

"I Remember It Well"

by Tom Carbery

In the present debate as to the future of the BBC certain considerations bounce through my head. One is Alastair Cooke and his "Letters from America". It is to BBC Radio that we are indebted (as well as to Mr Cooke) for all those wonderful broadcasts. Cooke on New England in the fall sent me on a path of discovery which took me well over thirty years to bring to fruition. Then again it was Cooke who first brought Adlai Stevenson to my attention, Stevenson the best potential president the Americans rejected. I could go on but it would be self-indulgent.

The Trial of Alger Hiss

Fortunately I have copies of some, regrettably not all, of the "Letters from America". I value those I have. Nevertheless the Cooke book I treasure above the others is "A Generation on Trial." This tells, and tells with magnificent Cooke lucidity and style, the story of the trial of Alger Hiss. After the war had finished Hiss was tried on charges of spying for the Soviet Union but the events in dispute were in the late thirties, before the war.

Hiss was no fool. He knew that whatever the difficulties of recollection he had to "get it right" and that if he did not he might be acquitted on the specific charges but later could find himself on a perjury charge. Asked, then, where he had been, to whom he had spoken, what type of typewriter he had used, Hiss prefaced his answers "to the best of my recollection . . ." "As I recall it at this late date . . ." "If my memory serves me aright . . ."

And the Test of Memory?

This may strike the reader as good, prudent, honest caution. But not everyone saw it in that light. Whittaker Chambers, the main witness against him, had no such reservations. For him all was clarity. Asked not dissimilar questions he was positive to the edge of assertion: "I met . . ." "I said . . ." "I used . . ."

The jury saw Chambers as the epitome of forthright honesty. That same jury saw Hiss as the epitome of evasive equivocation. The overall result was that the members of the jury found against Hiss and he, in turn, languished in jail.

The legal system and a lot more forby are based on the premise that memory is well-nigh perfect. "Where were you on Easter Monday 1983?" "Where were you on the 5th February, this year, any year?"

Moreover if that is a difficulty for the young, it is even more difficult for the

late-middle-aged to elderly who can barely recall where they laid down their spectacles far less recall what they did on Hallowe'en 10 or 12 years ago.

“Move the Minutes be Accepted”?

Yet despite this we - men and women of action that we are, engaged in our affairs (orderly, not amorous) as we are – set about our agendas.

“Right then, let’s start. Apologies for absence - yes. Adam Footer and our morose Scot, Geordie Girmygubbs! Fine!”

“And so to the minutes of our last meeting”. They were, of course, distributed shortly after that meeting and the question is “is this a true and correct record of that event, of what transpired?” Think of it - a true and correct record of what transpired - and half of those present forgot to bring the minutes and the other half would have forgotten they had been there but for the fact that the minutes observe that they were in attendance.

Little wonder some stalwarts of trade unions, Co-ops and Councils appear to work on the great adage:

“When at meetings, don’t ever lie
Indeed, dear colleague, don’t even try.
To do such things is frowned upon
- just write the minutes later on!”

“I remember it well”?

The law, our agendas and our daily lives all expect perfect memory, but consider what they - and we - experience!!

That old charmer, Maurice Chevalier and his lady friend said it all: “I remember it well . . .” but he didn’t and she had to put him right - or was her memory at fault? Surely not: on the other hand I remember, well, I think I recall . . .

The Author

PROFESSOR CARBERY retired from the University of Strathclyde where his teaching has ranged over Economics, Public Administration, Government -particularly British and American - and Information Technology. Some of his wider areas of service are the Labour movement, consumer affairs (including his book *Consumers in Politics*), broadcasting and the press and the Co-operative movement.