

# A British Teacher in America

Alan Jones

Having already been to the U.S. on a six-week Greyhound tour in 1972, and since watching enthralled Alistair Cooke's "America" on television, I was eager to come back again and spend more time in the U.S.

My exchange post was at Lake Forest High School, just north of Chicago. It is a rural suburb, bordered by urbanized Highland Park and North Chicago, enveloped by towering elms much prized by the community—a community of wealthy commuters and socially active wives.

I was to teach introductory biology to freshmen and sophomores, an age group with which I was not familiar. The two other Biology I teachers, I soon learned, adopted radically different methods of teaching. So I settled down into teaching the way I normally taught in England, and ran up against immediate difficulties. The students were not used to my teaching methods, nor, I think, my higher standards associated with more mature students—although the subject level was the same.

The first few weeks saw hostile students and parents, and I quickly became aware of a very different attitude to schooling. Here the parents, at least in this community, were actively involved in their children's progress, and if it was not satisfactory, fault was ascribed either to student or teacher.

The students themselves, even on a day-to-day basis, were extremely grade conscious—urged on, I suspect, by parents. "What's my grade today?"—as if it had changed from the day before! Another comment I found strange was, "What are we doing today?" or "Are we doing anything today?"—as if today at last we might be doing something interesting! Also, working in compulsory education for the first time, I was at a loss as to how to deal with students who made no attempt to disguise their contempt for schooling. I found the need to be a disciplinarian as well as a "giver of information" difficult to adjust to.



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Generally, I found the students socially mature and quite sophisticated, yet at the same time academically less advanced than students of the same age in the U.K. The affluence of the area must be in part responsible for this, although I think it is fair to say that American students seem to be "into" more things than British students.

I also felt that the students here had a lower level of respect for me as a teacher than I experience in the U.K. One thing that saddened me was that I was rarely considered a British biology teacher, but only a biology teacher. The cultural side of the exchange was only infrequently tapped by my students. I did, however, have the opportunity to speak to other groups in the school—once on British government and another time on British accents and dialects.

The staff, on the other hand, was very interested in the fact that I was British. Several of them had been to England and had some English ancestry, and it was clear that some of them had a special place in their hearts for Britain. The first few months were hectic socially, and we were constantly invited out to meals at lively homes. On my previous trip, I had been greatly impressed with the warmth and generosity of Americans and these early months confirmed this. With the money I earned helping coach soccer we flew to San Diego at Christmas, and I was amazed and deeply touched when I was presented with a sizeable contribution from the staff to help us finance our trip.

Of the school itself, there are many good things to say. I was impressed with the audiovisual facilities, there being video carrels with color monitors into which I could schedule groups to see some of the large collection of tapes the school had. I was also impressed with the variety and depth of courses on the curriculum. In an automobile society, driver education makes great sense and should be made compulsory in English schools. The size and range of the athletics program was also impressive.

At the end of the first semester I gave a questionnaire to all my students in order to obtain their impressions on having a foreign exchange teacher. The results were fascinating and generally favorable. A full 80% of the students thought the exchange of teachers from one country to another was a good idea and most had enjoyed the experience. Comments were mixed. Some thought "we've got good enough teachers here already," while others thought my accent was "really neat." However, some said the accent had given them a little difficulty. "You're teaching us to pronounce the words all wrong," and others, "Biology is boring, but with the weird accent, you have perked it up some."

cation Act in 1870 and the rapid growth of secondary schools after World War I that education became generally available to the working class.

With increased demand for higher education, a system of testing was introduced in 1944 for children of 11 or 12. Those passing these "11-plus" exams were placed in grammar schools and destined primarily for university training. Those who failed went to secondary modern schools, where the emphasis was placed on practical and vocational courses.

In some areas of the country strong objections were raised that this selection process perpetuated class distinction: middle-class children would, because of their environment, do well on the examinations; and working-class children would not have an equal chance at university. The secondary modern schools, it was claimed, would become primarily working class.

As a result of negative responses to the 11-plus, some school districts established comprehensive schools, which theoretically cater to the needs of all students. Comprehensive schools are similar to U.S. high schools. The idea of the comprehensive schools

has gained in strength and is now a main issue in British education.

While I was in England, the government (Labor) instituted changes aimed at forcing all schools receiving state monies to become comprehensive schools. Naturally, the grammar schools (whose histories, in some cases, reach back hundreds of years) and parents who believe in selective schools and look at comprehensives as mainly working-class schools are offering strong resistance. I found being an attentive observer on the sidelines rather than a participant in the center of educational controversy a unique and comfortable experience.

## *An Unforgettable Experience*

The year in England was an unforgettable experience for my family as well as for me. My 10-year-old son had a kind but very firm teacher who helped him improve his reading. My two teenage daughters attended a strict grammar school where even the color of their

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