

TRANSCRIPT

Transcript of the tribute to Colin Dexter given by Paul Humphreys of The University of Oxford Delegacy of Local Examinations on the occasion of the Annual Dinner of The Inspector Morse Society held at St Edmund Hall, Oxford, on Friday 15th September 2017.

SUMMARY

“... and so, if we *do* think of Morse as a surrogate of Dexter, we can then all of us remember Colin as he would want us to remember him — **as a good teacher.**”

Good evening everyone.

Colin Dexter's *first love* — his first love — was for the Latin language, Classical Latin.

And so, I would like to begin this tribute by speaking a short paragraph **in** Latin.

I'll do that now.

But please don't be alarmed. This language will not cause any objects to levitate and fly across the room.

(As long as I get it right.)

Here it is:

Salvete omnes. Gratam ad Oxoniensis. Dexter, caedes maxime, fiere post tempi decem. Autem ad versperam, etiam mane, ita spero sentire vos, contenti.

In translation:

Hello everyone. Welcome to Oxford. Most of Colin Dexter's murders took place after ten o'clock at night. So I hope you all feel reasonably safe because the evening is still young.

So, Colin's first love was for the Latin language.

I say this because back in 1966 when Colin came to Oxford (**when he was around the age of 40; I was about 18**) I remember that Colin told me that the first *word* he had heard spoken in Latin, in his very first Latin class when he was a schoolboy at Stamford School, was the word '**Amo**' which, of course, in Latin means, '**I Love**'.

At that first lesson, **when Colin was 11 years of age**, his Latin Master wrote *these* six words on the blackboard:
amo, amas, amat, amamus, amatis, amant.

The Master told the boys to copy *those* words onto the first page of their new Latin exercise book (**as yet unused**); to learn those words *by heart*; and to remember them *all their life*.

Colin saw a *shape* in that list of words: **the shape of a key**.

Colin was a highly intelligent boy. We know this because, although he was a local lad born in the market town of Stamford, he had won a scholarship to that neighbouring - very prestigious - public school, an independent school whose traditions and history extended back to the sixteenth century when almost **the sole purpose** of such schools was to **teach Latin Grammar**.

It would be unthinkable for a school such as Stamford to wake up one morning and decide not to teach Latin any more.

This was the whole **school** environment in which Colin was educated.

Colin looked at the backboard while the Master was **writing** those six words. Colin noticed, one by one, that each of those words *began* with the same letters (the stem) but each word *ended* with different letters; **and Colin could see a pattern**. He could see the shape of how the Latin language worked. He got it. He understood *why* those words were important to remember.

What did Colin see?

Colin saw each of those words as **a miniature detective story**: the stem of the word revealed what the action was, the **ending** of the word (its inflection) pointed to *who* did it, and *when* they did it.

We all know that Colin had an instinctive, natural, love for **puzzles** and **clues** and **codes**. And when Colin **dutifully** wrote down those

six words in *his* exercise book, a special bond took place between Colin and Latin; a kind of cerebral **love at first sight**.

Colin knew that he would be able to take that key and with it unlock the meaning of **any** sentence written in Latin, and the Latin language became for him - and always remained - the most elegant code, the most **beautiful** code of them all.

In Colin's first quarter of his life, he was a pupil at school, and then a student at Cambridge where he went on to take his degree in Classics at Christ's College. [I believe that the Society held its dinner last year at Christ's College.]

It would be unthinkable for Cambridge University to wake up one morning and decide not to teach Latin any more.

This was the whole **University** environment in which Colin was educated.

In Colin's second quarter of his life, he went out into the world to *teach* the Classics in secondary schools, *to share* his love of Latin *as a teacher*. He taught at Wyggeston Grammar School; at Loughborough Grammar School; and at Corby Grammar School where he was its Senior Classics Master --- and from where Colin wrote an essay in 1964 entitled: 'What is the *Use* of The Classics?'

In that essay, Colin rolled up all his knowledge and experience as a teacher and he wrote about the **practical value** to young people of learning Latin.

(Colin *did* acknowledge that Latin was not *accessible to all* young people - that he himself had been privileged in his own schooling - but nonetheless, in its own right, Colin sought to make the point that Latin contained *something of a special nature* that made it stand apart from other subjects.)

Here's what Colin wrote:

“The purpose of the study of Latin is to introduce a *process* of **training the young mind** in its capacity for *analysis and interpretation* fundamental to all mental disciplines.”

In other words, this was Colin's way of saying that if you learn Latin you become better at everything else you do!

It is only when we come to the start of Colin's *third quarter* of his life does *our* chapter begin: the Oxford story; the Morse story.

