

The final chapter in *Leading from Example* is devoted to *Journey's End* by R C Sherriff. As Peter Villiers says:

"It is an extremely unlikely success story; and our admiration for the film leads us on to wish to know a little more about its author, and what he was setting out to achieve in setting his drama in a dug-out on the western front. Why does the story touch us so deeply still, and why is it of enduring value?"

The following paper contains Peter's reflections on Sherriff's play and what it has to tell us about Englishness, class, values and leadership.

## *Journey's End*: a reflection Peter Villiers

This is what I wrote for the secondary school of which I am a governor, following a recent discussion of what the government is attempting to promote as British values...

At a Governors Board on 6 February 2018, the subject of British values arose.

The government has attempted to define them, via Ofsted, and decreed that they be both respected and promoted in British schools. Why? The cynic is tempted to answer, as a means to preventing Islamic extremists from becoming governors in state schools. Here, I hope, is a broader view.

- What are British values?
- Who should define them?
- How, if at all, are they to be taught, promulgated, or otherwise promoted?

Firstly, an apparent digression.

100 years after the end of the Great War, another film has been made of the play *Journey's End*, by R C Sherriff.

It has received good reviews, partly, I suspect, because it is a good film, and partly because it reflects a certain prevailing anxiety about what it means to be British in the era of Brexit. (See also *Darkest Hour* and *Dunkirk*.)

It is a simple story, set largely in the dug-out of a trench while the next German attack is anticipated; and it concerns the beliefs and behaviour of an infantry company commander, Captain Stanhope, and his officers (all of whom have died by journey's end.)

There is no explicit discussion of values, nor any indication that the soldiers should be indoctrinated in them. Nevertheless, it is obvious, at least to this commentator, that this group of men has a very clear set of values in common, and practises them as best they can.

What are those values? I would suggest they include:

Courage, and a detestation of its opposite, cowardice;

Steadfastness;

Fairness;

Comradeship; and a touch of ironic humour.

Fair enough, you might say: these are stoic virtues, appropriate enough for a bogged down military conflict - and nothing to do with life now. Moreover, they are being put into practice in a deeply traditional society, in which values do not have to be spelt out; they are as instinctively shared as the common need for food, drink and shelter. That, with respect, is not my point. Firstly, these men are not puppets and there is genuine variety of outlook and opinion between them. (The company commander, Captain Stanhope, is described almost with admiration in the Guardian newspaper, of all places, as a self-loathing alcoholic. Nevertheless, he does his duty.) Secondly, there is in any case little or no abstract discussion of any kind, except perhaps on the persistence of hero-worship in schools: the next meal is far more interesting.

And so, what does this nostalgic diversion have to do with life now? Let us return to our original questions.

What are British values, and who should define them?

If I were a facetious essayist, I would say that any attempt to define British values is in itself self-defeating, since any such attempt is in itself in contradiction of our fundamental values. Famously, and unlike almost every other country in the world, and indeed the host of former colonies on whom we bequeathed the possibly doubtful advantages of the Speaker's wig and the Lord Chancellor's tights, we have no written constitution - and if we do not even define our constitution, how can we possibly identify the values upon which is based?

What, no written constitution? Indeed. Parliament makes numerous laws: but no act defines Parliament itself. Again, we have the common law - and what does the word common imply? That it emerged from the people themselves. We have the adversarial system of justice; trial by jury; volunteer magistrates; and a host of other creations which have emerged over time so gradually that one might almost think that they had always existed.

What values do they reflect? In the absence of a formal definition, or indeed the instrumentalist views of Ofsted and the like, we might search for the answer in popular culture - although whether such products reflect or create values is itself an open question.

I would suggest that popular culture, as it used to be portrayed, touched upon such values as a mild sort of humour; the importance of fair play; the need for taking one's turn, and the overwhelming importance of queuing; the general need for moderation in most areas, including respect for others' views; and the value of self-deprecation. In other words, what is exemplified in the writer George Orwell's stress of the importance of the fundamental value of basic human decency. (Orwell, is also reviewed in my book.) Did this view ever really reflect our society? And is it of the slightest relevance to-day, in what is certainly a multi-racial and arguably a multi-cultural society, in which

a large number of Britons do not share a common historical inheritance, so that even a ceremony of acquired citizenship has needed to be devised?

