

Brookfield Revisited

by Michael McMahon

Letters Between a Victorian Schoolboy and His Family, 1892-1895

Edited by David Lisle Crane

Privately published (available through
www.worldwidebooks.com);
433 pp., £35.00



The Golden Year of the Golden Age of Hollywood was, perhaps, 1939. Amongst its many films that have since become classics—including *Gone With the Wind*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Stagecoach*, and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*—was the first (and best) version of James Hilton’s novel *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*. The film (like the book) tells the story of the three loves in its hero’s life: the boys he teaches, the wife he marries, and the school he serves for a lifetime and whose values he comes to represent. As he ages, Mr. Chips looks back on, and champions, what he thinks of as the golden years of the English public school. It is precisely this era that is covered, as fact, by *Letters Between a Victorian Schoolboy and His Family*. The fictional Mr. Chipping would have been beginning the third of his five decades as a master at the imaginary Brookfield School when the very real—and very small—Tankred Tunstall-Behrens arrived as a boarder at Clifton College, near Bristol, and encountered the Victorian public school myth for himself.

Letters is a remarkable book. David Crane has assembled the complete correspondence between Tankred and his parents, other letters that passed between the family and the school, and a host of associated documents and ephemera including reports, examination papers, and contemporary magazine articles. Nearly a hundred photographs, as well as maps, drawings, and facsimile manuscripts, illustrate and support the text. There is a full critical introduction by Julia Crane, David’s wife. The book is annotated, cross-referenced, and indexed in a way that makes its content accessible even to those who know nothing of English his-

tory or culture. And though few of the book’s readers will need to turn to the biographical index to discover that “Alfred the Great (849-901)” was “King of the West Saxons,” those puzzled by a passing reference to “Blackie” will be as amused as they are enlightened to find him listed as “a Newfield goldfish (d. 1895).” The editing is nothing if not comprehensive, and displays the kind of scholarly attention to detail that you would expect of one who has recently re-edited *The Merry Wives of Windsor* for the Cambridge University Press.

Letters provides an unusually complete picture of upper-middle-class life in late Victorian England. The characters revealed here are very much of their time, but they are not all bound by it, for this was, after all, an age on the very cusp of modernity. On one page, there is a photograph of the boy’s aunts Lilian and Mabel pedaling a kind of archaic double-tandem; a few pages later, his mother, Min, is pictured in the open cockpit of a biplane. Min is, in some ways, the most sympathetic character to emerge from the correspondence. The warmth of her personality and her enthusiasm for social justice, democracy, and the emancipation of women remind one very much of her fictional contemporary, Katherine, the short-lived and much-loved wife of Mr. Chips. (Though, had Hilton let Katherine live, it is perhaps unlikely that it would have been so that she could design and patent an “omnidress” to allow women the freedom of movement necessary for their emancipated state. Min did.) Min was much loved, too; not least by her brother, John Tunstall, who wrote with embarrassing intensity to his sister’s future husband that “no one on earth was ever more adored by Father, Mother & Brother than my Dear Dear Sister is; we are as completely wrapt up in her, as ever a lover was in the object of his love.” Tunstall was writing from New Mexico and could not return to England because of the “extremely critical position of [his] affairs.” That, at least, was no exaggeration: He was killed shortly afterward in an incident which started the Lincoln County War and made Billy the Kid a legendary figure.

For all the incidental interests that are touched upon in this collection of letters—the moral, political, and religious preoccupations of the time, and the char-

acters that weave in and out—the real heart of the collection is the struggle of Tankred to work out a relationship with the phenomenon that dominates the book: the Victorian public school. He was sent to one because Leu, his father, had a view of such places which was every bit as romantic as that represented in *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*. For Leu was a foreigner—a German immigrant who was determined to found a family dynasty in his adopted country, untarnished in honor and based squarely on the respect he expected from the son who was to be his heir. It must have seemed to him that there was no better place to reinforce such values than Clifton, a school self-consciously founded to provide the expanding empire of Britain with leaders among men. It was, in some ways, a good choice. After all, it was to be an Old Cliftonian, Sir Henry Newbolt, who would later write that most patriotic (and now, sadly, much-mocked) of public-school poems, “Vitaī Lampada” (“There’s a breathless hush in the Close to-night— / Ten to make and the match to win . . .”). The stirring message is also a simple one: that the teamwork, courage, and self-sacrificing stiff-upper-lippery that is practiced on the playing fields of English public schools turn into heroism in time of war.

What Leu failed to realize was that one of the rules binding the whole system together is that even its unjust punishments have to be accepted without complaint. A key strand of the correspondence relates Tankred’s moral outrage when he is beaten by his house prefects for some minor offense of which he claims innocence, and his father’s rigid defense of the offended honor of his son. Germanic heels dig in, and the letters that fly to and from the school become increasingly heated. Tankred comes very close to being thrown out. On March 10, 1895, Leu writes to his house tutor:

Will you kindly explain to me the powers and limits of power of the VI form boys. Is their serious responsibility supposed to exclude gentlemanly behaviour & permit cowardice? Can a praefect [sic] do no wrong & is therefore unpunishable?—If such is an existing error at Clifton I desire to expose it & have it rectified.

