

**KILBURN GRAMMAR SCHOOL
OLD BOYS' ASSOCIATION**

OBITUARY

BRIAN WINSTON

THE LINCOLN PROFESSOR

BY ALAN SCHNEIDER



Photograph by Alan Schneider taken in 1960



Brian Winston died on April 8th, aged 80. Because he died after a fall in a care home where he was recuperating after some weeks of intensive care for an infection that threatened his heart (not covid) an inquest had to be held, and the funeral did not take place until May 19th.

Brian was one of the class of 1952 entry to KGS and was the youngest in the year. I did not know him straight away as we were in different first year forms, but we joined up in the second year 2A, the Latin class. I got to know him a little then, though he was not yet the outstanding figure he was to become - the towering intellect of the class was **Danny Sperber** (now Rabbi Daniel Sperber, in Jerusalem). Indeed it was not until the fourth year that we got to know each other well, through, inevitably, the school play production of *Coriolanus*, in which he played Valeria.

Brian had gone into the Arts form in the fourth year though he could equally have done well with Science, as the technical detail in his books and his self-diagnosis of his heart condition about ten years ago, proves. But his love of literature, history, and the classics came foremost. Despite it being O-Level year, Brian took part in the 1956/7 production of Hamlet, playing Rosencrantz as a serious and nasty character. Unfortunately family objections prevented him from going on the tour to Germany.

In the sixth form Brian was the Librarian for a year, and Treasurer of the Music Society. I was the Secretary, and used Brian's considerable LP collection of classical music to make up the programmes for the Friday lunchtime meetings. Brian and myself, much encouraged by **Rosemary Chirgwin**, the School Secretary, had developed a passion for film, and we set up a Film Society, which became very successful and remained so for some years. The first film we showed was *Ashes and Diamonds*, by the Polish director Andrej Wajda. Brian had an uncle, Charles Cooper, who owned Contemporary

Films, a film distribution company in Soho Square. Mr Cooper had come to England from New York when McCarthy was about to get him for his communist sympathies, and he managed to bring his catalogue of films with him, including all the great Russian silent films. He did not charge us for the films he lent us for the Society. It was quite something going up to Soho Square with Brian and coming back with reels of the latest acclaimed film or a treasured classic in our arms.

In December 1957 **Mr P K Wright** put on *Love's Labour's Lost*, his last KGS play production, Brian played Sir Nathaniel, and was hilarious - what a wonderful sound it was to hear the Hall filled with laughter. Alongside, **Raymond Brody**, **Alan Ereira** (who went on to become a TV and Film director a few years later), **Steven Wilson** and **Mike George**, who wrote a lovely memory of Brian in the last Newsletter, they nearly outshone **Graham Bell** and all the lovers.

We both stayed on for a third year sixth - me because I had nothing else to do, Brian to finish his Oxford entry exams and also to write an essay for a Stuyvesant Foundation competition with a hefty cash prize for the winner. Brian chose to write about Eisenstein and his films, the detail of which probably left the judges nonplussed - I still have a copy of the draft. At this time, film was Brian's overwhelming interest. His uncle Mr Cooper let Brian take home all the Eisenstein films. We were continuously going up to his office to carry back films like *Battleship Potemkin* or *Alexander Nevsky*, and Brian would then spend weeks with his projector going through each film frame by frame.

In schooltime he had lessons, which were more like tutorials, with **Mr Vic Callaghan**, along with **Gabby Chanan**, for the Oxford entry exams. I sat in on many of these, which as often as not were discussions on the latest book, play, or film. This was all going very well until one day, walking down a corridor, Brian was stopped by

the PT master **Mr C V Williams**. “You weren't in gym yesterday” says he. “No” Brian replied, and explained that as he was now at school for the sole purpose of getting into Oxford he did not feel that doing PT was a part of this. CVW replied that if he was at school he had to do PT and said he expected to see him in the gym next week. Brian was totally flummoxed. He turned to me and said, “That's it. I'm going home”. He packed his briefcase and did just that - for something like two months.

