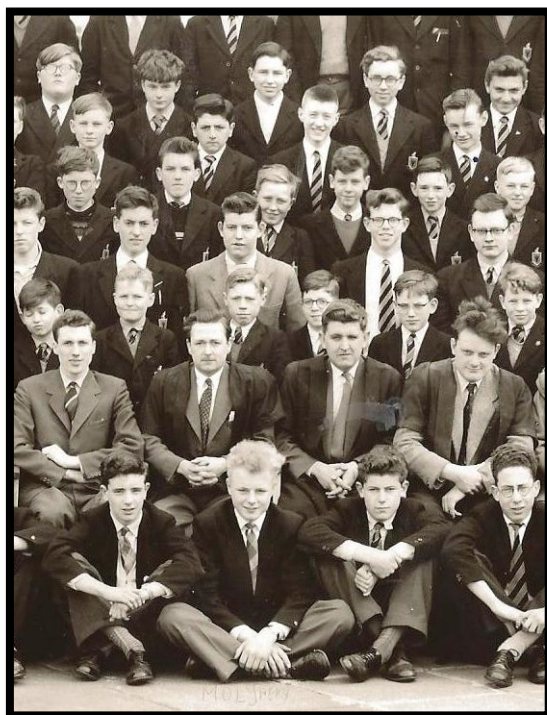


ALFRED NEVILLE MAY



Recently I came across a short article on *Wikipedia*, relating to Alfred Neville May (1944-1998). I remember him very well, though I was four years younger, because we both attended The Holt Grammar School in Liverpool in the early 1960s. I even have a school photograph of him, which is above. He is the boy with glasses and tie at the top left hand side; and, although it is a poor scan, you can see that the boy is fat, as well as studious. In fact, the photo flatters him, because he was very fat, many years before the plague of obesity which now affects our children and adults alike. At the time, really fat boys were rare, though every form seemed to have one, and he was therefore the butt of everyone else's humour, if you can call it that. As is well known, children, and especially boys, can be very cruel.

'Alfie', as we all called him, was a well known 'character', and despite being obese he could 'look after himself'. My brother, who was of the same age as he was, remembers that if one of the school toughs should happen to collide with Alfie in a

corridor, the tough would undoubtedly come off the worse for wear, because he would simply bounce off; and, underneath the blubber, Alfie was immensely strong.

He was also highly intelligent. When I was in Form IA, he was in IVA. Now, we young ones had little idea, let alone understanding, of what the older ones were studying; but some of the smart-alecs would tell you that Alfie spent his time discussing the butter situation in Outer Mongolia. Which meant, I suppose, that he was odd, because he was interested in current affairs.

But Alfie also excelled in conventional subjects, for example Latin. The Latin master, Albert Wilson - who taught both of us - told me that, although I was good at translating from Latin to English, I did not have the 'facility' which Alfie had. That hurt at the time, but I am sure he was right. Alfie also had more facility, I suspect, when it came to writing History essays, because he got a First Class Honours Degree from Cambridge in the subject in 1966 or 1967, and also gained a PhD from that University in 1970, the title of his thesis being *The Franchise in thirteenth century England, with special reference to the estates of the bishopric of Winchester*. This must have involved a knowledge of palaeography and economics, as well as Latin. I have not been able to read this thesis yet, but the conclusion is probably contained in the title of an article which Alfie wrote and had published in the (then) prestigious *Economic History Review* in 1973: *An Index of Thirteenth Century Peasant Impoverishment?*

I feel pretty sure that the question mark here was unnecessary to the conclusion, since Alfie was a Marxist, and for him the feudal age was unquestionably one where the landlord exploited the peasant, wherever and whenever he could. This was dictated by the engine of History, dialectical materialism, but it was not a conclusion with which my tutor at Oxford, the late Maurice Keen, would have agreed; and he studied medieval history more widely and for far longer than Alfie.

How do I know so much about this? Well, when I was an undergraduate I got in touch with Alfie, at the suggestion of one of the History masters at The Holt, and I went to see him, in Liverpool, at least once during every vacation between 1966 and 1969, to talk about History. Since he was finishing his first degree as I started mine, and working on his PhD when I was taking Finals, he acted as a kind of mentor. This was just what he liked to do, apart from smoke and drink, and eat enormous meals of egg, chips and peas at 4 o'clock in the afternoon; and play snooker in working-men's clubs.

