the views of my friends whom I had lagged behind being overthrown by a poet who wrote for important magazines. Braine really wanted to be the chap at the centre, he said. The life he satirized was the sort of life he actually wanted. Scannell mocked him, mentioning Alice telling Joe Lampton, "I want you to see me doing everything." I remembered reading that line and wasn't sure what it meant. Scannell laughed saying she meant leaving the door of the lavatory open for him to see her. No woman would ever say that, he said. But that was what Braine wanted women to say to him. And then he explained that like Alice, real women talcumed their underneaths before they went out on a date anticipating being touched there. I didn't believe it. It sounded too much like the sort of story clever young men invent.



His views on George Orwell were similarly outrageous. I introduced George Orwell to show I knew about such things, and here was Scannell, pointing out Orwell wasn't a novelist. His famous books were satires but he couldn't create characters. I thought he's only written *1989* and *Animal Farm*, and was proud to have read them. "None of his writing has a real character." I'd never thought of that. I'd never thought there could be faults in writers we were expected to read. All of this is so commonplace now but it made me feel glad to be inducted into this special world where people read feely and had ideas of their own.

In the course of a discussion he told me he could see nothing in photography. There didn't seem to be anything special about taking a photograph of something that was just there. He confirmed me in my conservatism. I was glad that my friends, who had seemed at the centre of all culture, were wrong.

He upset my solid foundations.

One day he came in with a letter from the BBC. They had accepted some of his poems. He wasn't bragging, though. He was secure in his confidence. He'd just brought it in to show us how poorly the letter was written and spelt. He wasn't scornful or indignant. It was just how things were. I was horrified. The BBC had always been the centre of civilisation in my mind and home, and at school we'd been told we would never get jobs if we made mistakes with spelling. But here was a short, illiterate letter. How could the typist have got a job and with the BBC too? We all lamented, and I wondered how such a thing could happen. Oh, the BBC pays very poorly, he explained, so it hires girls who can't write, with no idea how to type, who have been poorly educated at small private schools, and who don't need the money. They just want the prestige of working for such a company, and the BBC doesn't care how well they write and type.

Another time the little staff room were discussing stories from the Bible. Again views I'd never heard before. They're so ridiculous and unbelievable, he said. No one could ever get away with stories like that now. And he told us, or was it just me – he certainly wasn't holding forth – of a friend who had never read the Bible, meeting it for the first time at a friend's house where he was staying. He walked downstairs in the morning with the book in his hand laughing loudly – said Scannell. He also told me of a friend who had been invited to a nudist colony and was too bashful to take his clothes off. When dinner was announced he had plucked up courage to dine naked, only to find the assembled eaters dressed in tidy clothes. I don't believe that one now. But the story of the Bible reader stuck, even though I thought it very dangerous to take God's word so lightly.

I also couldn't believe it when the stand up staff room discussion discussed the lack of rain and the need for some voodoo. He suggested throwing a used sanitary towel to the rain gods. I think he might have been trying to shake up the unimaginative teachers (all men with unknown backgrounds). I thought it sounded too obvious, and what only dirty little boys said. I couldn't and still can't believe this thoughtful, imaginative man would make a joke like that.

A Lesson in Etiquette

One teacher, a former rugby Middlesex full back, the pupils told me, and conservative agent (whatever that was) who lodged with Chippy (the caretaker, and his wife), couldn't follow the plays on television. This was when plays started to have endings that were not neatly tied-up and unambiguous, so Chippy's wife and daughter irritatedly had to tell him what was happening when he constantly interrupted the plays with the need for explanations. This was a man who firmly believed that even the poorest people in England had cars and were well off. I forget his evidence but I couldn't convince him with mine of the existence of poor people in England who did not have cars, who did not live in houses of their own. (A similarly insulated teacher at the school, an Air Commodore, a few years earlier had called "spastics" "plastics.")

Ill informed and unimaginative as he was, he did show some ingenuity and tact in getting me to hold my working-class knife the right way.



His treatment of my weakness was so much better than sending me the *Gentlemen's Book of Dining Etiquette* anonymously.

At lunch he sat at one end of the long table and I at the other. Down each side was a row of boys. At one lunch he got up to and walked along the length of the table to explain to me that some boys had poor table manners and held their knives – he tried to imitate it but couldn't manage it --. He asked me to help him deal with the problem by showing me the right way. Ever since I've been very conscious of the right way, but it seems, when I return to England from Canada that people hold their cutlery however they please. But rather as with people who say "different from" I feel a special kinship with people who hold their knives as that curious man taught me.

