

*An Open Letter to all 'Old Dunelmians'  
from Michael Gibson 'O.D.' (School House 1957-61)*

1. This letter is written in support of T. G. R. Berkeley 'O.D.' (School House 1956-61) in his raising of the matter of what he regards as an adverse change in the Constitution and 'nature' of 'The Old Dunelmian Society'.

Trevor is objecting to the change which establishes it that former pupils of the Bow and Choristers Schools who have not gone on to their secondary education at Durham School may now be known as or become 'Old Dunelmians'. I agree with Trevor that this change is wrong and that it should, if at all possible, be reversed.

I would argue that 'The Old Dunelmian Society' has misdirected itself in making this change. It has thus rendered the term 'Old Dunelmian' somewhat ambiguous and nonsensical. The change 'goes against language and logic'. (That is why the titles of the Society and of its members are put in inverted commas in this letter.)

The term 'Old Dunelmian' originally applied factually, historically and technically in a singular or in a general sense to former pupils of Durham School. This is no longer the case, because the term is now used to refer to persons who did not attend Durham School. Specifically, it has been decided that pupils of The Choristers School and of Bow School who have been secondarily educated elsewhere than at Durham School may now be accounted 'Old Dunelmians'.

It may reasonably be surmised that this change in the usage and application of the term 'Old Dunelmian' is directly related to the situation whereby Durham School together with Bow School and The Choristers School became an organisation called The Durham Cathedral Schools Foundation.

It may be said that, as members of this Foundation, the three Schools have a sort or degree of 'shared identity'. But this 'shared identity' is supplementary and secondary to the primary and original identity that each School factually and technically retains. The pupils of each School are identified as being or as having been such. They may also now be identified factually and technically, but second-

arily, as 'pupils' or 'former pupils' of <sup>Durham</sup> The Cathedral Schools Foundation - in a different sense of the term 'pupil'. (And it may be noted that Durham School is, as a secondary school, different in kind to the Bow School and The Choristers School.)

We may now consider again the position that 'The Old Dunelmian Society' has arrived at in allowing as members, who are also to be called 'Old Dunelmians', persons who do not have the original, factual, technical distinction and identity of having been pupils of Durham School.

In its new usage the term 'Old Dunelmian' has <sup>thus</sup> become, technically speaking, ambiguous. It may be suggested that a nonsense has been brought about: the term 'Old Dunelmian' may now be used to refer to individuals lacking the original, principal, historical characteristic of 'an Old Dunelmian'. The term 'Old Dunelmian' may now be said to contradict itself. The one term is now used to refer to two (or more) things that are, in what is the principal, factual respect, technically different. As has been said, this new usage goes against language and logic. It is thus technically and practically invalid. It is false. It may even be said that the new usage invalidates the original one.

I am hoping that at the next A.G.M. of 'The Old Dunelmian Society' we may discuss the possibility of reversing this change in the structure and nature of the Society, and may even effect that reversal. The logic of language suggests that there be separate Societies for the pupils of the individual schools.

2. To further the argument for reversal of the change, I shall set these 'local' matters concerning 'The Old Dunelmian Society' and <sup>Durham</sup> The Cathedral Schools Foundation in relation to matters affecting society more widely, and suggest possible links.

So my approach to matters regarding 'The Old Dunelmian Society' has been principally and fundamentally linguistic. It has been much about the use of language in general as well as in particular respects. In order for thought to be cogent, and for any consequent action to be true and just, due attention needs to be given to the logic of language. There are three particular matters regarding which

I think attention has been wanting and in which bad sense has prevailed:-

- (a) The first is a literary matter, one regarding 'poetry' and poetics. It concerns what may be the best use of the terms 'poem' and 'poetry'. For a long time I have been addressing this matter as *The Poetician* (.com). An early interest in 'poetry', fostered at Durham School by Norman MacLeod and Hugh Dillon (in the years when the 'redoubtable' John Brett was Headmaster), led to my later making a close examination of the craft of English poetry over its thirteen hundred year history in order to understand its nature better, and to perform any of it in its original language, dialects, tones and rhythms, so far as that is possible.

In the course of this study it became clear to me that the principal terms 'poem' and 'poetry' themselves are ambiguous in their present usages. This ambiguity has complexity. We may approach the matter historically.

Through most of the thirteen century history of the craft of 'poetry', the terms 'poem' and 'poetry' were technical ones that referred to things that were written or spoken in verse. 'Verse-craft', as it was originally termed, was the practice of making things in words that had particular, formal objective characteristics. It was also called simply 'word-craft'. It was 'writing' (though the 'word-thing' might not be actually written down) in sets of measured lines in a consistent rhythmic mode (in elements that might later be termed 'feet'). And in conjunction with this consistent rhythmic structure there was another objective and regular patterning technique. In our early 'poetry' this was a systematic patterning of 'alliteration'. Then in later centuries 'rhyme' was used schematically. These were, and are, the original, primary technical characteristics of what were called 'poetry' and 'poems'.<sup>1</sup>

The usages of these terms has changed, with a loss in precision and 'definition'. In more recent times the same fundamental terms 'poem' and 'poetry' have been applied to writing that is less and less 'formal'. This developing ambiguity has been resisted by some.

