

A MAN OF PRINCIPLE

Jack Gibson, guiding light to generations of Mayo College boys, passes away

I often wonder what would have happened to Jack Gibson if he had stayed on at the Doon School and hadn't shifted to Mayo. Well, obviously, he would have become headmaster at some stage. And as obviously, he would have passed into legend.

Last week, when he died, there was a clutch of Mayo old boys who were ready to mourn him; there were brief news items in the papers; and there was the mention on All India Radio news. But despite the flurry of headlines, it was a private grief and a quiet mourning.

How different things would have been had he ended his years at the Doon School! Don't forget that the lawns of Chandbagh (or whatever the campus is called) have been immortalised as the breeding grounds of Camelot.

It was of two Doon School masters that a Rajiv Gandhi aide was to tell the press, "The real rulers of India are the ghosts of Martyn and Holdsworth."

Nobody from Mayo — even assuming that one of us was born into the prime ministership — would ever say that of Jack. We learnt a lot from him; we respected him; we had enormous affection for him; but at the end of the day, he was merely a *part* of our growing up.

Of course it wouldn't have been like that if Jack had stayed on at Dehra Dun. For most Doon School boys (or Doscogs as they like to be called), their school days mark the pinnacle of their achievement; to hear them talk, one would think that once they had passed their Senior Cambridge/ISC/or whatever, it was downhill all the way.

Poor Jack, I thought again, as the news of his death sunk in, not to have stayed on to coach a new generation of Congressmen. Poor Jack, to have migrated to the dusty plains of Rajasthan, to



teach a different kind of schoolboy, who had fond memories of school but who believed that there was life after the age of 16.

Perhaps he should have stayed on at Doon. Then, in the last years of his life the honours would have piled up. Dignitaries would have journeyed to his bedside. Yuppies would have clucked their tongues at his passing between lachrymose golf games. And God knows, his death would have made page one of every newspaper.

It is a funny business, this link between Jack Gibson and Mayo College. The school is over a hundred years old, its campus takes in 300 acres, its old boys include every great maharaja of consequence and in any listing of Indian public schools, it always plays Harrow to Doon's Eton.

And yet, for whole generations of old boys, the school was entirely Jack Gibson's creation. There were those who spent their school days under his shadow and there were others who had only a brief acquaintance with him, but none of us had any doubt that Mayo was Jack's baby.

Take my own case. When I first went up to Ajmer in January 1966 at the age of nine, Jack had already announced that he was looking for a successor. In January 1969, when I was 12, he handed over charge to Shomie Ranjan Das, who was the principal I really dealt with till I passed out.

And yet, that brief acquaintance from the ages of nine to 12 left such an impression on me that though Shomie was the

Mayo is over a hundred years old, but for many, the school was Jack's baby, changing from a near-anachronism into one of the best institutions in India



The clock-tower at Mayo: a different kind of public school

It was Jack who saved Mayo. He turned it into a public school that was even regarded as being one of the best in India. And his personality sent it hurtling from the Raj era into the modern age.

For that reason alone, Mayo became Jack's adopted baby.

But of course, there was more to it than that. It would be foolish to deny that Doon is an extraordinarily

good school and in fact, there are always periods when it is even better than Mayo (perhaps the present is one such period). But it is, at the end of the day, a collection of privileged kids in search of more privilege.

Perhaps because Jack knew Doon inside-out, he recognised both its strengths and its weaknesses. He realised that what Mayo had going for it was its strong Rajasthani/Rajput underpinning.

And, unusually for an expat Brit, he knew how to build on those advantages.

When I went up to Mayo, I was your typical Bombay schoolboy, recently rescued from the Jesuit horror of the appalling Campion school. I ended sentences with (dare I admit it?) 'man' and knew how to make the sign of the cross better than I knew my Hindu trilogy.

It was Mayo — the creation of a very pucca Brit — that shook Bombay out of me and gave me some sense of what India was all about. I learnt to wear *bandhgallas*, not ties. I discovered that it made sense to wear sandals in the summer and that it was no mark of sophistication to wear shoes and socks in mid-July.

