

## QC Talk 10.27.14 “170 years of Dynamic Influence,” by John R. Rickford

Your Excellency the President, Honorable Prime Minister, Other Ministers of the Government, Headmistress Jackie Benn, members of the QC staff, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls—I cannot tell you how **exciting** and **vivifying** it is to return to the land of my birth and the school in which I crossed the threshold from boy to man! [Pause] Even as I speak, the cuirass fish and cheriga crabs in the Cowan Street canal must be sending tweets to each other to look out for strange worms on hooks or saltfish tails on strings, because Johnny, who terrorized their forebears in the 1950s and 60's, is back in town. But they needn't worry, since I don't have time for them this week—bigger fish to fry.

Before turning to the topic Headmistress Benn has asked me to address, I must tell you quickly about three rejuvenating memories that being at General Assembly and standing on this stage [or at least its predecessor upstairs] bring back to me:

#1 is hearing the name of my grandfather's brother W.T.R. Rickford read out on the honor roll of QC boys who died in WWI. Classmates would come up and ask me dolefully if it was my father. (Chupitness, of course, since the good great-uncle, whom I never met, died in 1918.) But I milked their sympathy for all it was worth. For all I can recall, I might even have used it to get someone to treat me to a sugar bun or other favorite from the tuck shop.

#2 was when I was 12 or 13, playing the part of one of the Major General's 16 daughters in *The Pirates of Penzance*. QC girls of today may wonder why I was playing a girl's part, forgetting that there were no QC girls (ALAS!) in my day. But I wasn't too skilled in wearing the “can can” that my sisters lent me to make my dress stick out, and it began to slip as we tripped across the stage singing, “Oh what is this, and what is that, and why is Father up so late...?” I was starting to die of embarrassment, but I had the good sense to let it drop all the way, then hopped out of it and left it on stage. For all I know, it's still there, if it wasn't burned up in the fire of 1997.

#3 My last anecdote comes from 1966, when as Head Boy, I had to deliver a short speech to the general assembly on Speech Day. Despite my debating experience, the prospect of talking to a huge audience of students, parents, staff and dignitaries filled me with trepidation. But the late great Ivy Lonke, one of my best teachers at QC, helped me get over my butterflies by making me practice behind a chair in her home, giving me copious feedback on content and form. That was a striking example of the "Dynamic Influence" principal Benn has asked me to talk about. It was in part our teachers' extraordinary dedication that made us the men and women we turned out to be.

Talking about "**170 Years** of such Influence" is a daunting task, however. Like everyone else here, I wasn't around for most of those years. I could of course, extract significant details from N.E. Cameron's *History of Queen's College* (1951, reprinted 2009) or Lawrence Clarke's *Records of a Tradition of Excellence (1844-1994)*—like the fact that QC started in 1844 with only 15 boys and 2 tutors, that its system of ten house system was introduced in 1916, or that it changed location several times, coming to its current site only in 1951. But you can get that info easily from those sources and the web. And since it is **people** who make institutions and countries great, not their buildings or infrastructure, I've decided to focus on some outstandingly successful students who passed through these walls. From these brief portraits, you will get a sense of how students were not moulded not only by their teachers, but also by the company of and competition with some of the brightest fellow students our nation could provide. And you'll appreciate too how those students in turn dynamically influenced the lives and careers of others, and the institutions and nations in which they worked, both locally and abroad.

I'd like to begin with two well-known examples. **Sir Lionel Luckhoo**, 1914-1997, who would have attended QC in the 1920s, was, as *Wikipedia* notes, a distinguished politician, diplomat, and lawyer. His 245 consecutive successful defences in murder cases, earned him recognition in the Guinness Book of Records (1990) as "the world's

most successful lawyer." A second internationally known example is **Sridath Ramphal**, born in 1938, so attending QC primarily in the 1940s. Trained in Law at King's College London and Harvard Law School, he became Attorney General of Guyana in 1965 and helped to draft Guyana's 1966 Independence Constitution. After becoming Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1972, he went on to significantly influence Caribbean and international politics and foreign policy. In 1975 he was elected the Commonwealth's secretary-general, the first from the Third World. As his biosketch notes, "Articulate, dynamic, and self-confident, he was a strong advocate of the interests of the Third World, the need for a new international economic order, and the need to end apartheid in South Africa." *Kaiteur News* had a great write up on him just two Sundays ago. And I refer you to that for more info.