Rosemary made frantic daily phone calls to try to persuade him to return. Vic Callaghan realized that this was no easy situation, and continued to read his essays and help shape the Eisenstein project from afar. I visited Brian at his house almost every day, taking messages and bringing back written work. It was a stalemate situation - Brian would not return unless assured he would not be cashiered into a PT class. I would add that he was not adverse to PT or games. **Brian Proctor** tells me he was a very capable hockey player, though he did not play in the school team because of the Saturday morning fixtures. Later on, at Oxford, he played in goal for his college.

Eventually, Rosemary was able to smooth things out and he returned to take his Oxford entry and finish his Eisenstein essay under Vic's guidance. He did not get the scholarship, however, but he did get his Oxford entry, and went to Merton College in the autumn of 1960 to read Law. Almost immediately he was writing articles for the *Isis* magazine, and occasionally for *The Listener* and the British Film Institute journal *Sight and Sound*, for which he continued to write for many years. Much later he was appointed a Governor of the BFI.

A great feature of the year entries to KGS in the early fifties (and before) was the number of Jewish boys who came to the school - mostly because of the high academic standard for which it had a

name throughout North London. Everyone fitted into the school perfectly, and we were not afraid to be open about being Jewish. Some were more religious than others, and Brian was certainly amongst those. He read and understood classical Hebrew fluently, and he had a deep knowledge of Jewish history, both ancient and 20th century. No wonder that many years later in his academic career he won an Emmy for his script for a programme in an Israeli TV series about the History of the Jews.

I visited him several times at Oxford, where it seemed he was on track to become a film director. Many of his friends were part of the university theatre and film world, including the late Jo Durden Smith, who became a documentary film maker and was godfather to Brian and Adele's children, Gavin Millar, who became a film director, and died just a few days after Brian, and the late Sheridan Morley, the writer and authority on theatre. So no surprise when on leaving Oxford Brian joined the team of one of the most hard hitting weekly documentary series on TV, Granada's *World in Action*. I went over to his house to watch the first programme he worked on with him and his parents and brother **Jeffrey**, also at KGS in the 60's. The programme, in B&W in those days, was about the waning power of the British Empire in Africa. When the final image of a tattered Union Jack was shown and the programme ended, we all gave a cheer.

A few years later he joined the BBC, where he met Adele working on the programme *24 hours*. Brian was a strong union supporter, though I do remember him telling me shortly after he joined the BBC how impressed he was that his training actually included technical detail such as how a microphone worked, but adding that if a microphone was not working and he took it apart he could close down the whole BBC by causing the electrical or technical union to come out on strike.

Brian and Adele married in 1978. They had two children (born in USA) - Jessica, who is Director of Communications for an agency

that deals with new businesses, and Matthew, who has followed his father into the world of film and media and is a Teaching Fellow at Leicester University.

At the BBC Brian worked on the news report *24 Hours* and on *Talkback*, where people who had written to the BBC were brought into the studio to put forward their views live. But film continued to pull him away, and he soon left to teach at the National Film School for several years. In 1979 he began a life of continual academic appointments at various universities where he either set up or greatly enlarged departments in film and media and communications, firstly in the USA and then in GB. In USA his first post was at New York University, followed by heading an even larger department at Pennsylvania State University in the 80s.

In 1992, as the children were growing up, they decided to return to GB and Brian was offered a post at Cardiff University, then after a few years went to Westminster University. Whilst in London the family had a flat just round the corner from me in Islington, and our daughter would babysit for them. Finally, Brian was offered a post at Lincoln University. Here he became a Doctor then Professor of Communications and Pro Vice-Chancellor of the University. But the honour he most relished came in his last years, when he was the first to be appointed The Lincoln Professor. Lincoln's annual award for best documentary (student film) has recently been renamed '*The Professor Brian Winston Award for Best Documentary*'.

He spent much time attending documentary film festivals and competitions, especially abroad, and it was through these visits he met Gail Vanstone, Associate Professor of Humanities at York University, Toronto, and they became partners, although they were only able to meet occasionally, and never again once covid lockdown started. Gail's flight to attend the funeral was originally booked as their first meeting once all restrictions had been lifted.