I would suggest that it does, and that at least some of the values which it embodies are common to all civilised societies, and are put into practice every day in Great Torrington School and other schools as a matter of course, because if those values did not obtain a sort of generalised respect, then those schools would find it impossible to function; and certainly find it impossible to help to shape the citizens of an effective society.

We may not always be able to specify those values, but we can easily state some, and certainly their opposite. Generosity is a virtue, and selfishness is not; but what young child is not automatically selfish? The child begins to learn other habits in the home, we hope, and certainly at primary school; to be continued, in a more sophisticated manner but based upon the same principle of do unto others as you would be done by, in its further education. Virtue, as Aristotle once said, is gained by practice so that it becomes a habit, and need not be analysed. Indeed, such a practice is unnecessary, and may even be unhelpful, except in the case of a moral dilemma where two or more virtues clash; and there the benefit of a liberal education, in the old-fashioned sense of the word, in which the child is encouraged to consider the consequences of its action for others, and to think for itself, not at the expense of emotion, but with the benefit of discursive consideration, is of abiding value. We may say that something is wrong, unethical, illegal, or in contradiction of official indoctrination by the state; but how much better if one child simply says to another: We don't do that here. And now, having exhausted both my thoughts and the goodwill of the reader, I shall return to my contemplation of the immortal Captain Stanhope.

### *Enduring values*

*Journey's End* appeals, I believe, because it presents a portrayal of the English as they would like to be. The officer who represents the values and behaviour of the ideal Englishman is Lieutenant Osborne, whose nickname, 'Uncle', gives the key both to his character and role. Osborne is the second in command of the infantry company, to whose commander he is intensely loyal. His task is to support its officer commanding both in his military duties and by providing emotional support. Osborne, at least for this viewer, is an immensely appealing character. He is older than the other officers, but still active. He is modest, patient, balanced and understanding; he knows himself, and has nothing to prove. We learn that before he volunteered for the war he was a schoolmaster in Hampshire, and had once played rugby for England. Unlike Stanhope, who dare not go home on leave to England and contents himself with the supposed delights of leave in Paris, Osborne is happily married. His patriotism is implicit rather than intrusive and he willingly admits that the football match that took place between the British and German troops at Christmas 1914 does rather indicate the stupidity of war.

### *Class*

From a sociologist's perspective, *Journey's End* might be seen as an analysis of the mores of the officer class which the British public school system had set out to develop, and how that class coped with the pressures of the Great War. The play is constructed from an insider's perspective and the public school system which has educated the main characters in this play is not so much approved as taken for granted. Stanhope, Osborne and Raleigh are all a product of the public school system, but it is Osborne, the older man (and school-master) who has the deeper understanding.

Osborne: *Small boys at school generally have their heroes.*

Stanhope: *Yes. Small boys at school do.*

Osborne: *Often it goes on as long as—*

Stanhope: *As long as the hero's a hero.*

Osborne: *It often goes on all through life.*  
(Act I)

This is not the whole discussion of hero-worship, which Uncle perceives as both natural and beneficial if not taken to excess; but the class system which has given the officers very much the same values, outlook and prejudices is taken for granted.

So should it be, for this is a 'real' play about 'real' people and not a sociological analysis. Moreover, a good play shows what people are like by what they do, rather than by what they say. Military service can give rise to the most extraordinary paradoxes; but the purpose of Journey's End is not to explore class attitudes to war, but to present a drama which has a universal aspect.

### **What does the play tell us about leadership?**

In our view, *Journey's End* could serve as a master-class in leadership. It indicates, not by exposition but by demonstration, that:

- Leadership is necessary

Stanhope may be a flawed character, but his role is a necessary one. The company needs a commanding officer who must set and maintain standards, lead by example, and act as a focus for the admiration and loyalty of his men. His followers *expect* to be led.

- The leader need not be perfect

Sherriff writes in his autobiography of the sort of man that Stanhope was (for the character had become real to him). He does not refer to him as a public school hero, but as a tough, drink-sodden company commander: the sort of man who was actually to be met in the trenches. He was far from perfect; but he was the sort of commander with whom his men (and later, the audience) could identify.

