

Lunch at King's College

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Preface

There are no embarrassing revelations here, but as a courtesy I'm lightly obscuring some identifying details, since I haven't asked those involved if it's OK to write this.

[Update: I've now shown this to them and they are happy.]

A few weeks ago I got an email from Alan, a person that I'd never heard of and who turned out to be a distinguished humanities fellow of King's College Cambridge. The email was a reply to an earlier message to Alan from John, an old friend whom I keep in touch with by email (though we haven't met in person for at least 30 years).

Alan and John share an interest in history and John's first email to Alan was an enquiry about some of Alan's online historical material. In an aside, John also mentioned me and included my email address. When Alan replied to John he cc-ed the message to me. When I got this I saw John's name in the header material and wrongly jumped to the conclusion that the message was part of my ongoing correspondence with John and that he was telling me about his interest in Alan. I hit reply and accidentally sent a message to Alan that was intended for John.

Aside. I'm paranoid about email accidents, so it worries me that this happened! Preventing such communication errors is part of the discipline of cybersecurity, in which I take an interest (but am not an expert). I failed to sufficiently digest the difference between the 'From' field in the message header, which contains Alan's name, and the 'To' field, which contains John and my names. Most of the body of Alan's email was a copy of John's earlier email, so when I'd finished reading Alan's message I was in the mental state caused by reading material by John, so when I instinctively hit 'reply' I thought I was replying to John.

In my email intended for John, but actually sent to Alan, I asked a question about John's interest in Alan's writings, which I had just learnt about from reading John's message embedded in Alan's email to me. I also started a separate conversation with what I thought was John, but was actually Alan, and this contained a link to [a web page](#) I'd set up to help me think about what to do in my retirement. I don't know what Alan thought when he got this unintended email, but he found my retirement plans interesting as he was also retired:

Dear Mike,

As someone who has been retired for about 7 years, I was fascinated by your plans. I should have written such a document and compared it with what I have done. Perhaps, if you would be interested to meet someone a little further down the road, we might meet for lunch one day?

Best wishes, Alan

I was embarrassed by my misrouted email and quickly replied to Alan's message with an apology and explanation ("So what's the story?" in my email below is what I intended to ask John):

Oops!!! I actually meant to send that to John not you, as you maybe guessed from

>>> how i got from logic and computing to ... is a looong story

>> So what's the story?

This cyber error was a result of hitting "reply" from the wrong email. I'm usually pretty paranoid about this sort of thing, but slipped up this time. Apologies! However, fortunately, the embarrassment from this event is, I hope, pretty minimal.

I see from Google that you are (were?) at King's. I was a student there once. Happy to meet for lunch sometime.

Cheers,

Mike

After exchanging a few more emails with Alan, which lead us to discover we had a few things in common, a day was set for us to meet for lunch in King's. I was both intrigued and intimidated by the prospect. Google showed that Alan was incredibly distinguished, having written numerous books on a wide variety

of topics; he has an awesome online presence. I usually feel awkward around humanities academics and can't perform the sort of chitchat occurring in college senior common rooms. However, I asked a colleague who had met Alan and was told not to worry.

Lunch

I arrived at Alan's rooms to find him entertaining a number of eminent visitors from the Far East. He was signing their copies of his books; they then wanted pictures of themselves with Alan, so I took snaps for them on their phones. After the visitors left Alan offered me sherry, which I had to decline as it would have sent me to sleep. He then introduced himself by giving a history of how he and his collaborators had used computers for many years.

Before setting off for lunch, Alan showed me some of the amazing things that he'd collected, including Wittgenstein's apparently famous poker and Keynes' wardrobe. Since I'd already acted as a photographer by taking pictures of Alan with his visitors, I felt it OK to ask if I could photograph him holding the poker.



