

## **'Cookie – a Schoolmaster's life'**

*Mark Robinson*

***'Today we have writing reports. Yesterday  
We had peer mentoring and tomorrow  
We shall have health and safety. But today,  
Today we have writing reports. On the back of the door  
Hangs the dusty gown with its patina of chalk dust  
And today we have writing reports.'***

*(with apologies to Henry Reed - 'Naming of Parts', 1942)*

Renaissance Prince, poet, scholar, distinguished historian, saw-doctor, quintessential Englishman and more significantly perhaps, the very best of friends and colleagues, the inimitable Mr Cooke. Oh, Frank (as they called him in the early days, after Frank Spencer from 'Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em'). How sorely you will be missed... and by so many...

Some ten days before he died, Michael called me from his hospital bed to discuss the fine detail of this funeral service. He was very matter of fact to begin with. J.S. Bach was to be played at the beginning, middle and end of proceedings, 'with a light sprinkling of Purcell, perhaps?' John Hutchings or John Le Grove should play the organ ('both very brilliant'), so 'it would be good to give those Tamar pipes one last blast!' The College Chaplain, Rev B+, was to be 'very much the top chap' amongst the officiating clergy. Things were to be 'done properly', as Michael's mother would have thought fitting, and I was to give the eulogy, albeit from a peculiarly Framlocentric perspective.

Michael J. Cooke arrived at Framlingham College in 1974. He 'came to teach History but brought with him another talent', writes Bob Gillett in The Second Sixty Years, 'a self-effacing cellist and pianist, he shared his gift of music as teacher and accompanist'. It soon became apparent, however, that he was also equally willing and able to share his love of literature, poetry and language – French, German, Latin and even a little Greek, as well as his sporting *savoir faire*. And, up to his official retirement some forty-three years later, this Man For All Seasons continued to inspire both in and out of the classroom; his sparkling wit, erudition and unswerving commitment to the cause seemingly undiminished by the passage of time... so much so, in fact, that he was still teaching Latin part-time at the College only last term!

***'Please find attached the deadlines for grades and reports  
For the spring term's first half – as Suzie said,  
All the grade templates are now available  
Available on e-portal – gloomy portal  
Except when Suzie's available in the spring  
And the temps are not late or attached.'***

During those many years of distinguished service, Michael delighted and flourished amidst the hurly burly of College life: a heady mix of the weird, the wonderful and something straight out of Evelyn Waugh's Decline and Fall! Cookie survived run-ins with 'King RIM' in genuinely smoke-filled rooms and steely glares from Common Room colossus, Norman Borrett. He caroused with Carruthers and the ghost of

Squiffy Thomas, quite literally bouncing down the main corridor walls to his Stradbroke bed-sit. He witnessed the end of ‘shacking’ and the introduction of girls in 1976; weathered the storms of ‘87 which blew off the top of the Chapel spire and felled a fir tree across his beloved Morris Traveller. He sung ‘Hallelujah, Mr Suter’ with Marcus Booth and those Ziegele Boys, and on one very special occasion even dug out his creamy-white flannels to play Common Room Cricket, taking a wicket first ball with his peculiar brand of leg-spin, having not turned his arm over for a decade or more. Batsman beaten in the flight; stumped by Doctor Baird... off a wide!

*‘Usual procedures apply: you must write your reports  
Into Word first, then copy and paste; do not  
Whatever you do, do not put a line between  
Your paragraphs – some colleagues are still, so please  
Please, Suzie, whatever you do; remember,  
Usual procedures apply.’*