But before we step into that third quarter ...

[AT THIS POINT IN THE TRIBUTE PAUL HANDED OUT A SEALED ENVELOPE TO EVERY PERSON PRESENT - with an instruction not open their envelope until ... “We’ll come to its contents, a little later...”

So.

We have just briefly reminded ourselves of Colin's school years and his time at University; and his subsequent teaching career. Those were important **formative** years **for what would come next** at Oxford.

During Colin's professional career at Oxford, Classics teaching in schools came under serious threat.

By this threat, I'm thinking of a whole era from the 1970s when grammar schools were disappearing; new technology subjects were beginning to emerge and edge their way into schools to compete for time; and a National Curriculum would soon come in **that did not give Latin a place** in its core timetable. All these things, taken together, conspired heavily against Colin's subjects.

It was, for Colin, that **the unthinkable had actually happened**. The Nation State had woken up one morning and decided **not to teach Latin** to its children any more.

To give you a sense of the real impact of those changes on the Classics in schools --- in the 1960s the number of school candidates entered for Latin examinations was never higher than it was then. But by the 1980s the number of candidates for Latin was never lower.

This reduction was far greater than a *decimation*, the number of candidates had more than halved.

And so, ladies and gentlemen, it is a remarkable *co-incidence* that Inspector Morse should walk onto *that* crime scene precisely in that same era, in the 1970s.

Colin's drive for Morse, was **underpinned** by Colin's drive to support the Classics.

And where did that *drive* come from?

Well, the drive came from the same place that the *love* came from.

"And would not anyone fight to defend what they loved, Lewis?"

Colin was saddened by this drop in numbers --- at worst he was dismayed, but not defeated.

Before his retirement from our office when Colin was around the age of 60, you could hear Colin going around the corridors asking people what '**Media Studies**' was.

Colin was not much into technology but he adopted this new subject title of 'Media Studies' as his all-embracing term to represent anything that had come to conspire against the Classics. **It was the fault of Media Studies.**

Colin would go up to people in the office and say 'Media Studies' *have you got any idea what that is?* Then he'd wander off before you had a chance to say anything.

Colin had already written 7 of the 13 Morse novels while he was with us in our Oxford department. His third book, which Colin

often said was his favourite, *The Silent World of Nicholas Quinn* - set in an Examining Board - came out in 1977.

Again, a co-incidence of timing when Latin entries had once more taken a further dip that year.

The remaining 6 novels he wrote in his retirement.

Colin had given Morse an important job to do: not simply to solve murders, but **to keep an awareness of the Classics alive** in the *public* eye while the world in education had gone mad.

And Morse did deliver this objective for Colin, **far in excess of Colin's own expectations.**

Morse has created an *essential association* of words:-

Wherever you are in the world, when you think of **Morse** you think of **Oxford**; and when you think of Oxford you think of **Learning**.

Morse had **arrested the attention** of people around the world, and had led many of them to the entrance of Caesar's tent.

Let me give you some evidence to support this co-incidence of purpose.

This book [Paul holds up a copy of the book] '**Death is Now My Neighbour**', was intended by Colin to be the last in the Morse series: his twelfth book.

Colin neatly wraps up this book with a tribute to Lewis.

This book's last words are:

"...Lewis, let me thank you for everything, **my dear old friend.**"

It is a very emotional ending. Colin *was* a sentimental person.

We get substantially the same ending again in *The Remorseful Day*, which was published more than three years after *this* book - and only after Colin had been **cajoled** into producing another book, another story.

Sue Lawley on Desert Island Discs asked Colin *twice* on Radio 4 if there would be another Morse book.

The first time, Colin replied: 'I don't think there will be another one;' but, the second time Sue Lawley asked the same question, Colin said, 'Well, maybe, there might be just *one* more'.

But Colin begins *this* book (potentially his last) **very powerfully** and directly out of the heart of the Classics --- with the equivalent if it were music of the opening bars of Beethoven's Fifth.

The major reference introducing this book is from Aristophanes - Colin evokes the spirit of the Ancient Greeks - and he gets Aristophanes to tell us that the next thing written in this book holds the key to its purpose.

"Bring me a beaker of wine, so that I may wet my mind and say something clever... (dot dot dot. What *will* he say?)"

Then Colin hands us a quotation at the head of his Chapter One, an abstract from the very first Latin Grammar Text suitable for

teaching Latin (Principles of Elementary Latin Syntax, by Aelius Donatus in the 4th Century AD). Colin reproduces an example from that text that focuses on the role in Latin of the **Pluperfect Tense** in its **Subjunctive Mood**, where conditions are set in the past and deemed to remain constant because they will never lose their intrinsic value, come what may.

