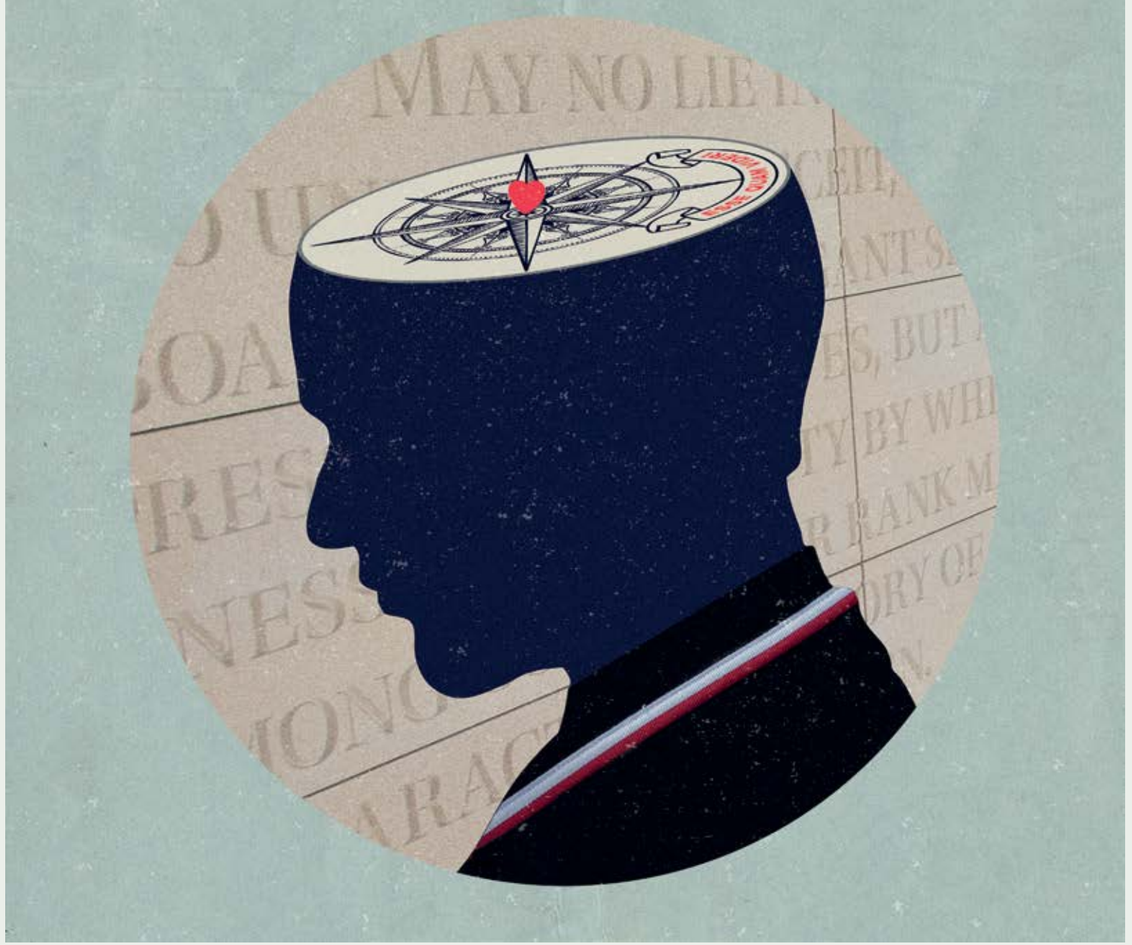
THE MEANING BEHIND OUR MOTTO

BY NICHOLAS SAMPSON

MINUTES FROM THE FIRST MEETING OF THE CRANBROOK SCHOOL COUNCIL ON 6 JUNE 1918, WRITTEN IN BLACK INK WITH A CAREFUL HAND, REVEAL A RECOMMENDATION FROM A SUB-COMMITTEE MADE UP OF THE HEADMASTER, REVEREND F.T "POLLY" PERKINS, ALONG WITH THE CHAIRMAN OF THE SCHOOL, AND THE HONORABLE SECRETARY: "THAT THE MOTTO OF THE SCHOOL SHOULD BE ESSE QUAM VIDERI."



OUR FIRST *CRANBROOKIAN* tells us that Perkins referred to the Motto on the first day of school: "Boys (were) urged to make an honest attempt to live up to it. (They) were reminded that wherever they went they carried in their keeping the good name of the School, and that in order to keep it unsullied they must behave well, not only when they knew that they were under observation, but also when they thought themselves unobserved."

Perkins also urged a faithfulness to the School Motto in the foreword to the first *Cranbrookian*. "May this expression of our character always reveal us loyal to the highest and best of traditions," he wrote, "in heart and spirit faithful to our School motto, "Esse Quam Videri"; may no lie in word or deed, no underhand deceit, no sham, no idle boasting, no arrogant self-praise find expression … but a love of truth, goodness and sincerity by which the humblest among us in age or rank may add to the character and glory of our School."

We should be thankful for the clarity and centrality of this message. As school life becomes ever more complex, the competing imperatives of measurement, competition, political pressure, economic scale, technological change, compensation for the diminution of other social agencies and the erosion of respect for institutions can obscure the heart of our mission: we must restate and return to the cultivation of wisdom and virtue as our mainspring. Above all, we are concerned with the pursuit of truth, excellence and integrity.