Among notable QC alumni from that era one would of course have to include the first two Presidents of Independent Guyana, **Forbes Burnham** and **Cheddi Jagan**. But you are undoubtedly familiar with their stories.

Moving closer to my era, I'd like to focus on my good friend **Ewart Thomas**, who left QC as a Guyana Scholar in 1960, the same year I came in. Ewart gained distinctions in pure math, applied math and physics at the GCE "Advanced" level, went on to graduate with First Class Honors in Mathematics from UWI Mona in 1963, and got his PhD in Statistics from Cambridge University in 1967. He became Assistant Professor at Stanford in 1972, and in 1998 became the first (and to this date only) Black Dean of the School of Humanities and Sciences at Stanford. To appreciate how significant that is, note that Humanities and Sciences is the *biggest* School at Stanford, including more than fifty departments and programs, and that Stanford is consistently ranked in the top four (with Harvard, Yale, and Princeton) among US universities. Other notables from the 1950s era include **Dr. Charles Denbow**, the renowned cardiologist, who spent much of his life working in Jamaica, and the accomplished historian and martyr, **Dr. Walter Rodney**.

From the 1960s, my era, let me cite two alumni you may not recognize as readily as these iconic figures.

One is another friend of mine, **Keith Wilson**, son of Edgar Wilson, who had gone to QC from 1931 to 1938, and later taught at the University of Guyana. Keith left QC in fifth form and did his A levels independently, and in the summer of 1969 we both pumped gas at a Shell gas station in Hollywood. Keith went on to gain his PhD in Physics from the University of Southern California, and became a key member of the Technical Staff at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory [JPL] in Los Angeles. He holds three US patents in fiberoptics. And in 1995 his JPL team demonstrated for the first time that a laser beam could be transmitted bidirectionally 6 million kilometers (15 times the distance to the moon), using as their target the Galileo spacecraft, which was then on its way to Jupiter.

The other 1960s success, lest you think I've omitted the Arts, is **Brian Chan**, the most brilliant poet of my era, and one of my closest friends at QC. [Like many poets, Brian was unconventional—for instance, he was househusband and main child-rearer in his married household for many years—a liberated, feminist man rare in that era and even now.] His first book of poems, *Thief with Leaf* (1988), won the Guyana Prize. It was followed by a second book, *Fabula Rasa* (1994), and he is also an accomplished clarinetist and painter. But Brian's poems far outshone the efforts of the rest of us as far back as 6<sup>th</sup> form. Here, for instance, are extracts from a poem of his in *Expression*, a literary journal founded by a group of us in the late 1960s:

[Read slowly, expressively]

If I could extract every passionate phrase,  
every wandering word from the unwritten minds  
of the longest lovers of beauty . . . I wouldn't be able to touch the circle  
of your apogee-an beauty in wild pure praise  
of you whom I don't fathom as you break my breath. . . .

[Please, if you see my diamonds, my diamonds,  
however dull, I ask you to stoop to pick  
them up to put them on your ears till they sink  
into you, and you wear them for me like your eyes.]

Taraatid! If the rest of us could have written like that, our overtures to female counterparts at BHS and other schools might have been more successful.