Mr. Borwick replies by return, explaining

how vitally important to the success of the public-school system, here and elsewhere, is the loyal cooperation of every one high and low, with the endeavours of the VI form to maintain a high standard of conduct and manners.

Still, Leu doesn't get the point, and he complains to the headmaster, M.M. Glazebrook, who replies that Tankred

does not take a proper attitude either towards work or towards authority. Instead of accepting instruction and rules of discipline, and making the best of them, as ordinary healthy boys do, he is querulous and critical. It not only makes him unhappy, but deprives him of a large part of the benefit of a public school education.

But term ends, the incident is forgotten, and Tankred survives. It is a survival almost as remarkable as that of the correspondence itself, which David Crane has here assembled in a handsome volume which offers a scholarly yet sensitive insight into the reality behind the English public-school myth.

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Great—and Famous

by Tony Outhwaite

Ray Charles: Man and Music

by Michael Lydon

New York: Riverhead Books;

448 pp., \$27.95



The late 1940's and early 1950's were the heyday of rhythm-and-blues. Singers like Charles Brown, Muddy Waters, B.B. King, Amos Milburn, James Brown, Bobby "Blue" Bland, and others like them were becoming acknowledged masters of the genre, all with readily identifiable musical personalities, while such older big-band blues shouters as Wynonie Harris, Jimmy Witherspoon, Eddie

"Cleanhead" Vinson, and Big Joe Turner, years past their early successes, began to attract the attention of teenaged audiences and re-launch careers in decline. Most of these men were what might be called "urban bluesmen" and worked with instrumental groups that featured tight rhythm sections and jazzy horn arrangements. They sang of problems with women, alcohol, money, or life in general, and their lyrics were sophisticated, philosophical, sometimes quite humorous, and even hilariously bawdy. And most of these men—and others—recorded for one or another of five or six labels: Chess Records of Chicago; King Records of Cincinnati; the Duke or Peacock labels, both owned by Don Robey of Houston; Ahmet Ertegun's Atlantic Records of New York; and two Los Angeles companies, the Bihari Brothers' Modern Records and the Mesner family's Aladdin Records.

Early 1952 found the young bluesman Ray Charles at something of a crossroads: He had spent the formative years of his career imitating both Nat "King" Cole and Charles Brown, elegant and refined singers who accompanied themselves on piano and tended to operate in a trio context. He had worked as pianist, arranger, and sometimes alternate vocalist with singer Lowell Fulson's band since 1950 and functioned, to the musically illiterate Fulson's occasional resentment, as the band's leader. At the very beginning of 1952, Charles had signed a contract with Atlantic Records, but a lack of an identifiable personal style puzzled Ahmet Ertegun and his associates—particularly veteran Kansas City bandleader Jesse Stone, by now serving as Atlantic's artist-and-repertoire director.

That spring, Charles ran into R&B bandleader Johnny Otis in Cincinnati and, in a poorly planned attempt at bidding up his value to Atlantic, persuaded Otis to get him an audition with the temperamental Syd Nathan, president of King Records and regarded as one of the keenest judges of talent in the country. Yet Nathan's snap decision, based on a short studio audition, that he didn't need "a poor man's Charles Brown," as disappointing as it initially was to Charles, can be seen as a key point in the singer's career. Now he would have to continue with Atlantic, at least for the near future, and he would have to come to grips with perhaps the most important decision any singer faces: the aesthetic choice of a personal style, a sound of one's own.

Today, the world knows Ray Charles as a music-industry legend. He has sung blues, ballads, jump tunes, country-and-western, and what some might call pop, yet he always sounds like himself, instantly recognizable; he has been a composer, arranger, bandleader, and both pianist and alto saxophonist, even organist, and has fronted groups ranging from trios to 17-piece jazz bands. He has sung at presidential inaugurations, recorded for charity, guest-hosted "Saturday Night Live," run a string of commercial enterprises, owned his own plane, and done advertising campaigns for Pepsi and for mink coats.

He has seemingly been everywhere and done everything, a star since the late 1950's, and yet even this legend has experienced what an unnamed record-industry sage described as "a time in nearly every artist's career when he or she stops selling records. They may still be great, but the market moves past them." For Charles, this happened around 1977, and the early 1980's became one long slump marked by declining record sales and personal income. Yet in the 1990's, he remains one of the music world's most enduring personalities, constantly on the move, trying new ideas and exploring new possibilities. This restless, inventive man's life and career, from the earliest years of dire poverty in rural north-central Florida during the Depression and World War II to the first hits in the 1950's and on to permanent status as a major box-office figure, is documented in full detail by Michael Lydon in his excellent new biography, *Ray Charles: Man and Music*.

It is to the book's advantage that Lydon, one of the founders of *Rolling Stone* magazine, is himself a musician, because this gives him added insight into the musical life; however, he is also adept at describing what he sees and knows in terms readily understood by the layman. He has spoken with most of Charles' oldest friends, and it is clear from the reactions of such veteran jazzmen as Hank Crawford, Leroy Cooper, Phil Guilbeau, and David "Fathead" Newman that Charles could probably have been one of the world's finest jazz pianists, had he wanted it that way. It also becomes apparent that Charles has never been the easiest of men to deal with. Mercurial, quick to anger and reluctant to forgive, secretive and penurious, often inconsiderate of even those closest to him, he seems to possess a number of the personality traits