This is the inimitable Colin Dexter steering us to read between the lines, actually to read *above the lines*, for us not lose sight of this important language, Latin, because it has an *enduring purpose*.

If any Classics teacher did not have a textbook to hand, they could run a Greek or a Latin tutorial from any of the Morse novels!

Colin did like to entertain us, didn't he? He had a good command of human nature. Colin knew that we were no different from the Romans. The Romans liked to watch people being murdered, in the Coliseum. In Oxford we were far more civilised. We liked to watch people being murdered **in the Sheldonian!**

Now, this brings us to Oxford, and, for our (Morse) visitors (new to Oxford) I'd like to introduce a little *Oxford Local history*.

My colleagues and I know, that *we* have been doubly fortunate.

Not only to have worked alongside Colin, but also to have been employed in our particular office which was certainly a unique department in the history of Oxford University.

Our department was established in 1857.

Up until that year in this country there were no boards for secondary school examinations.

There were plenty of **schools**, but no means of comparing pupils' performance between or among the schools. Importantly, *it was schools themselves* that called for a new *kind* of organisation to be created that would be *independent* from them but have the *authority* to make proclamations about their pupils' performance.

And so the question came up here - to Oxford University - for consideration because Oxford had long experience in managing examinations, albeit for degrees. And the University said early on that whatever form these new exams might take, they should be sat in the *locality of the candidates*.

There was some opposition to this idea of examinations being held locally in the schools.

Some Oxford dons said, 'How can we be expected to assess these pupils at a distance, if we are not allowed to see them?'

The dons at Oxford were used to assessing students, face to face.

So the University refined its plan and instructed a group of Delegates to establish a central office at Oxford to which school teachers (not pupils) *teachers* would travel. Teachers would then sit around the table and agree a syllabus for each subject which would be printed at The Oxford University Press and distributed out to schools. **Oxford University had the resources to do this.** Question papers would be set at Oxford and, after the exam, candidates' scripts would be sent from their school to be marked by teachers from schools other than their own.

This was not an examination system imposed externally, as it were, by central government on schools. It was all done **within the world of education:** schools and University working directly together for the primary purpose of promoting learning.

So, that *blueprint* was implemented first here at Oxford in 1857, and the very first examining board in this country was named: 'The University of Oxford, Delegacy of *Local Examinations*'. This was **our** office. It was **Colin's** office. And Colin's department was in charge of school examinations in Greek and Latin. **It would be hard to imagine any better next job for Colin - given that he had to leave the classroom because of his deafness.**

This first Oxford model from 1857 was then replicated by other Universities. Each new exam board adopted a different *keyword* in its title.

So, Oxford had used the word **Delegacy**. Cambridge used the word **Syndicate**. The northern universities grouped together and used the word **Matriculation**. London used the word **Central**.

In Nicholas Quinn, Colin named his examining board 'The Foreign Examinations *Syndicate*' - **mischievously** using a Cambridge word for the board he had based at Oxford.

Colin liked being mischievous about these things.

I was in the room when Colin asked a trick question of a group of his own subject examiners.

"Why did the first examination in English Literature not contain any questions on Charles Dickens work, *Great Expectations*? Was this not a grave oversight on the part of those examiners?"

(Colin liked the work of Charles Dickens and often said that 'Bleak House' was the book which most influenced him at an early age.' [Incidentally, 'Great Expectations was Charles Dickens' thirteenth novel!])

The reason for this apparent error, Colin said at that meeting, **was simply explained**. In 1857 Charles Dickens had *not yet written* that book! *Great Expectations* was not published until 1861!

This provides us with a pretty good example of Colin's office humour.

Colin had always expressed a much greater interest in **the nature of questions**, than in answers.

He often said to his examiners, 'It's not whether candidates know the answers to the questions you set. Its about making sure they **understand the question** being asked of them'.

By the way --- I should tell you in passing, that our department finally closed its doors back in 1997 which happens to be twenty-years ago this week. Under major national reorganisations, our work at Oxford was assimilated into other examining groups and the Oxford Delegacy was closed after 140 years.

But - as you can see tonight - it evidently remains a great tribute both to the special character of our department and to Colin that Delegacy staff have continued to meet socially at least once a year; and Colin - as you would expect - was always the star turn at our annual reunions.

Oxford University had started it all going, and we should rightly give it top marks for that; well done Oxford! But from the start of this new millennium in 2000, the University had moved on. It re-focussed its attention on growing its **global** reputation as an international teaching and research University.