Since the topic of QC girls/women has come up, let me give three quick examples of accomplished QC Old Girls, again beginning with my Stanford circle. **Maya A. Trotz**, a QC girl from the 1980s, received her BSc in Chemical Engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (with a minor in Theatre!) in 1994, then did her Master's and PhD in Environmental Engineering at Stanford University. After teaching at the National Technological University in Singapore, she joined the faculty of the University of South Florida in 2004 and is now Associate Professor of Civil and Environmental Engineering there. She works at the nexus of geochemistry/water quality and global/community sustainability and education. And as those on the list-serves of QC alumni associations know, she often serves as the social and political conscience of QC alumni, and challenges us, especially male alumni, to consider current issues involving women and the disenfranchised with fresh eyes.

QC alumna **Dr. Abenaa Brewster** received her BS from Stanford University, her MD degree from Harvard Medical School and a Master of Health Science degree in Epidemiology from the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health. An Associate Professor in the Department of Clinical Cancer Prevention at MD Anderson Cancer Center, her clinical interest is breast cancer. She uses methods of molecular epidemiology to investigate epidemiological and biological factors that determine risk for breast cancer and survival. She is particularly interested in understanding how ethnicity and obesity influence a woman's risk and survival after a diagnosis of breast cancer. She has received funding from the American Society of Clinical

Oncology, the National Institute of Health and the Susan G. Komen Foundation.

Queen's College alumna **Priya Devi Manickchand**, is an Attorney-at-Law by profession. Before becoming a Government Minister, she had managed a private practice and was simultaneously Senior Supervising Attorney at the Georgetown Legal Aid Clinic. She served on the executive of the Guyana Bar Association and on the executive of the Guyana Association of Women Lawyers. She was also on the Guyana Medical Council and she was Chairperson of the Rice Assessment Committee (Region 5). In 2006, following the country's Regional and General Elections, Priya Manickchand was invited by President Bharrat Jagdeo to serve in the country's cabinet as Minister of Human Services and Social Security. She accepted the offer, and on September 9th 2009, became the youngest member of the cabinet.

A few general comments about these twelve QC success stories. Although I've mainly picked people I knew, close to my 1960s era, one could easily pick another dozen, or another dozen dozen, from other decades or centuries. This is in keeping with the Uniformitarian Principle some geologists espouse—that the forces shaping nature at one point in history are generally similar to those shaping it at other points. Those forces, throughout QC's 170 year history, include its knowledgeable and demanding teachers, who taught us not only about Latin or English or Maths or Chemistry, but also about working hard, improving ourselves in body and spirit through sports and extra-curricular activities, and developing strong human and interpersonal values in the critical, often difficult adolescent years. [I celebrated "six of my best" QC teachers—Eddie London, C.A. Yansen, Bobby Moore, Roger Isaacs, Ivy Loncke and Sylvia Wynter—in the 1994 *ICQC* newsletter.] Finally, while not everyone was equally successful, it's amazing how even average QC students went on to make a niche in areas we never imagined, as we often discover at QC reunions: "You mean 'Bumblebee' owns a chain of businesses? Or is Mayor of her city?"

Our teachers and school experiences also taught us about FAILURE. And I don't want to talk only about success, because failure is an inevitable and instructive part of the human experience, and QC helped to teach us its lessons.

Some of these were swift and painful. When I was in my third year at QC, then headmaster Sanger-Davies called me into his office, and showed me a graph of my end-of-year class rankings in those years. I had come, maybe 3<sup>rd</sup> in my first year, 7<sup>th</sup> in my second year, and 11<sup>th</sup> or worse in my third year. He had a little graph illustrating the steady decline. "What's wrong with this picture?" he asked? When I failed to give an answer, he decisively said, "It's going in the wrong direction!" and proceeded to give me a caning—six of the best. Now at the time I felt deeply wronged and not the least appreciative. Later I came to see that keeping track of my progress (or decline) showed that he cared. I still consider those canings barbaric, but must confess that my academics improved, and I went on to win the speech day prize for the best O level results in 1965.