<sup>1</sup> And see Appendix A if you are at all interested in these matters!

but such resistance has all but disappeared. In modern times 'the craft of poetry' includes pieces that are said to be in what is termed 'free verse', which may 'look like poetry on the page'; and it now includes what are called 'prose poems'. Both these terms are 'self-contradictory'; they are nonsenses; their use goes against language and logic. The matter entails a capitulation in intellect. The terms 'poem' and 'poetry' are now used of things that are of quite different technical kinds. Indeed, this ambiguousness has gone so far that in a recently published little book for children about 'poetry' and 'what it is' by a much respected figure, the leading statement on which the book is founded is this:

A poem is a poem if the writer and  
the reader agree it's a poem.

(Michael Rosen, *What is Poetry?*, 2016)

I regard the perpetration of this nonsense to be a disgrace to all concerned. But the children's teachers will be inclined to accept it and entrench it. It is a shame.

All of us are taught something about 'poetry' and 'poems' early in our lives. Most of us will have some awareness of the ambiguity of these terms. Most of us are not inclined to resist it, because it doesn't 'matter' greatly. But it might be said that this 'imprecision in the use of terms' has 'embedded itself in general consciousness'. This, I suggest, presents a general danger. I rather think that it may incline us to accept and even to perpetrate further nonsenses in other situations.

The ambiguity in the use of the term 'Old Dunelmian' may be considered in parallel with the ambiguous use of the terms 'poem' and 'poetry'.

- (b) The terms 'prose poem' and 'free verse' are in use 'globally' but do not appear much in general discourse in a busy world! However, the odd term 'gay' as a synonym for 'homosexual' (and for the less technical term 'queer') has been in wide and active use for a long time. And now we are well used to the term 'gay marriage'. The informal term 'gay marriage' has now as it were been 'formalized'

through the passing of *The Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act of 2013*. We talk of 'same-sex marriage'. This formulation is a linguistic nonsense. The original and primary meanings of the term 'marriage' had and still have to do with unions between persons of opposite sex, which unions generally had the expectation of a procreative outcome. It need only be said here that, generally speaking, the union of any couple of the same sex will be technically and practically different in essential ways to the union of any couple of opposite sex with regard to a main purpose, that of sexual congress or intercourse.

The linguistic and logical significance of this is that the term 'marriage' in *The Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act* is false, a nonsense. It renders the term 'marriage' ambiguous. The usage of it in the title of the Act is a secondary and a metaphorical one. It falsely implies a primary technical 'sameness' and identity in homosexual and heterosexual unions.

So the linguistic effect of the Act has been to render the terms 'same' and 'opposite' in this context the same rather than different. This can only weaken the logical and linguistic idea of 'differentness'; and this is likely to make difficult the drawing of other logical and linguistic distinctions. This is to be regretted.

There is 'a parallel to be drawn' here between the structure of the ambiguity in this matter and the structure in the changed usage of the term 'Old Dunelmian'.

- (c) Any notion that the long general acceptance of ambiguity in the uses of the terms 'poem' and 'poetry' might in some way have predisposed society to arrive at the 'legal formalizing' of a metaphorical usage of the term 'marriage' would be difficult to prove; but I do entertain that notion.

And I do suggest with some confidence that enquiry and study might provide evidence of a sort of 'causal link' between society's achievement of *The Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act* and the advance of what might be called 'the transgender movement'.

In 'transgenderism' (to use a term that might or might not be acceptable) there is a most serious and to a large extent wilful misuse of primary and technical terms concerning sex and gender. That someone who is biologically a man may claim to be and to be



regarded for practical purposes as actually, technically and biologically a woman, and to have some degree of formal support and protection in establishing 'rights' in this matter, is a dangerous position for society to be in. If such imprecision in thinking in matters essential to life itself becomes established and spreads, cogent and unambiguous communication in all matters will become increasingly difficult. 'Transgenderism' is introducing ambiguities that are absurdities of metaphoricality. It is gaining the power to derange logical thought and to seriously disrupt proper and established social structures and processes. This is wrong.

Again, I suggest a parallel here with the use of the term 'Old Dunelmian'.

This letter is a somewhat elaborate response to what is a quite simple matter regarding the constitution and Constitution of of 'The Old Dunelmian Society.' If the "quite simple matter" has been clearly identified, and the "somewhat elaborate response" has some validity, a question then is: How much does that "quite simple matter," well, 'matter'?

As The Poetician, I am constrained now to go into verse:-

Once, a brilliant Old Boys\* Society  
Somewhat erred from the ways of sobriety;  
And its Constitution  
Required some ablution -  
Finding pristine good sense and propriety. Cheers!

\* I hope that fellow Girl members of our Society will excuse this 'poetic infelicity.'

Michael Gibson

March 2025  
Knutsford · Cheshire

#### Appendix A:-

The conclusion to my thesis has long been this: that written or spoken things that are not in formal verse but which have other but less objective poetic qualities (to do with 'expressive language' and so forth, and which <sup>things</sup> may be in some ways 'poem-like') ought, according to the logic of language, be called something other than 'poems'.