The phrase, "to be, not to seem to be," has a weighty philosophical history, weaving its way through a discussion of virtue in the writings of the ancient world. The phrase first appears in the work of Aeschylus, one of Athens's great dramatists. In *Seven Against Thebes*, the warrior Amphiaraus is described as a "most sound-minded man"; one who resists the battle-frenzy of his fellow citizens. In contrast to the shields of other warriors, Amphiaraus' simple bronze shield boasts no swaggering signs or symbols, "for he does not wish to seem, but to be the best as he harvests his mind's deep furrows, from which his careful resolutions emerge."

Plato in *The Republic* borrows the phrase from Aeschylus in a dialogue exploring the concept of justice and fulfilment. The perfectly just person would be "a simple and high-born man, who, to quote Aeschylus, does not wish to seem but to be good." Again, in Plato's *Gorgias*, Socrates insists, "that above all things a man should take care not to seem to be but to be good in private and in public … and that all flattery with regard to both oneself and to others, to few or to many, must be fled." For Plato wellbeing, or fulfilment (eudaimonia) is the highest aim of moral thought and conduct, and the virtues are the dispositions and skills needed to attain it. It is critical to "know yourself" and the first and best victory is to conquer self. Virtue is itself the good life.

We next find the phrase in the works of the Roman lawyer, scholar, philosopher and statesman Marcus Tullius Cicero, in his famous essay, *De Amicitia*, where he writes about true friendship. In this context, Cicero emphasises that a true friend does not have a reputation for virtue but is virtuous: "For many wish not so much to be as to seem to be, endowed with real virtue." Like Plato, Cicero explores what it is to be truly virtuous, resisting fakery, falseness or flattery. He argues that integrity is essential, for "hypocrisy pollutes truth and destroys sincerity."

Finally, the Roman historian Sallust references the phrase in his history of the *War with Catiline*, contrasting the grand 'look at me' gestures of Caesar with the virtues of Cato the Younger. Cato is portrayed as moderate, restrained, and full of integrity. Sallust writes that Cato "preferred to be good rather than to seem to be good; hence the less he sought fame, the more it pursued him."

Up until the Renaissance, these classical conversations about the virtuous life, using examples of the lives of virtuous rulers from the classical world, influenced humanist scholars and helped rulers to govern well. Academic Nick Spencer believes there was one clear assumption: "Virtuous rulers—generous, compassionate, merciful rulers—won."

It was Niccolo Machiavelli who articulated a different view in the sixteenth century. Born into a tumultuous era in his native Italy, he had spent a lifetime observing the business of ruling, noting in particular the tenuous link between virtue and success. "I could give you an infinite number of examples from modern times, and show you numerous peace treaties and promises that have been broken and made completely empty by the faithlessness of princes: these knew well how to use the ways of the fox, and they are the ones who succeed," he writes in *The Prince*.

MACHIAVELLI UPENDS OUR MOTTO into "Videri Quam Esse": to seem, rather than to be. He argues that a ruler doesn't need to have virtuous qualities: "but it is necessary that he (sic) appear to have them." In order to "win over the affection of the common people" Machiavelli advises that a ruler should act in such a way as to give an *impression* of greatness, spirit, seriousness and strength. While it's good to *appear* to be "pious, faithful, humane, honest, and religious" a ruler needs to remember that when the need arises "you can and will change into the opposite."

The tension between the idealism of Plato and Cicero and the pragmatic realpolitik of Machiavelli is evident throughout modern history. We are accustomed to the art of spin and declarations of false news. Yet as a school we must rise to the challenge of equipping rising generations of citizens with the skills and moral compasses to distinguish between personal promotion and the pursuit of the greater good. For us, our motto and its history throw down a challenge: are we concerned with the creation of a profitable impression or with the pursuit of wholeness and truth? As human beings, do we choose to champion justice, morality and authority or bow to the temptations of force, strength and power? Do we spend our lives and talents building the land of might or right? Mr Perkins' answer is clear, and his injunction is ever more relevant. ■

DR BRUCE CARTER, HEADMASTER (1985- 2000)

I know of no school where the students are so aware of the presence of its motto and of its significance well beyond their time at school. A Cranbrook boy (as with girls in the future) takes our motto seriously and personally as a mark that indicates what is genuinely special about being a member of the Cranbrook community and hence society.

The motto is included in the School Song. It will be referred to in assemblies. Every boy can quote it and translate. It is significant that time and time again obituaries will conclude with 'esse quam videri' as a reflection of a life well lived.

The School can be proud.

JEREMY MADIN, HEADMASTER (2001-2012)

In practical terms 'to be rather than to seem' is manifested in doing something worthwhile, not taking credit by talk or half-hearted involvement. Not seeking public acclamation.

Several years ago a classic example of Cranbrook boys living the motto was the remarkable response to Mrs Edwina Parsons' call for volunteers to turn up in formal uniform at 6am one Sunday morning to help the organisers of Breast Cancer Awareness Week. Their job was to set up thousands of metal silhouettes in the Domain, white ones in memory of the many women lost to that insidious disease in the year just past, a host of pink ones making a powerful statement about so many who were diagnosed but who survived, and a small but significant group of blue ones that – to the boys' surprise – indicated men who also battled with breast cancer.

So many boys responded to the call that numbers had to be limited. And the job was done in a fraction of the time expected by the grateful organisers. While they were working I asked the boys why they turned up. 'It's for our mums' said one. Another piped up 'And our sisters'.

Esse Quam Videri.