

Thesis madness

A STORY by DAVID MARPLES

This is a commonplace story about a trip to Europe and a thesis defence. But as often happens, nothing turned out quite as planned.

There I was at my university in northern England, a red-brick edifice in what might be described as an industrial wasteland, a full two hours before the defence was to begin. The department chairman, one Rodney Spencer, was smiling benignly at me with his huge blue eyes. Rodney is known locally as Golden Boy, because of his meteoric rise from humble lecturer to professor, or as "Psycho" because of those eyes. It was the latter appellation that seemed most appropriate to me at the time.

"Just had a call from Professor Bailey (my external examiner)," he said assuringly. "He wanted to know when your defence was."

I spluttered "Isn't it today?"

"Of course, but he said it hadn't been confirmed in writing."

"Hasn't it?"

"Well it has, actually. But he's in Liverpool and the confirmation went to his college in London."

"So he phoned from Liverpool this morning?"

"No, London."

I was already bewildered. "If he phoned from London, then surely he must have received the confirmation?"

"It went to his department. I think he was phoning from his home. And he didn't have a chance to call in at the department because he had to catch the train to Liverpool."

It all made sense. My external examiner did not know when the defence was. The phone rang it was the internal examiner. This at least was reassuring. Psycho handed me the phone.

"Thomas Derby here," the pleasant voice said, "How are you feeling?"

"Nervous."

"No need to be. I'm looking forward to it. I shall be taking Bailey to lunch, so that should put him in a good mood."

If he turns up, I thought. I retreated to the university library.

At 1pm, I entered the university's Arts Tower. The Department of Political Science, wherein the defence was to be held (for reasons unknown, since my subject was History) was on the eleventh floor. In order to get there, one had two choices: an elevator that stopped at the tenth and twelfth floors; or a hideous machine that was a sort of open elevator that was constantly moving. The accepted method of entry was a swallow dive and a prayer. In fact, it is alleged that many students suffering the tensions of examinations have perished in this very machine. Summoning what remained of my courage, I threw myself at an empty compartment and sailed upward. When Floor 11 was at eye-level, I prepared to disembark, briefcase ahead of me, somehow managing to land upright and none the worse for wear.

The Political Science secretary informed me that Derby and Bailey were still at lunch. It was 1:10pm, I had travelled 4,000 miles for a thesis defence, and my examiners were having lunch. Eventually they arrived, Derby chubby and jovial, Bailey serious, bespectacled, a sixtyish Englishman in a tweed jacket.

Derby acquired three coffees and began. Almost instantly Bailey, to all intents and purposes, fell asleep. He slumped in his chair like an overgrown hedgehog, eyes closed. Must be the trip, I thought. Poor old chap isn't as young as he used to be. Derby was talking about Soviet farms, not altogether surprising since this was my thesis topic. Sud-

denly there was an explosion. It was Bailey. Moaning loudly, he raised one finger in the air.

"But what," he asked, "What about the campaign to join up small farms?"

"He hadn't been asleep after all. 'It's in there,' I said, as calmly as I dared.

He scrutinized me over his glasses as though I had just made a horrendous gaffe.

"In where?"

"In the thesis."

"Yes," he replied. "I am aware of that. But it took me a very long time to find it."

"I'm afraid that section will have to be greatly expanded."

"I cut it down. It was originally thirty pages. I thought my thesis was too long."

"You're right," Bailey said, "It is too long. Ok, that's fine then. But it will have to be expanded before the book comes out."

"What book?"

"You see," Derby interjected, "One of our tasks is to determine whether your thesis is publishable."

I had a loophole. Thenceforth, whenever either examiner raised a point, I was able to ask, regarding proposed revisions, "Do you mean for the book?"

"Of course," Wiles would reply, "For the book."

After an hour or so, we were on to resistance to Soviet rule, which Derby knew something about. I relaxed, and it was in this languid state that I began to talk about movements of population within the USSR. Bailey, who had been examining an apparent hole in his pink sock, sprang to life.

"What do you mean, 'moved'?"

"To other areas."

"You mean they left good land fallow?"

"It wasn't good land. Most of it was in the mountains."

"They were living off it weren't they?"

"Well yes."

"Then it was good land. Not being an economist, you wouldn't have realized that."

"Well I'll be damned. I wouldn't have believed it even of the Russians."

I was in a fog. Then Bailey began again.

"About those farms being joined up..."

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry, but they'll have to go in. Just too important."

Another hour and it was all over. Psycho entered on cue, but before he could offer congratulations or commiseration, Bailey assailed him.

"Look here, I don't like to bother you with this, but there is the little matter of my travel expenses."

"Quite all right," said the blue eyes. "Have you filled in the form?"

"Oh yes," Bailey handed him a crumpled sheet from his back pocket.

"You haven't included your insurance number."

"No," said Bailey, "I haven't. And I'm not going to. It is no business of anyone's as far as I can see."

"It would help the processing."

"Nonsense! They'll process it. Now if you good people don't mind, I think it's time I got on with my life."

But we followed him down the stairs to the elevator, the little eccentric with his battered briefcase. As we descended, Bailey glowered at my thesis, which I was now carrying.

"I had problems when you sent that," he said. "There I was staggering around London with this ruddy great brown fucker under my arm."

So there it was. Five years of solid labour reduced to "brown fucker." As Bailey disappeared into a taxicab, I asked Psycho about the old man's elevator language. Psycho smiled knowingly.

"It's just a new word he's discovered. so he uses it all the time."

So it was over. And time to celebrate. But it was 4pm and the pubs were all closed. Dry England on a hot summer's day. Thoughts of Canadian brew flashed through my mind. Meanwhile the afternoon's principal entertainment was on a train heading for London, or Liverpool, or wherever, doubtless mousing into the *Daily Telegraph*, "It has to go in, no matter what, it has to go in."

Hi-tech costs jobs

by Rick Warren

Cutbacks in national social programs are threatening our very basis as a civilized society, says a Canadian Labour Congress spokesperson.

Katherine McGuire told participants at a workshop on technological change that if cutbacks continue, fear, anxiety and lack of trust will be widespread across the nations undercutting the cooperative measures developed in Canada.

Cutbacks have been made in the unemployment insurance program; in government funding for post-secondary institutions; senior citizens pensions have fallen in value along with the introduction of medicare user fees and doctors opting out of the medicare system.

McGuire spoke at the Conference on Human Work, a convention jointly sponsored by various business, labour and education groups.

The threat of technological changes is only compounding the problem, she said.

"There is nothing wrong with technological change as long as it does not create widespread unemployment and underemployment. The effects of technological change

can be good or bad."

"The question, she said, is why and how the changes will be introduced. The problem has not yet been addressed seriously."

Half of the country's steel workers are facing the prospect of losing their jobs in the next 10 years, because of technological changes.

Factories will be run by complete automation and telephone systems are becoming completely computerized.

Technological changes, said McGuire, must be phased in and proper notice given to employees and communities to allow them to prepare for the changes.

Employers and government have a responsibility to train people for planned changes and contribute toward paid educational leaves for retraining purposes, she said.

An explicit job creation program is necessary to plan for the country's future, she added. Shorter working time would allow workers to share in the benefits of technological change and allow them time for job retraining purposes.

McGuire also called for effective collective bargaining to give workers a sense of achievement, autonomy and dignity in their work.

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