Equally painful sometimes was the practice of reading out the names of each student in alphabetical order, at a general assembly, along with their passes, when the GCE exam results came in. "Ewart Thomas, distinction in pure math, applied math and physics," might be followed by "Basil Thompson"—a slight pause, then "Basil Thompson," the modified inflection indicating that he had passed nothing—a public shaming from which I think little good emerged.

My second lesson in failure was similar to the one Sanger-Davies gave me, but more gradual, and less painful. In Lower Sixth, Roger Isaacs came to QC to teach French, and gave us a demanding exam in his first week. I did terribly, scoring less than 10 on a 100-point test. When he returned the exams, he asked me to come outside in the corridor, and told me that I could not be as "dunce" as that test suggested, since he had gone to UWI Mona with my sister Elizabeth, and she had been pretty smart. He suggested I come to his after school lessons, offering to make them free if I couldn't afford to pay. I went to his lessons faithfully, and gradually my French

improved, so much so that by the end of term, I scored 71 or 72 (in those days teachers never gave you 100% or even 90%), and I came second in the class. And today I'm a professor of Linguistics. He taught me that dedicated application could work wonders.

My final QC lesson in failure is a bit different. In late 1965 or early 1966, I sent out letters to high schools all across Georgetown and Guyana, asking them to send a representative or two to an inaugural evening meeting of a new "Inter High School Council" I wanted to form. We had quite a good turnout, and the highlight of the evening was a film about high school councils that I'd borrowed from the USIS. We had the projector all set up, and the film ready to roll, but I discovered to my horror that we had forgotten to get a take-up reel, and without that, no dice. After an uncomfortably long delay in which I made desperate, unsuccessful calls to see if I could procure a take up reel somewhere, I had to go on stage and tell the clearly disappointed audience that the highlight of the evening would not occur. The students filed out, clearly disgruntled, and I wished the earth would open up and swallow me. But as I got ready to leave, with my face full of sorrow, I passed a BHS deputy head girl, Angela Marshall, waiting for her father to pick her up. She said something comforting, I can't remember what, but I stopped and talked with her for a while. To cut a long story short, she and I started meeting to talk about English Literature not too long after, and she has now been my wife for 43 years. Beyond the love story, the lesson I learned from that almost complete disaster is to anticipate and pay attention to details. I remember reading an article about the million or more elements it takes to get a rocket into space. If even one of the crucial ones is missing or not right, the rocket might never take off nor never come back.

Oprah Winfrey, the wildly successful TV talk show host, is ranked as the richest African American of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and by some as the most influential woman in the world. Oprah had many failures before her huge successes including her stint in a juvenile detention home at 13, and her pregnancy at 14. But she only got into working as a talk

show host after her attempts to serve as a straight news anchor at the age of 22 failed miserably. She would read a news story about an accident on the freeway and express her feelings empathetically, "Oh my goodness, that's terrible!" The Baltimore TV station at which she worked quickly took her off the air, but they asked her instead to host a talk show, and as soon as she sat in the chair and began emoting about and responding to people's stories, she realized that was the job for her. It just felt right. If it doesn't feel right or fulfilling, don't do it, she says. That is the lesson she learned from that experience. Every failure, she says, has a lesson to teach us, and if we don't learn it, other failures will crop up to teach us the lesson again. So the point is not that you'll never have failures or setbacks—you certainly will. But ask yourself when they come up what they're trying to teach you.

[Insert quick point about the importance of keeping up with active new learning throughout one's lifetime, including learning touch typing—cite example of my mentor Professor Labov typing at 125 words per minute—critical in today's computer age.]

My time is up. I've tried to give you a largely but not entirely personal account of successes and failures at Queens, arguing that they reflect the dynamic influences our teachers and class-mates had on us, and the dynamic influences we in turn have had on schools, universities, hospitals, law courts, international policy-making bodies, love and aesthetics, government institutions locally and abroad, the environment, even outer space. May this rich 170 year pattern of interlocking influences continue forever. *Laude gratemur scholae.*