I learnt Hindi, I learnt to make my own bed, to polish my shoes, and to call my servants 'ji'. I learnt that to wear a *safa* on Sundays was a mark of pride in my Indianness. And I discovered that not only did I no longer have to spend my lunch-times raising money for assorted Jesuit charities but that there was temple every evening for those who wanted to go. (Fed up of Campion's Catholicism, I declared myself an agnostic and refused to attend; an attitude of scepticism that has probably had the effect of drawing me closer towards Eastern religions as I have grown older.)

All this was Jack's doing. I sincerely believe that he was the only public schoolmaster in India in the 1950s and 1960s who knew exactly how to balance the demands of a Western education with his pupils' search for their Indianness.

It helped that he loved India, not in the patronising *koi-hai* way in which expats had affection for natives, but in the sense that by the end, he was more Rajput than Brit.

Every schoolboy has memories of his youth that he foolishly imagines are special or unusual. So, I will not

principal I knew well (and who was extremely kind to me), I still think of Mayo as having been Jack Gibson's school.

Partly, I suppose it was the history. When Mayo's governors drafted Jack from the Doon School, Mayo was in danger of becoming an anachronism. There was no place for Chiefs' Colleges in independent India and the school was struggling to find its identity.

bore you with tedious stories about breaking bounds and moonlight schemes.

But I have particular reason to be grateful to Jack. In January 1966, when I arrived at Mayo, my mother was seriously unwell — I learned later that doctors had concluded that she would not survive and had recommended that I be sent away so that her suffering left fewer scars on me. At nine, nothing seems very clear but I sensed that something was very wrong.

The day after my father deposited me at Junior House and went back to look after his wife, I knew that I couldn't stay on in Ajmer and that my place was by my mother's side. The problem was: how did one get to Bombay from Ajmer?

I had no idea. But I thought I knew of somebody who would have the answer. And so, without warning, I knocked on Jack's door and invited myself into his office.

I explained the situation to him and asked if he could please help me get home as soon as possible. Most headmasters would have been horrified by the sight of some precocious brat walking into their office and asking to be despatched home.

But Jack understood.

He took me completely seriously, listened to my story, reasoned with me, and then, promised that if, by March, I still felt that way, then he would help me get to Bombay.

I listened with nine-year-old solemnity and decided that perhaps he had a point. Okay, I finally said, I'll give it till March. Even those headmasters who had been understanding till that point would normally have then asked any nine-year-old to run along.

Not Jack.

Recognising that my dignity was important, he put me in his jeep and drove me back to Junior House. When we got there, he told my housemistress that he had taken me for a drive. My abor-



J.T.M. Gibson (shown above receiving the Padmashri from President Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan): balancing the demands of Western education with his pupils' search for Indianness



tive escape-attempt remained our little secret.

And when, that March, my mother beat the odds, regained her health and came to Ajmer to see me, even my nine-year-old brains could accept that Jack had kept his side of the bargain.

I stayed on in Mayo for another

seven years.

Jack was thoughtful and understanding where I was concerned. But I know for a fact that there were others he did even more for. I knew of cases where he took boys from modest backgrounds under his wing and helped them soar. He even helped old boys clope when he believed that their parents were wrong to deny them the right to marry the woman of their choice.

So why then, do we Mayo boys refuse to defy Jack as the Doscocs do with their Martyns and their Holdsworths?

There's no easy answer to that one.

But my feeling is that our affection for Jack, restrained though it may be in its expression, has something to do with the things that Jack himself taught us.

He taught us to think for ourselves; he gave great responsibility to very young boys; and he never let us forget that *everybody* deserved respect, from the *farash* who cleaned our dormitories, to the gardeners who tended Mayo's sprawling estate, to the housemasters who dealt with us on a day-to-day basis, to a very pucca Brit principal.

There were no Gods at Mayo. We searched for our own lights within ourselves. And Jack never let us forget that he was as human as the rest of us. On one occasion, when he caned a boy who had been unjustly accused, not only did he admit his error, but he also insisted that the boy cane him in return. (Oh yes, the boy did!)

That was Jack's Mayo. It was not an end in itself like Doon, which is why there are no professional Mayo old boys even though India is crawling with professional Doscocs.

And that is why poor Jack has been denied the kind of headlines that would have been his had he stayed on to complete the Dehra Dun trinity of Martyn, Holdsworth and Gibson.

But I think Jack preferred it this way. Headlines are forgotten and even schools themselves change with the passage of time.

But Jack Gibson's legacy is us, the young Indians he shaped and created.

And by God, we miss him. •

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