Michael never courted promotion or prominence, but on occasion greatness was thrust upon him. He was taught by Monty Python’s John Cleese at Prep School and went on to Wrekin College with his brothers, Richard and Martin. In his final year there he was made Head of School and was awarded the Founder's Prize, the Hunter Music Prize and the Governors Silver Medal. After graduating from Selwyn College, Cambridge, like a fish out of water, this quintessential Englishman travelled to Italy, where he taught English for six months in Salerno, and, in an uncharacteristic moment of ‘daring-do’, he even tried out the local pizza – which he quickly discovered, like all foreign foods, he absolutely hated! Thereafter, having run out of Marmite and Earl Grey, Michael gratefully returned to ‘Blighty’ to get a proper job. Here, as a fresh-faced schoolmaster at Framlingham College, our international ‘man of mystery’ became an instant hit. ‘Frank’, as he became affectionately known, was soon cajoled into becoming editor of a student-led College equivalent of Private Eye, wittily named, *Framboise*... or ‘Fram boys’. While the occasionally anti-establishment tone of this worthy publication no doubt enhanced his credibility with the students, however, it didn’t always do much for his popularity with Senior Management. Indeed, on one occasion the content was deemed so contentious that an entire edition’s worth of copies had to be hunted down and destroyed!

But our ‘Phantom Raspberry Blower’ always did like to sail close to the wind and had started how he meant to go on – ‘building a career’ in any conventional sense simply wasn’t in his DNA. Under the Headmastership of J.F.X. Miller, we campaigned to get him elected President of Common Room as a joke, but once in office, as hard as he might try, he could not get rid of the role. Ultimately, he was banned from public speaking by James’ successor, Gwen Randall, and stood down by his campaign manager for his own safety! You see, once you put Michael in the spotlight, there really was no end to the amount of damage that rapier wit might do.

*‘Then there’s the character count – any problems there  
Get back to either Suzie or myself  
As Head of ICT – but I have left  
Lines between stanzas, tried to shape a phrase  
Followed the line beyond the template’s reach,  
For today I am writing reports.’*

From a personal perspective, from the moment I arrived at Framlingham College in 1990, it was Michael who set the benchmark for good 'School-mastering'. For 'School-mastering' was his vocation and principal *raison d'être*. He whole-heartedly believed that students should be encouraged to re-discover in each generation the truth set out by Plato and Quintilian, that pleasure should lead them on into further education, and the relationship between tutor and pupil should be at the very heart of this journey.

Michael was profoundly interested in History and fortunately for me, he was genuinely interested in anyone who was similarly inclined. So, we would tour Suffolk's exquisite local parish churches with young historians after school, run our own gratuitously pretentious History Society – sometimes featuring ambitious student and staff talent (usually involving wilfully provocative alliterative titles), and more occasionally starring the most eminent and distinguished intellectuals that Oxford and Cambridge had to offer. We would also travel to London History Conferences in the name of scholarship, and more improbably, on one memorable occasion, to Culford, to listen to a lecture by Doctor Christopher Harper-Bill on the English Reformation. We travelled with three Upper Sixth formers (Carruthers, Dolan & Marr) in the back of Cookie's dilapidated vintage Wolseley. This was always a hoot because, like its owner, it was idiosyncratic in the extreme. You couldn't have the headlights and windscreen wipers on at the same time and you had to press hard on the warped mahogany dashboard in order to get even a flicker out of the fuel gauge. Anyway, because we were running late for our 7.30pm lecture, Cookie ignored my suggestion that we dropped off to fill up at Haynings' on the way, assuring me that he had plenty more 'jungle juice' in a petrol can in the boot. We were all hugely amused, therefore, when I was shortly thereafter asked to empty the contents of that can before we'd even hit the Norwich Road... 'just in case'. Sadly, due to the delay, by the time we reached our destination the lecture had already started. So, not wishing to interrupt, we felt obliged to make a diplomatic retreat to a nearby hostelry for a 'swift consolation half' and a scholarly chat about what might have been discussed. (You could do such things in those days!)