While he smoked, he would indulge in flights of fancy, explaining the true reason for what had happened in History, in terms of Marxist dogma; and I must say it all seemed to make sense - the 1960s did after all see the triumph of Communism in Cuba and Vietnam, and the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Russian Revolution of 1917. So, for Alfie, the explanation for the English Revolution of 1640 (an idea first advanced by Christopher Hill three centuries later) was the crisis in the wool trade in the 1620s (see the work of Professor Barry Supple, apparently). I can see now that this idea is open to attack on a large number of

grounds; but I did not have enough information or verbal skill to enable me to engage in an equal discussion at the time. So I just listened, in wonder.

I was taken aback by the vehemence of Alfie's views about modern politics. He was (as the Wikipedia article states) a communist; but I notice the writer uses a small 'c'; and I would agree that he was not what we used to call a 'card-carrying' member of the British Communist Party. Whether he was a Trotskyist or a Maoist, or a member of the New Left, or some other variety of communist, I cannot say; but he certainly thought that the English and French Revolutions were bourgeois revolutions, whilst the Russian Revolution was the work of the proletariat, and therefore represented progress, while the Irish Revolution was incomplete, and the Hungarian uprising of 1956 was not a proper revolution at all; and he also saw British society in terms of the class struggle.

I did not agree; but I was swept along by his rhetoric; and he was, in many ways, good company, generous (with books and his time, rather than money) and, as I have hinted at, a difficult man to move, when in full flow (or when under attack, but wedged against a wall). I was also afraid to question his motivation, since he was authentically working-class, his father being a hospital porter, at a time when very few intellectuals could claim that distinction.

I did not see him again after (I guess) 1969. The *Wikipedia* article tells us that he died in 1998, which means he was only 54; and that does not surprise me, in view of his smoking, his drinking, his obesity and his intensity, even as a youth. But there is something in the article which does surprise me greatly; and this is that in 1988 he converted to Islam, taking the name Muhammed Haroon; and then writing and publishing around a dozen books about Islam, including *Why I accepted Islam* (1990), which I will obtain and read, out of curiosity.

What accounts for the conversion?

First of all, I have to correct one statement in the *Wikipedia* article: that Alfie converted to Islam from Christianity. He was never, at least not in his youth, a Christian. As a convinced Marxist, he regarded all religions as 'the opium of the people'; but I would also suggest two reasons for his adoption of a new religion relatively late in life, apart from the obvious one - that he genuinely believed that Islam is the Truth.

The first is personal. I think Alfie went through a period when he felt a sense of great failure. After obtaining his 'First' and then his PhD, what followed? I do not know all the facts but I know that he tried teaching at The Holt, and this was not a success. Some parents objected strongly to their children being indoctrinated with Marxism. I also know that, possibly in the late 1970s or early 1980s he became a drop-out in Liverpool, walking the streets and railing against his fate. But finally there came a moment of redemption, when he obtained a post as a lecturer in Manchester and (so I believe) found love at last. This coincided with his finding Islam, which provides (as Marxism once did for many) a complete explanation of what happened in the past, of the way the world is now, and a programme for action, for those who believe.

The second reason is historical. The 1980s saw great changes, both in the real and the intellectual world. Like all Marxists, Alfie had believed in material progress and that the spiritual and political were ultimately explained by the social and the economic. But, by the 1980s, it had become increasingly clear that the 'English Revolution' of the 17th century was not a bourgeois revolution (as Hill had proposed), nor was the French Revolution of the 18th century (see in particular the work of Alfred Cobban in England and François Furet in France). Finally, the decline and eventual collapse of the USSR showed that the Russian Revolution had not achieved what Communists once hoped for. This left a considerable vacuum for people like Alfie; and, since he craved an explanation, he replaced Marxism with a religion in which he found personal satisfaction as well as a convincing philosophy of history.

The historian strives for accuracy but, as Alfie once explained to me, it is both more satisfying and entertaining to draw a line from A to B and explain how we got from one to the other. At the age of 40 or so, when many experience a mid-life crisis, he must have felt that Islam provided the key to personal happiness and professional fulfilment. I hope that he found both.