Figure 1: **Alan with Wittgenstein's poker pointing at Keynes' wardrobe**

After admiring Alan's treasures, we headed off to the King's fellows-only area for lunch. Alan offered me either a light soup and sandwich lunch or a regular cafeteria meal. I chose the former and just had soup. We arrived at the ordering station a bit late and I noticed how apologetic Alan was and how he chatted with the catering staff in a completely different way than one would talk to waiters in a restaurant. I'd guess this reflects how colleges like to think of themselves as families rather than as institutions – like a country manor rather than a hotel. When I first came to King's in the 1970s, the then Provost, Edmund Leach, told us in his welcoming speech to be kind to the old fellows as the college was the only home they had and we should act as their guests and behave accordingly.

After ordering lunch, we went to the senior common room, where Alan seated me in a quiet corner. One of Alan's many interests is biographies of academics. There are a couple of very short biographical memoirs on the web page I accidentally sent him, and over lunch he asked me about my life. We didn't get very far, but I found out that Alan is writing a book on schools and [the one I went](#)

to is of interest to him as it's based on a kind of educational philosophy that he didn't have data on yet. It emerged that Alan was unaware that an ex-colleague and friend of his went to this school – furthermore we were classmates and were both at a [50th anniversary class reunion](#) this year. I wonder if this could be a useful research lead for the book on schools.

Whilst eating, a collaborator of Alan whom I happened to know came in and Alan invited him to join us. Continuing my biographical interrogation wasn't appropriate, so we took to chatting about mutual acquaintances and academic gossip. Alan and his collaborator talked about a discussion they'd heard about, or been part of, concerning a couple of extremely distinguished Cambridge scientists, X and Y. In this conversation, someone asked who was the cleverest person in Cambridge and it was suggested that X was. However, although it was agreed that X was very clever, apparently Y was said to be more intelligent. Now, this is the sort of chatting I don't do well at and keeps me away from senior common rooms, but I rose to the occasion by asking what the difference between clever and intelligent was, and some discussion ensued. I don't think the distinction was completely resolved, but it's something like: "clever" denotes knowledge of everything (e.g. Bertrand Russell) whereas "intelligent" emphasises depth in particular areas (e.g. Ramanujan) – or maybe it was the other way around. As X and Y were Nobel Prize winners, the conversation turned to gossip about other winners. My only contribution was that the sister of Rosalind Franklin lives on the same street as me and although I can't say I know her, I've seen her at street parties.

Alan's collaborator who'd joined us had to leave to meet someone, so we resumed asking about my life. Eventually lunch was over and Alan offered either coffee in the fellows common room or tea back in his rooms. I chose the latter and we returned to Alan's rooms. The conversation now focused on my retirement, particularly what kind of writing I might do. Alan put the case for writing books, but I'm sceptical about them partly as writing books is much less of a tradition in my academic area now, and partly because of the effort and time. I'm seeking faster gratification and articles achieve this better. Alan explained how he had reduced the hassle of book publishing by setting up his own press and also said that once one had enough articles they could be combined into books. I came away from this discussion realising the different perception of the value of books in Alan's and my worlds.

After the discussion on book writing, we then turned to articles. I pitched my idea for tutorials targeting a technical level that was midway between research monographs and popular science writing: something that might interest graduate students in one field trying to get an understanding of another area, perhaps as part of looking for topics to investigate further. Alan also suggested giving methodological advice based on wisdom accumulated over my career. He signed and gave me a couple of books he'd written along these lines.

The time to leave arrived and Alan walked me to the college exit and encouraged me to stay in contact. I think I will: he is from such a different universe than the

one I inhabit that there must be many unanticipated and extraordinary things I can learn from him.

Reflections

Although I was nervous at meeting Alan, I ended up having a fascinating and delightful time. He is a gracious host who put me at ease right away and largely shielded me from the terrors of King's fellows society.

I'm certain that thinking about how Alan is spending his retirement and the kind of outputs he's generating will help guide what I do in mine. For example, the cover of one of his advice books that he gave me has on it "Write first, think later" and this has provoked me to write what you are reading now (maybe I'll get to the "think later" part in the future). I hope Alan gives me feedback on my writing from time to time. After our lunch, he sent a kind email message which ended:

- hope we can keep in touch. Let me know how the writing goes.
best wishes, Alan

Thank you Alan!

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