

Dick Henley recalls Sir Richard's view of Education.

Aza Briggs, a leading historian of the twentieth century, once said that young people of my generation should not consider themselves the only ones who had ever tried to change the world. Any man who could convince us of that being true back in the late sixties, would need extra ordinary qualities. He would need experience, tenacity, oratory, patience, presence, morality, and an unswerving faith in his own beliefs...In the Autumn of 1967, at Killerton House, I met such a man.



Sir Richard Acland was an educationalist with a difference. I recall our first term at St Luke's being cantered on education theory of one sort or another. The net result of our instruction was that children would respond in a set way to set stimuli. Sir Richard vehemently disagreed with this approach to the point he requested a year lecture to refute it. I recall him saying in the Killerton bar one night, that children should not be equated with Pavlov's dogs.

A 'year lecture', as the name suggests, is for all the students who had arrived in that particular year, an intake of about three hundred, and is held in the main theatre. Word went around campus, and such was the Acland reputation, that this voluntary attendance event saw the theatre packed to absolute capacity from every year, all waiting for what we knew would be a show.

Sir Richard entered and began to speak as he walked down the aisle, rose to the stage, and put his folder of notes on the lectern. There followed a demonstration of oratory that I had never experienced before, or for that matter, since! For an hour he kept us all spellbound with his opinions and beliefs. The speech was delivered with all the skill of a great politician, which he had been, and the conviction of a theologian, which indeed he was. His theme was that there is a doctrine of original sin, that every human has the inherent choice between right and wrong, and, as teachers, it was our calling to point this out to our pupils. His conclusion was that the future development of English youth was in our hands.

The entire theatre stood and burst into applause ... Sir Richard gathered up his unopened folder of notes and rushed back up the aisle with his black gown flowing behind him, one hand raised in thanks and his head down; I think to hide his tears.

I was glad to be a Killertonian before that lecture, but afterward, I was, and still am, a very proud one.