As we saw from *The Times Report* last week, Oxford is at the very top of that list of world rankings. **I am sure that Morse also has helped to promote the good name of Oxford around the world.**

(Apart from the murders.)

What really distinguished the Delegacy was its rate of growth.

By the time Colin came to Oxford in 1966 the Delegacy was examining **tens** of different subjects, employing **hundreds** of examiners, marking **thousands** of candidates, who gave rise to **tens of thousands** of examination scripts, and those scripts contained **hundreds of thousands** of individual marks.

In 1966 we were as far away from using computers as we were in 1857. What the University had created and sustained for over one hundred years was entirely a manual process that operated like a *human computer*.

Oxford had created an amazing piece of human engineering where everything was done by hand and checked by hand by a different group of people.

Colin *loved* the idea of checking things.

Colin once said of himself that he was not naturally a good writer.

But what he **was** good at was *revising* what he had written, progressively making it better and better than before.

After Colin had had a chance to observe the detailed mechanics of this vast administrative operation - from behind the scenes - on the other side of the bar so to speak - Colin made a significant contribution to its reliability.

What Colin had noticed in the 1960s was that more and more people were taking their holidays abroad, and they **were returning home with bad habits**.

Colin called this: *the problem of the continental sevens*.

With **hundreds of thousands** of marks being *written* and *copied* and *added together* and *transcribed* entirely by hand, there was enormous potential for numbers to be misread.

Colin said, “Take the number **one**, for example”.

If it is written as a single vertical stroke, there is no ambiguity and it can be read *nothing other* than as a number *one* because no other numeric digit looks like that. But if it is written with a fancy flourish at the top, then it *could* be mistaken for the number seven.

Now, Colin expounded that the continental defence to this problem of potential ambiguity was that the number seven should therefore now be written with a horizontal bar through its stem --- so to distinguish it from the number one which had adopted this *entirely unnecessary* flourish at the top.

But at Oxford, at the Oxford Delegacy of Local Examinations, Colin **insisted** that all personnel use the elementary vertical line when writing a 1, and a simple seven that looked like this (7).

Colin's straightforward instruction headed off the equivalent of a computer virus wreaking havoc if that same data had been digital. His observation was **brilliant and clear**, and by focussing on the importance of legibility the same lesson served to sure up many of the other manual processes.

And all of that came down to the shape of a number.

In an interview for a newspaper as recently as 2014, Colin was asked how he would like to be remembered.

As a good teacher.

What was the most important thing you taught your pupils?

To ask questions.

Now --- I'm going to take that as a cue to ask a question.
It's open to anyone to answer it. **I'm looking for the title of a book.**

What was the title of the first book published, written by Colin Dexter, about which Colin said: 'This book kick-started my writing career.' ?

[AT THIS POINT PAUL ANNOUNCED THE BOOK TITLE AS 'LIBERAL STUDIES' PUBLISHED IN 1964 IN TWO VOLUMES AS A 6TH-FORM TEXTBOOK. Then, Paul said that on behalf of all of Colin's colleagues at The Delegacy he would like to present the two volumes to The Morse Society (with a card signed by all Delegacy personnel present at the dinner). Paul then presented the books to Dr Antony Richards, Chairman of The Inspector Morse Society.]

NEXT

AT THIS POINT PAUL THEN REFERRED BACK TO THE UNOPENED ENVELOPES EARLIER HANDED OUT TO EVERYONE AT THE DINNER. Paul was keen to emphasise the fundamental importance to Colin of his pre-Morse formative years: as a pupil, student, and then teacher of Latin. Paul asked everyone to open their envelope so that everyone could re-enact "Colin's First Latin Lesson" by everyone reciting aloud "Amo, Amas, Amat, Amamus, Amatis, Amant" **in a voice loud enough to be heard**

over Oxford - with its echo sounding in Cambridge - and high up into the clouds!

[Paul then summarised:]

Colin was a kindly man.

He had a big heart.

Colin was an inspirational teacher who wanted everyone to make the most of themselves.

Today, Colin is no longer with us.

Tonight, Colin is engaged in Socratic Dialogue with Socrates himself - up in the Clouds.

Tonight Colin is saying to Socrates:

"I used to teach the boys and the girls about you, Socrates: about **Philosophy**, about **Logic**, about **Right Thinking**. About always to examine any proposition from both sides of the argument.

But, do you know, Socrates, do you know what they are teaching our children nowadays?

Media Studies! Do you have any idea what that is? "

If we do think of Morse as a surrogate of Dexter, then we can *all of us* remember Colin as he would want us to remember him --- as a good teacher.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]