

Revisiting *The Age of Unreason*

Roy Blatchford

August 2023

Charles Handy's golden book *The Age of Unreason* was published in 1989.

Turning the pages this summer to remind myself how the text influenced my thinking as a young headteacher, I am struck by how much its analyses and assertions were 30 years ahead of the times.

Writers about the future hope that what they have to say will resonate years later. In Handy's case, his words seem remarkably like a blueprint for the 2020s.

He brought into 1990s debate the new language of 'upside-down thinking', 'shamrock organisation', and 'portfolio working', even 'portfolio marriage'. He helped leaders believe in a view of society much bigger than themselves. And always he observed with a delightful lightness of touch and an engaging optimism.

Take this when he is writing about the changing world of work:

One company is creating a number of regional work centres, places where their individual workers can go when they need to attend team meetings, use more specialist equipment or just want to escape their homes and meet people. The early morning crush in the commuter train will one day be a thing of the past or at least only a twice-weekly chore.

Or this on the subject of leadership:

The wise organisation realises that intelligent individuals can only be governed by consent and not by command, that obedience cannot be demanded and that a collegiate culture of colleagues and a shared understanding is the only way to make things happen.

Or this on an ageing society:

It is the professional caring services which are going to be overstretched in the new society as people live longer and more on their own. We will need more and better homes for old people, delivery services for them, information and home counselling services. There will not be enough full-time

professionals to staff these services. Part-time professionals in their Third Age could be a great help.

And when he writes about education, consider these enlightening words referencing 'the forgotten third' which continues to bite us in the UK:

A system which has in the past allowed more than a third of its members to leave without even one acceptable mark of achievement has to be more deskilling, particularly for a portfolio world. In that world, self-confidence, a saleable skill or talent and an ability to cope with life and to communicate are critical. Success of some sort needs to be part of everyone's early experience. That is why a wider and more formal acceptance of the other types of intelligence is so crucial.

Spending a few hours browsing through recently published books by pundits on social, business and education affairs, I am at a loss to find a writer who lays out a comparably prescient view of a future society, say in 2050.

Perhaps it is because writers are still in a post-Covid hangover. Or maybe their thinking is (properly) focused on a carbon zero 2050, and on the inevitable mass migration of peoples from south to north as the planet warms. These big topics squeeze out the kind of creative thinking about the shape of society to come which inspired me several decades ago.

As school and college leaders take precious breathing space during August, who might they read to inspire them ahead, in the way Charles Handy did me in 1989?

Who is offering some upside-down thinking which challenges orthodoxies for this and the next era? Which pioneer writers might we turn to? Leaders are ever in need of compelling stories and ideas about the future to share with and guide those they lead.

Suggestions welcome at royb88@gmail.com

Roy Blatchford's latest book is [*The A - Z of Great Classrooms*](#), published by John Catt.