- 'Charisma' and its vagaries

Leaders are sometimes described as 'larger than life,' or having 'charisma.' We would suggest that 'charisma,' in this vague sense, is neither necessary nor sufficient for leadership, since there have been plenty of successful leaders who did not display it. The charismatic leader is a recognised type, and is conspicuous for his flaws as well as his virtues. Such faults, provided that they have a certain generosity about them, may be part of what makes him admired: and as he proceeds to his third wife, or smashes up an even more expensive motor car, or reels out of the night club at dawn to triumph at the power breakfast or board meeting a few hours later, he is living out in reality what at least some of his admirers have imagined in their dreams.

- Appearance and reality

Arguably, a leader must appear to be what his followers expect. He needs, in other words, to portray the right image. But what is that image? When *Journey's End* was first cast, both director and writer knew exactly what they were looking for in Stanhope; an actor who would come across, not as an accomplished performer, but as the real thing; a real soldier in a real dug-out. The man whom they chose to play Stanhope was called Colin Clive, who was then 29 and may already have acquired the drinking problem which was to contribute to his early death at 37. He was nervous at his audition and read his lines badly. Paradoxically, this worked to his advantage; for Sherriff commented that this was just what Stanhope himself would have done. (The also-ran, Colin Keith-Johnston, was almost too impressive. He had been an infantry officer in the Great War and had won the Military Cross for his valour: but he was somehow less convincing than the stuttering Clive. His substantial compensation prize was to play the part on Broadway.)

- The leader needs support

We have said that the leader must set an example. This presents Stanhope with his greatest difficulty, since his character is an obviously flawed one, and he can no longer play the role of the captain of school that he once offered so convincingly. He can, however, continue to function as a leader if he has support; and he obtains this in abundance, not only from the hero-worshipping Raleigh but his immensely helpful second-in-command, Osborne.

- The leader must confront and overcome doubts and uncertainties: but not necessarily by overt 'heroics'

Stanhope does this in part by shared irony, as when he tells his sergeant-major that they will defeat the enemy in the next 'push' and win the war—a statement that both men know to be untrue. Stanhope is playing the role of the confident leader, but at the same time hinting at his real feelings to the sergeant-major. We may note the significance of the word 'role.' Leadership is role-play. A leader is not an actor: but an actor may be a leader, provided that he lives by his script.

- The leader must confront weaknesses in others, even at the price of admitting the same weakness in himself

The weakness once recognised can then, at least in hope, be faced and overcome. This tactic can be a leadership ploy, insincerely practised as a way of manipulating followers; although Stanhope is sincere. Stanhope is more successful in confronting the cowardice in one of his officers, Hibbert, who pretends to neuralgia, than in facing his own inner demons. Stanhope tells Hibbert, as he also confesses to Uncle earlier in the play, that he is sick with fear in the trenches, after what he has experienced over three years; and that Hibbert and he will go out and face the danger together.

Stanhope: *We've all got a good fighting chance. I mean to come through—don't you?*

Hibbert: *Yes. Rather.*

(Act II, Scene 2)

### **The Enigma of R C Sherriff**

R C Sherriff remains an enigma, and his autobiography fails to explain the mystery. Indeed, the apparently artless story of his life is as carefully constructed as any work of fiction, and it would appear that he is determined to give little away. The major (and indeed the most interesting) part of the book is devoted to the story of *Journey's End*, rather than its author, about whom very few facts are given.

Sherriff presents himself as an inveterate worrier and a person of what would now be called low self-esteem. He saw himself as an ordinary chap and certainly no intellectual; and he seems to have been reluctant to admit, even to himself, that in *Journey's End* he had created a great play which deserved its success.

As far as he was concerned, the less 'theatrical' the play appeared, the better: and his intention was that the audience share the experience of being in the trenches. Some of his audience had already been there, and may even have looked back upon the war with some nostalgia, for the reaction of the war-poets was atypical. The play is an unstated homage to the courage and decency of the men who lived and died in Flanders, and perhaps to those who survived. E M Remarque dedicates his book, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, to those who, even if they have survived its bombs and bullets, were still destroyed by the war. Sherriff conveys a more positive message.