In the staff room he would engage Mr Scannell on literary matters, calling him Scannell but also using deference—"well it's very easy to confuse the two" adding deferentially, "isn't it?" He said once when talking about two poets with similar names but very different styles. "Yes," said Scannell. I couldn't see any similarity. Later he told me that P . . . was a fool, that to confuse the two because they had similar names was ridiculous. I had no notion that Mr Scannell made judgements on anyone.

Scannell the Sportsman –

rugby

Once when P . . . was talking of the manly game of rugby Mr Scannell introduced the notion that rugby players had homosexual tendencies. (He must have known how shocking he was being, but he was very quiet and persistent -- I never heard him say anything that wasn't firm but unassertive.) Just look at all that physical closeness and touching he pointed out. I was shocked. I'd never even thought of such a thing. P . . . was offended. Mr Scannell just left it alone.

boxing

About boxing he also had a different view from the received one. He had been an accomplished amateur boxer and must have been working on his novel about it at the time. Every now and again the school had an internal boxing tournament, taking advantage of VS's renown and, I suppose, hoping to make real men out of the seven year old boys. VS was in charge, I think, because he was asked to be in charge – he was always very compliant. He was referee and I was one of the judges. He gave us rules for scoring and told me he had no belief that what they learned in boxing had any effect on building character. All the boys learned to do was hit each other and, when they were hit – and the losers were hit many many humiliating times ,usually unsuccessfully, try not to cry.

In the language of educational psychology, there was no transfer. The little boys bashed each other in a small ring, usually in the face, making them red and blotchy, some of them crying helplessly as they were punched continually in the face. He stopped a few of the fights when a child was so weak with crying that he couldn't respond. Simon Jenkins says VS asked to teach boxing out of a sense of its nobleness. I got the impression that he was doing it because he was asked to, saw nothing noble in boxing foe little boys, and he didn't want to rock the boat.

swimming



Vernon Scannell (right) judging Hazelwood Swimming (Snapshot: Barry Fox)



Snapshot by Barry Fox

Vernon Scannell (extreme right) pulled his weight. Here he, with teachers and matrons, watch, perhaps judge, a diving competition. (Hazelwood, 1960). For a five shilling bet, one evening, the matron next but one to Scannell swam the length of this pool fully clothed.

Sports Day

When sports day came, parents arrived in their Karmann Ghias.



Karmann Ghia

Vernon Scannell arrived with all the other teachers, accepting everything he had to do. No scorn, no sense of dumb insolence. He was on duty and he pulled his weight. No sense that this was “the underbelly of education.” I looked forward to seeing this athlete, boozier, poet, rumoured lover of many, object of the infatuation of all the young women in the area, take charge, show what a real man would do at such an archetypal upper-middle-class event. But no. I didn’t see him organizing everything, or even anything.



Vernon Scannell on Sports Day, Hazelwood School, Limpsfield, 1960

snapshot by Barry Fox

I found him at the high jump at one point in the afternoon where he seemed quite lost. In this snapshot he comes to realise something is odd, but what? He had in fact been raising the bar in one inch intervals, his colleague in half inch intervals. His colleague, Cowey, has just noticed and is about to cross to Scannell to confer. Vernon Scannell is still reflecting.

Later

I saw him once more, when he came to Sheffield University to read his poetry to Stan Collier 's adult class in something. (I notice on Google that there is "a collection of poetry from the Leeds University student magazine *The Gryphon* by Stan Collier, Storm Jameson, Herbert Read, Vernon Scannell") .He nodded to me when he came in. He read his poetry. And I, because I knew him and was now a first year undergraduate, asked a question. "Why do you write poetry about such small matters when there are such big problems in the world?" What a stupid question. I still cringe. Why didn't I remember what he'd said in the staffroom at Hazelwood. Why did I find it necessary t ask a question. Sighs of knowingness rose from the middle aged women in the audience. What a fool they thought. Vernon Scannell explained politely that he wasn't in charge of what he wrote. He wrote what came to him. The access to a new world he provided me at Hazelwood closed. I left quickly and ashamed.

I meant to email him years later telling him how my Canadian university students had enjoyed his "Cows in Red Pasture." But I never did.

For Simon Jenkins's experiences of Vernon Scannell, from a pupil's point of view, see www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2007/nov/23/comment.poetry Simon Jenkins