

Blinks

High quality reviews for the education sector

Ronald Arnold H.M.I.

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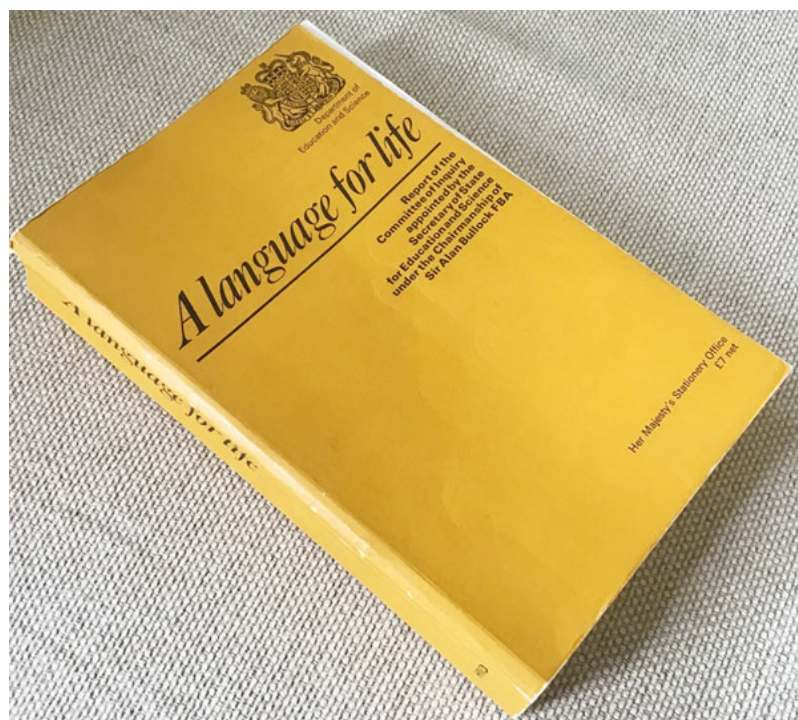
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One of the towering educationists of his generation died peacefully at the end of June, aged 98. We shall not see his like again.

The Committee's greatest debt is to its Secretary, Mr. R. Arnold, H.M.I., who has been a constant source of energy, ideas and invention at every stage of the inquiry.....The ability and efficiency with which he handled a formidable volume of organisation under great pressure have impressed us all. He has crowned two years' hard work by turning the views and judgements of the Committee into a coherent Report, written by a single hand.

Alan Bullock, 1975

The Bullock Report: A language for life was one of the landmark reports in education in the second part of the 20th century. In the Foreword to the Report, Reg Prentice, the Secretary of State for Education and Science, wrote that 'all our education depends on the understanding and effective use of English as does success in so many aspects of adult life'.



Few reports since (one thinks of the Cockcroft Report in mathematics) have had such a telling and long-lasting impact on schools, with Bullock's central mantra that *all* teachers are teachers of English.

And, as Alan Bullock's introductory paragraph above testified, the Report was in fact the work of 'a single hand'. Years later I had occasion to interview another distinguished educationist Michael Marland. Michael was a member of the Committee and I asked him whether it was true that Ronald Arnold's draft was so perfect that no-one dared tamper with it. 'Almost', he replied. The power of the first draft has stayed with me.

The 600-page report is nothing short of a masterclass in harnessing evidence and views from a diaspora of sources across the nation - and then capturing their essence in beautiful prose which flows flawlessly. Take these snapshots from HMI Arnold's pen.

It has been claimed that at no time in the life of an average person does he successfully achieve a more complex learning task than when he learns to speak, a task which is substantially completed before he is five years old.

It is a particularly effective device for a teacher to stir demand by reading out arresting passages from new books.

Assessment is possible only by examining the explicit products of school activity, and the instruments of assessment should therefore include samples of performance considered to be important and representative of attainments.

In any anxiety over a contemporary situation there is likely to be a wistful look back to the past, with a conviction, often illusory, that times were better then than now.

I can hear Ronald's voice proclaiming these sentences. Why? Because after he retired as HMI in 1987, Sir Tim Brighouse appointed him to be adviser for English in Oxfordshire. I was a young headteacher and, miraculously, Ronald was assigned to me as a school improvement partner, a title he eschewed in characteristic style.

His professional development sessions with staff were legendary, usually beginning with his quoting chunks of Milton or Sylvia Plath or Graham Greene - and then he would stand beside the overhead projector turning his transparencies one by one with an inimitable flourish and with phrases of most exquisite syntax. He was inspirational.

He had his darker side too, suffering he always said from seasonal affective disorder (SAD). This led one foggy November to his arriving in my secretary's office and plonking himself down on her electric typewriter. It crashed to the floor, irreparable. He took out his wallet and offered to pay for it, ever with a winning smile.

And of course he was a font of great tales from his own days as a headteacher and then his many years as one of Her Majesty's Inspectors. One Friday afternoon he was asked by a Minister to produce a pamphlet on the teaching of poetry in England's schools. He presented it to the Minister on the following Monday morning; you can read it to this day: *Teaching poetry in the secondary school - an HMI view* (HMSO 1987).

A formidable intellect, a master of the English language, a wonderful raconteur, a trenchant critic - his influence on every teacher whom he encountered was significant. **Ronald Arnold HMI**: that our paths crossed, I am forever grateful.