

Count your cherry stones

Bob Jones considers career options after dinner

Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, rich man, poor man, beggar-man... interpreter?

Here's the thing... you can't train an interpreter, but you can train all of the above (and lots more!) to be an interpreter. Discuss.

Perhaps the rhyme should still end with 'thief' – but of the Robin Hood variety! The 'interpreter' relies on knowledge acquired and understood on a particular subject in order to pass it on to others – to 'explain the meaning of things/places/events/processes/ideas'. Perhaps we are all 'thieves' to an extent in that we stand on the shoulders of others. We depend on knowledge, often hard won, built and passed on to us by those who have gone before... but not always acknowledged.

And here's another thing... Interpretation is not a profession; rather, it is a calling, a passion, even an art (in the fullest sense of that word). And the absolute worst thing that could befall the art of interpretation is that it become elitist, a chartered body, a 'club' for the few; a cloistered coven where you are a Professional because a degree and a piece of paper says so.

The next worst thing would be for interpretation to be hi-jacked by academia and taught to school-leavers and other innocents as a career. The good interpreter must have a first discipline, a base-line, some 'life experience'. Without such attributes he/she cannot possibly relate to the audience, cannot place things into context, cannot 'explain the meaning of things'. Interpreters are not teachers – but teachers can be interpreters. Interpreters can be chefs or engineers, writers or miners, astronomers or shepherds, nurses or cleansing operatives, playgroup assistants or parents. Whatever they are, whatever their background, the common denominator is that they will have one – a background that is!

My premise is that you can't make an interpreter out of an empty vessel. There must be something to build upon – and in the world of interpretation that 'something' should be built upon knowledge and passion; knowledge that grows out of a deep commitment to a particular field or subject, passion that emanates from deep understanding. It follows that the good interpreter will have a background in a first subject, will have experienced the world from another perspective before coming to the field of interpretation. Through such 'life experiences' they can then have the audacity to place meaning into context for others.

It is salutary to look back at the inauguration of the Society for the Interpretation of Britain's Heritage (SIBH) way back in 1975 – now the Association for Heritage Interpretation (AHI). The initial membership of around 108 enlightened souls represented some 20 different 'professions', ranging from architects to audio

engineers, teachers to tour guides, environmentalists to educational psychologists, curators to conservationists, foresters to... You get the picture: diversity. Oh, and there was also a Lord and a Countess!

I am confident that if you looked closely at AHI today there would be much the same rich diversity of backgrounds. That is the beating heart of interpretation – the variety, the diversity of its proponents and practitioners. The more we try to put interpretation into a box, to ‘certify’ it, to decorate it with honours, to endorse it with certificates, the more we will strip it of its very strength, like Samsons horn.

In the late 1990s there was a move to establish a degree course in interpretation. I argued against such a path. In a round-about way those discussions have led to the University of the Highlands and Islands Master’s degree in Interpretation, now run out of Perth College. I welcome and support this course, as it is at Masters’ level, a second degree, so those who take it on come to it with a wealth of life-experience already (many could be teaching the course rather than studying it!). But it is still necessary to beware the fast-track to box ticking, the ‘soft’ degree, the gathering of ‘letters’ for their own sake.

By all means be professional – in fact it is required. But don’t turn interpretation into a profession for self-aggrandisement and personal gain.

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All professions are conspiracies against the laity
George Bernard Shaw