

MACHINERY MADNESS MAGIC

BY NICHOLAS SAMPSON



I have learnt a great deal from exemplary headmasters. One said that ‘three things matter in schools: machinery, machinery and machinery.’ He meant, of course, that efficiency and strong systems promote fairness, good order and shared experience. Another said, equally powerfully, that ‘we must have more madness’, meaning that the machine alone is not enough, that great schools make space for difference, eccentricity, creativity. Machinery and madness need to be in balance and form a dynamic equilibrium if a school is to fulfil its potential. And there is a third ‘M’, magic, by which I mean the distinctive genius of a place, which is recognisable but hard to explain, consistent but often undervalued. Cranbrook possesses an attractive mixture of madness, machinery and magic which must be cherished and upheld.

THE EXTRAORDINARY EVENTS of the past two years have catapulted schools, usually taken for granted, to unaccustomed prominence in public discussion. What happens to society when schools cannot function? Closures triggered by lockdowns have prompted consideration of the value of schooling – and of the possibilities and problems offered by technological solutions and online delivery. Unusual demands have been made of teachers – and of families. Important questions, avoided for too long due to their scale and complexity, regarding the purpose and future of schooling have been articulated, if not answered. The opportunity for careful reassessment of the ways in which the educational establishment operates must be grasped.

We have identified new methods of working. The brilliant advances forged by the continuing technological revolution have enabled us to sustain academic progression throughout the challenges imposed by isolation. Some matters of school business, such as parent-teacher consultations and year-specific curricular briefings, have been strengthened by technology and this new format will be retained, easing the lives of families and educators. Teachers and students have acquired and honed new, important and valuable skills. The machine can adapt.

We have, however, missed the cultural, communal and inter-personal elements of traditional school life: the implicit value of these humane, character-building aspects has received renewed appreciation. The craft of the great classroom teacher, which includes the skill to read the mood of the class and critical moments for individual students, as well as the capacity to ringmaster exploratory and developmental conversations, has only been partly served by distance learning: indeed, the value of face-to-face learning has been made apparent. The madness is deeply humane.

The case for the ‘de-schooled society’, and a move away from orthodox, and at times over-traditional, educational delivery, has, then, been weakened. This should not, however, encourage complacency amongst educators. Great schools never stand still.

TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCES have promoted the capacity to make unexpected connection, to surf from subject to subject, and this skill is expansive, exhilarating and enriching. It must, however, be complemented by the ability to test ideas, to research deeply, to avoid being dazzled by the shallows. We see real dangers from the weakening of the drive to search for truth which has been the mainspring of humane development. We need our students

to acquire a love of both ‘surfing’ and ‘diving’ so that their intellectual curiosity is strengthened and deepened. Great schools, in my experience, are as independent as they can be and as self-critical as they can be. Both of these qualities are difficult to attain, but they must be sought and prized. The grasp of centralised control – of the curriculum, of assessment, of university entry – militates against independence and erodes a school’s capacity to trust its teachers. Cranbrook looks to the IB in order to provide its staff with a set of intellectual and moral possibilities and to move the needle back towards the traditions underpinning our liberal philosophy.

WE MUST ALSO ACCEPT the challenges issued to us on the moral front in a world where our students face confused and mixed messages about the right use of power or what constitutes ethical or unethical human behaviour. The online consent petition revealed distressing detail of hurtful, harmful and inhumane behaviour. We need to continue to respond, identifying further opportunities to promote the capacity to form respectful relationships and to stand, and speak up, for what is right. Current Cranbrookians will spend their careers in environments which will require them to work with, and for, women. Archaic versions of masculinity will no longer serve. We know we must develop both gentleness and strength within our student body and will continue to take active steps to do so.

At Cranbrook, we believe that we uphold a distinctive and unusual educational philosophy. We seek to avoid the perils of stereotyping and we aim to make space for the recognition, and endorsement, of individuality, curiosity, intellectual courage and, in MacNeice’s great phrase, ‘the integrity of differences’. There is a freedom at the heart of Cranbrook’s ethos, practice and vision – but this freedom must not be mistaken for a licence to be self-centred or indulgent. It must, instead, be balanced and buttressed by rigour, by the capacity to dig deep, to try new things, to test ideas, prejudices and assumptions and to cherish the search for truth. A great liberal education requires a dynamic equilibrium between discipline and liberty, between community and individuality, between self-discovery and self-discipline.

As we reflect, then, upon our tradition, our Anglican heritage and our defining philosophy, we are excited by the prospect of institutional change, growth and expansion so that current and future Cranbrookians can contribute to the betterment of society as they seek to discover and develop their own, distinctive talents. They will do so through the combination of professional machinery and healthy madness and by subscribing to the magic that has made this place welcoming, affirming and encouraging. ■