

Assess the relevance
of pages 58 – 63 in
the history boys to
the rest of the play...

[History](#)



When we meet Irwin again at the beginning of Act two he is a man now well into his forties and has moved on from teaching history in a school to filming a television history programme on location. We learn that he is five years older and yet there is a certain irony in the fact that he still recites the same mantra that he used with the 'history boys' when called in to prepare them for Oxbridge entry

If you want to learn about Stalin study Henry VIII.

If you want to learn about Mrs Thatcher study Henry VIII

If you want to know about Hollywood study Henry VIII'

It was all history. It seems that although older and now in a wheelchair his basic attitude and approach have changed little. He is now a 'personality' presenting a programme upon Rievaulx Abbey and life in monastic orders which he brings down to the level of 'toilet arrangements' stating that he believes this to be the way to bring history to life and the Director reflects upon how he sounds a 'tad schoolmasterly'.

Irwin, for all his changed position, having been transported from a life in the classroom to in front of a television camera, is still focussed upon viewing things from an unusual perspective and using language to effect as when he reflects upon the different materials being used in place of toilet paper, in effect saying that it is these artefacts which people now come to view saying of them, 'there is an increment in excrement, so sanitised by the years and sanitised too' so he introduces a note of humour. Indeed he says of what he

sees as 'modern day pilgrims.' 'We are differently credulous and our cults are not the same but saner, wiser, more rational...'

He stumbles as if deeply absorbed in reflection of how people's attitudes have changed, yet he can use the same approach. We see that Irwin's approach to teaching and to history has not really changed from that which he expressed when first called in to prepare the boys for Oxbridge entry, For Irwin history is not a matter of conviction and he encourages the boys to be dispassionate and so distance themselves. It was perhaps evident from Irwin's first meeting with the boys that he was prepared to advocate whatever was required in order to gain the described objective. Irwin, the television presenter, has retained this belief in looking at these aspects of history which offer a more controversial approach to the subject. Initially describing the boys' work as 'Abysmally dull' he recognised to be successful they had to attract attention by using unorthodox methods. His dictum, which was evident as a teacher, was evident when he said,

'The wrong end of the stick is the right one. A question has a front door and a back door. Go in the back or better still the side.'

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To shock or surprise was his intent. He then proceeded to express his opinion that history was a performance, For Irwin, unlike Hector, presentation was everything and he has interest in moral truth viewing things as being entertainment, so the first glimpse of Irwin the television presenter was evident even as a teacher. When referring to Stalin, whilst agreeing that he

was a monster, he was still perfectly willing to say something in his defence. Thus, to him, the end justifies the means and he revels in being perverse. Irwin sums up the object of his approach, to the man who turns out to be none other than Posner, by describing it as 'meretricious' and when called upon to define the word he describes it as 'Eye-catching, showy, false.' This last word almost appears as a damning indictment of his whole approach to teaching. When Posner replies by saying, 'But you were a good teacher' Irwin simply says 'The meretricious often are... on television particularly.' He then backs this up by reflectin that

'The wheelchair helps of course.

Disability brings with it an assumption of sincerity.'

We see that he was still prepared to use whatever vehicle to give him the edge and curry favour and sympathy. It was a means to an end, a prop but reveals him to be morally shallow.

So it is that we are reminded of our initial meeting with Irwin when, still in a wheelchair, he was addressing three or four unidentified MPs upon the best way of presenting a bill before Parliament, the effects of which would, if examined, would prove to be very contentious concerned, as it was, with the effective ending of trial by jury in at least half of the cases which come before the courts abolishing with it the assumption of innocence. Sadly Irwin's views have become even more morally corrupted, perhaps the person we see before the television camera and addressing MPs is just the logical

projection of the teacher who advocated taking a completely opposite or controversial view to attain a desired outcome.

It is now just the case that his horizons are greatly expanded and he is able to suppress any moral feelings. He has obviously reached a stage where he is happy to twist debatable aspects to fit in with what he wishes to achieve. His views are well illustrated when he says in defence of a law change, 'Paradox works well and mists up the windows which is handy' We then come to appreciate how Irwin the television presenter views what he does by saying, 'School. That's all it is. In my case anyway. Back to school.' He really had come to believe that history was 'a performance. Its entertainment. And if it isn't make it so.' Perhaps this last statement is so telling of his willingness to subvert the facts and in so doing taking an argument and endeavouring to prove its opposite as he had first done as a teacher who was willing to relegate moral truth for effect.