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James at Harrow

For those who only encountered James in his late plenitude at Oxford, the willowy, raven-haired young man, with extravagant gestures and near-permanent expression of startled enquiry who arrived at Harrow School as the youngest member of staff in September 1966 might come as a bit of a surprise. Yet the exactly thirty years James spent at Harrow formed him as a teacher, mentor, writer and classics advocate. While ever alert to the inherent and particular absurdities of public school life, James always insisted he had enormously enjoyed at least the first 20 or so of his Harrow years during which he combined intense parochial involvement in the school's academic and social community with an unwavering appreciation of wider perspectives in learning, literature, art, music and drama.

The Harrow School that James joined was predictably hidebound and stuffy, yet at the same time oddly ramshackle, decentralised, still with echoes of John Betjemen's admiring description of inter-war Harrow as 'rich and slack', very different – as James was fond of pointing out – from the effortful manicured regimens of today. There was space for diversity, initiative and even risk, latitude of which James took full advantage. Hired to teach English and classics, the two elements of his Cambridge degree, he represented a new generation: he possessed a teaching qualification; belonged to a union; and, much to his amusement, was only the second English teacher at Harrow ever to have any sort of English degree. As he readily admitted, he was fortunate to arrive when he did, to join a small circle of younger masters whose enthusiasms avoided the hearty, whose approach to teaching eschewed traditional distance and formality, and who provided James with the encouragement and example to forge his own unmistakable style, one based on accessibility,

enjoyment of education as a collaborative enterprise, and a generous understanding that, where possible, pupils should not be dragooned but treated as individuals. Unlike many pedagogues, James genuinely liked people, even some of his pupils.

James soon became indispensable to the cultural life of the school. Always a doer not just a talker (although obviously he was that too), his contributions were legion. In only his second year he started to run the weekly school newspaper, a transforming introduction to how the school operated and to a wide range of bright pupils. He rapidly became a much-sought after, indefatigable director of plays, anything from Peter Shaffer's *Black Comedy* to *Macbeth*. He produced operas, ran an Opera Society and played a key role in the creation of a school theatre. Few teachers took more theatre trips. An inveterate performer off-stage, he frequently trod the boards himself, from Shakespeare to charity 'Fifties' Nights' (James as a brylcreemed teddy boy is just one lasting image). As school librarian he protected a functioning central library, supervised the creation of a professional Archives Room and helped commission a new school history. He presided over the creation of a gallery for the school's treasures. On committees, as elsewhere, James would weaponise flattery, covering his steely purposes with disarming lightness of touch: by contrast, in private his opinions remained typically robust. His reward, if that is what it can be called, was membership in his final Harrow years of the school's Senior Management Team, a source, in his telling, of a very Morwoodian combination of hierarchical pleasure and low farce.

However, institutional baubles were not James's Harrow legacy. Effortlessly riding his two academic horses, by the early 1970s he was effectively the number two in the English department, a profound engagement with teaching English literature he maintained long after he succeeded as Head of Classics. He had already begun to produce classics textbooks, thanks to Maurice Balme, and had started his life-long association with the JACT summer school. But only after his appointment as Head of Classics in 1979 did James fully enter his kingdom. His leadership was meticulous but

collegial. Learning was serious but not po-faced, shared as much as imposed. While insisting on rigorous linguistic skill with his Classical Sixth, he opened up the classical inheritance by offering Ancient History to non-linguists, introducing Classical Civilisation and leading innumerable long-remembered tours to Greece, Rome and Turkey. Deeply opposed to traditional Classicists' narrow elitism that he saw leading only to academic suicide, his wider commitment to the survival of the subject, what he called the 'cause', stemmed from his own enduring excitement with the classical world, a passion he conveyed in lessons laced with insight, wit, humour and only the occasional tantrum.

James at Harrow was a figure of contrasts. Dedicated yet effervescent, his easy sociability belied a fierce work ethic and an often intense expenditure of nervous energy. He gave himself unstintingly to his pupils, his tutorial evenings famous for their spice of Virgil or Puccini, wine and, of course, gossip. His lynx-eyed self-knowledge embraced a measured confidence in what he could and could not do. His academic ambition, like his teaching, reached beyond the confines of school. Thus, after directing Sheridan he wrote a book about him and through teaching classical languages he began his main publishing career. Few school teachers possessed such determination, imagination or stamina. While often of an evening 'lit up', to use a Jamesian euphemism, the dawn would habitually discover him doggedly marking essays, correcting unseens or proses, checking proofs or devising rescue stratagems for divisions whose teacher had taught the wrong exam syllabus. Whatever the burden, by the time he had to teach, he would be parading the school in full sail, eyes sometimes fierce with ersatz rage at the dereliction of his charges but more often twinkling at the human comedy, bursting to share what he called 'the latest'. Compulsively gregarious, in his 30 years at Harrow, James made remarkably few enemies – and almost none that mattered or who couldn't be disarmed with a chat, a wave or a glass. More importantly, he cultivated a great and diverse company of friends, of

colleagues he entertained, of pupils he inspired. All he enriched. James was an unusual school teacher and a great one.

CJT