By the time we headed for home, it was raining and pitch-black, which really didn't bode well, as it necessitated sparing, but meticulously co-ordinated use of the windscreen wipers. Moreover, to heighten the tension, Michael now started to discretely whisper serious concerns about just how much fuel we actually had left. (Remember, you couldn't get even a suggestion of a reading on the fuel gauge without applying due pressure to the mahogany dashboard... and you couldn't have the lights and windscreen wipers on at the same time... So, even if you did apply the requisite pressure, you still wouldn't be able to read what the fuel gauge said, as the panel lights weren't on, because the windscreen wipers were!). Anyway, having been on the A14 for about ten minutes, while ever so cautiously climbing a small hill... we began to lose momentum..., slowing and slowing still further before finally spluttering to a stand-still, right at the very summit. We had finally, run out of petrol! In a moment of panic, Anglo-Saxon expletives followed from the Cookie Monster's lips, with the rest of us in absolute hysterics...

What happened next seemed almost miraculous... as we effortlessly, freewheeled down the other side of the hill, as if floating on a cloud; the Wolseley steadily

gathering pace, before drifting into the most splendidly situated petrol station you have ever seen in your life! Never in doubt! Michael filled-up the old jalopy and returned us safely to College almost as if nothing had happened. One strongly suspects that with equal serenity, the Wolseley will have already ghosted through the Pearly Gates (No brakes required... Just as well!), Michael doffing his cap to Saint Peter, before parking up and nonchalantly taking his seat at a conveniently located piano next to his dear father, 'Tigger' Cooke ('everyone called him Tigger, even the Bishop!'), another fine musician and classicist, who had also been a schoolmaster before joining the clergy... a glass of something suitably unpretentious on the side... adorned by a band of beautiful angels and some of his favourite luminaries (Professor Sir Geoffrey Elton included, of course)... just in time for a little duet, perhaps? 'Eeyore and Tigger too', in perfect harmony – 'et Eeyore est Tigger'. Now there's an enduring image... made all the sweeter by the fact that Tigger Cooke ('round and bouncy'), actually taught Christopher Robin Milne! And Michael could be a little like Eeyore. Always expecting the worst – hence the ever-present umbrella (even in bright sunshine!). Indeed, even when planning his own funeral, for which he prescribed almost every detail, amidst all the positivity and appreciation, he couldn't stop himself from exploring the possibility that the entire event might degenerate into a complete and utter disaster: 'the clergy will probably muck it up... and Hutchings will piss about on the organ... probably to the tune of 'Shine Jesus Shine'... and Robbo's eulogy will be anything but 'brief'... 'Not many jokes!'

Having said that, Michael could always be relied upon to make the best of things, even in the most challenging of circumstances. He was always 'ill', if you asked him how he was, but he hardly ever missed a day of school in the thirty odd years we worked together. He was always there... immaculately turned out... clean shaven, white shirt, same green tie (donated by a swooning gaggle of student acolytes' way back when, no doubt!), same chalk-marked gown for formal occasions. Cookie made himself available for all eventualities: personal, spiritual, pastoral or academic... often at the drop of a hat. Nothing was ever too much trouble. And amidst all those professional courtesies and personal kindnesses, Michael invariably made it seem as though the recipients of his generosity were doing him a favour: the loan of books from his personal library; the concert trips to Snape; the historically themed silk ties and special bottles of claret for Robbo... 'probably corked, so you can always pour it down the sink, if it's no good!'

Considerate and unconditionally generous to the last, by the end of that phone call from the hospital, Michael was overcome with emotion, humbled by the love and affection expressed by so many well-wishers from all over the world. So moved, in fact, that he subsequently consented to the live streaming of this service: in characteristically selfless fashion, his love of tradition and hatred of modern technology giving way to heartfelt concern for the many dear friends who would otherwise have been unable to be with us today!

And so, in this pattern of timeless moments, while the sun shines on a spring afternoon, amidst the splendour of the ancient Howard and Hitcham Tombs, we have much to be thankful for!

***For Today we celebrate the life of mjc (in lower case).  
Principled, kind, generous and pure.***

*A man of distinction, elegance and grace.  
Scholar and Schoolmaster extraordinaire... Michael Cooke,  
Like the College he served with such selfless devotion ...  
Forever, 'On an eminence...'*