During his many years of academia, Brian was involved in many, many projects. Some of these were: co-producing a feature film in 1978 titled *The Third Walker*. He enjoyed this, but more production did not appeal to him. In 2010 he scripted a documentary on Robert Flaherty (who directed *Man of Aran*, *Nanook of the North*). This documentary was entitled *A Boatload of Wild Irishmen*, and it was extremely successful and won awards. His most prized award however was in 1984 when he won an Emmy for his script for an episode in the Israel TV series called *Heritage - Civilization and the Jews*. His episode was entitled *Out of the Ashes* and it dealt with the period 1917 to 1947. Brian wrote some twenty books, one with Gail - *Documentary Film in the 21st Century*, and latterly with his son Matthew. They were working on a new book when Brian died.

Some things he did meant a lot to him. One was helping a friend escape from the Greek Junta using his passport. Another was, at the end of the funeral of his uncle Charlie, who had lent us all those films so many years back, Brian joined in with everyone to sing the International.

On a different level, he spent a lot of time visiting schools and talking about the Jewish Heritage and way of life. A lasting achievement was getting proper recognition of what happened to the Jews of Lincoln in 1255, when they were accused of killing a Christian boy for a religious rite. For many years Brian was a member of a very small Jewish community which would meet in the same castle tower where the Jews had been imprisoned. A plaque in the Cathedral made a brief reference to this but did not explain that the Jews were imprisoned on a completely false charge, and later taken to London to be executed in the Tower. Brian persuaded the Cathedral to make a new plaque stating clearly what had happened. The community had no regular Rabbi, and Brian would help take the services on

Sabbath, Festivals, and Holy Days, reading the Law and Talmud and leading discussions.

A Rabbi did officiate at Brian's funeral, however, and I had great satisfaction in leading the recitation of Kaddish - the Prayer for the Dead. The chapel was full: Brian's family with Adele, his daughter Jessica and son Mathew. His partner Gail was there too. Sadly his brother Jeffrey was not present for reasons which were suggested in **Julian Freeman's** appreciation in the last Newsletter, though in fact there was later on a very bad family rift. On the other hand Jeffrey's son Sam, an artist, was present, and I was very pleased to meet him. He has some of Brian's interest in film, and was keen to learn more about him and KGS. Also present were many members of Lincoln's Jewish community, and old friends from his TV career.

One of these friends, from his teen and Oxford days, Ruth Leon, widow of Sheridan Morley, spoke about Brian. She said he was a remarkable man, and this summed him up perfectly. He had a prodigious appetite for knowledge on any subject, greatly enlarged by his photographic memory. Anyone who could sit in the prefects' room and recite pages of Ulysses from memory and explain all the regimes and characters from *The Lord of the Rings* had to be remarkable.

The reason Brian took to an academic life rather than become the film director I thought he was going to be was because equal to his never ending desire to acquire knowledge was his desire to impart what he knew to others. I am sure that his lectures to his students covered a mountain of information whatever the lecture subject. There may well be clips from his lectures on YouTube. Also, he can be seen making comments in a BBC documentary *Dial B for Britain - The History of the Telephone*, but only in the first half. This because he said they were getting so many things wrong that he walked out!

I have never forgotten one anecdote that Brian told me. Having finished his Oxford exams, he went to teach in a school (I cannot remember whether it was in Kilburn or Wembley). In an early attempt at Equality, this school, rather than call its forms ABC, or 123, suggesting some order of superiority, called its forms Red, White and Blue. One day Brian was talking to a group of young boys. He asked one boy who he did not know, which form he was in. The boy replied " I'm in Blue form, Sir. I'll always be Blue. I'll never be Red or White". That reply stayed with Brian a long time.

Before lockdown we would meet for lunch whenever he came down to London, and in between we would exchange e-mails . When we met, we would talk about times old and new, and have a good laugh. From schooldays on he was one of the funniest people I knew. For all his achievements, that is how I will remember my great friend.



**GABBY CHANAN, ALAN SCHNEIDER and BRIAN WINSTON
at the Royal Society of Arts in Albany, London, in 2018**



BRIAN as ROSENCRANTZ in "*HAMLET*", 1956
Photograph by Mr E W L Leavey



BRIAN as SIR NATHANIEL (seated) in "LOVE'S LABOUR'S LOST",
with **RAYMOND BRODY** as HOLOFERNES (left) 1957
WILLIAM READ as DULL (partly hidden)
STEPHEN WILSON as MOTH (right)

Photograph by Mr E W L Leavey