

**On the occasion of the unveiling of the Blue Plaque for Alec Peterson:
Old Headington, Oxford, 26 September 2026**

Speech by Amelia Peterson

Good afternoon. I'm Amelia, Alec's youngest grandchild, which I think is my main credential for being the one who gets to speak today. The youngest *descendant*, my cousin's baby Lyra, is also here, and though she's not quite up to speeches yet, I think Alec would have been pleased that she's a real Oxfordian, as he so loved this city.

My job today, I believe, is to bring this plaque to life somewhat: to give you a sense of Alec as a person, but I'm going to start first with place.

One of the programmes I teach on at the moment has a focus on collective intelligence, and I learn from my fellow programme faculty that the contemporary theory of pioneering breakthroughs is that they arise not from individual men or women of genius – from 'genes' – but from 'scenes': from the combinations of people and the cultural and social settings that enables ideas and capabilities to mix.

33 St Andrew's Road was, it's fair to say, a bit of a 'scene'. Lodgers, three growing children with diverse interests, cousins, fellows dons, colleagues, and an intellectual circle supported not just by Alec but my Granny, Corinna, easily his equal in the realm of ideas.

But what mattered in this scene was not just ideas, but – as Alec frequently wrote, inspired by Kurt Hahn – *action*.

I was amused to remind myself that in the chapter on Oxford life in his memoirs, that the IB and Atlantic College are just one of eight different projects Alec had on the go related to educational reform, and the breadth of activity that he cultivated is undoubtedly part of what ultimately allowed some of those strands to survive and flourish.

He roped into this activity many colleagues from the Oxford Department of Education at Norham Gardens, establishing the development of the IB as an 'action research project', and recognising the contributions not just on the basis of subject matter expertise but the considerable administrative and secretarial duties required to get the thing off the ground.

He himself was not above administrative duties, but was a prolific letter writer; writing 20 a day on the IB project to ask for support, money, understanding. As David Sutcliffe recorded, he was writing letters up to the day of his death.

So a pioneer, yes, but in today's system-change parlance more an orchestrator, a weaver – someone who recognises that 'scenes' do not create on their own: they need someone scurrying around, connecting the dots.

So that brings us back to the person. And as a person he was not all activity. We know, from his personal memoirs, a little of his *interior* life.

We know that he was always fascinated by the nature of knowledge and ideas. And as an amateur philosopher, by the behaviour of time; the way one could wish it away or dwell in it. To be permanently memorialised in time is an honour he never dreamed of – though he did admit, in his own self-deprecating way, to boyhood dreams of honours.

But despite his fascinations with philosophy, he was not really a scholar. Using the words of F. H. Bradley, he described himself as preferring 'the warm and living flesh' over the 'bloodless ballet of categories'.

And it's this love of *life*, I think, in so many different forms, that provides such strength to the educational endeavours he was part of. One cannot get through any speech about education these days without some discussion of artificial intelligence, but AI poses no real challenge to education as Alec envisioned it.

He was clear that the role of the teacher is not "transference from one mind to another of a structured body of knowledge", but to "enlarge [student's] interest, initiate them into the process of learning and affect their understanding of life as a whole". This is, of course, human work.

Of all the aspects of today, more than the permanent plaque on the wall, he would be touched by the presence of you all here. And in particular that Atlantic College and the IBO, despite growing so much in scale and significance, remain staffed by people who are motivated by a love of learning and of other people; by a moral compass. Underneath the increasingly abstract phrases of educational theory, beneath 'international mindedness', 'system transformation', or the OECD's 'global competence', there are still people who recognise that what we are cultivating is not something that can be communicated in language, but a feeling, a connection.

So I hope that what is remembered, when people read this plaque and perhaps look up Alec's name, out of curiosity, is not that he was a pioneer of international education, but what inspired him to be so. What motivated him to sit in a cupboard for an office, and write all those letters, to keep working on it up until the day he died.

It's the story that he chooses to tell at the beginning of *Schools Across Frontiers*, describing the one experience from his time in Malaysia that most impacted his ideas about education:

Chinese, Indian, and Malay. My only directly educational responsibility was the establishment, in an abandoned palace belonging to the Sultan of Negri Sembilan, of a training school for field officers who ran mobile film units for the rural communities. Going down to attend a passing out or graduation ceremony, I found that the students had written up slogans in Chinese, Malay, and Tamil over the gates. They were not, I hoped, mutually conflicting, but being unable to read any of the three scripts I asked a student what they meant. "We have written", he said, "each in our own language 'All Men are Brothers'."

All men are brothers; all people, ultimately, a kind of family.

Romantic, of course, but as an ideal, more important than ever.