

NEWCASTLE IN THE 60S

ANTHONY WAINE

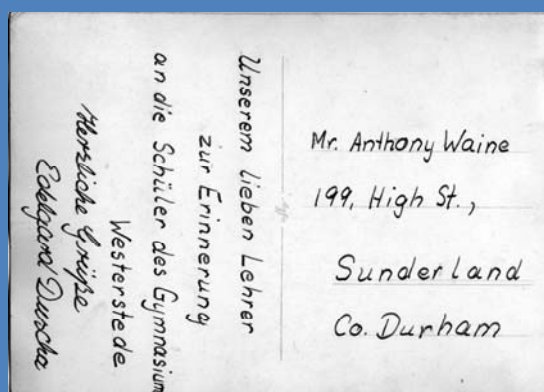
"I'm offering you a conditional place to read German at Newcastle. I believe you'll make a good honours student, Mr Waine." With these words Duncan Mennie concluded my interview with him in December 1963. The final sentence summed up his educational philosophy. A clear expression of faith in the young individual; the unembarrassed giving of approval; and the respect shown to an unimportant seventeen year old from Leicester by addressing him as Mr Waine – the first time in my life any person in authority had called me that. And after I left his office, feeling good about myself, I bet he slapped his thigh in triumph and said to his co-interviewer: "Factory worker's son from Leicester. We'll take him. Never had a bad one yet!"

The percentage of students from a working class background studying German at Newcastle from 1964 to 1968 was suspiciously high. Duncan was a one man social class manipulator, consciously in tune with post-war democratisation from above.

Duncan Mennie was devoted to the welfare of his students and knew almost everything there was to know about each of us. He not only remembered what we had told him but stored it up for future action. Thus on my return from the year abroad I happened to mention to him that I would like to return to Germany after my finals to teach as a Lektor. A couple of weeks later, as I climbed the stairs of Sydenham Terrace for the obligatory 9 o'clock lecture, I was stopped half way by a Lektorin from Hamburg who said she had heard I was interested in being a Lektor and her boss in Hamburg was asking for suitable applicants.



The picture postcard shows the main building of the Westerstede Sportverein in Niedersachsen. Tony Waine spent his year abroad there 1966 to 1967. He played football for the Westerstede First Team and trained and played matches on the pitch next to this building. He not only taught pupils at the Gymnasium, but also organised soccer matches between Gymnasium Westerstede and other grammar schools in Emden, Leer, and Oldenburg. The postcard was sent by pupils he had taught to his Sunderland address in July 1967 on his return to complete his studies at Newcastle University. Their very kind sentiments proved to him just how rewarding teaching could be.



Within weeks Prof Mennie had (hand-) written a reference for me, and long before Christmas 1967 I had got a job at a major German university, starting in September 1968. Right on cue for encountering the Student Movement in its full theatrical glory in Hamburg.

But Duncan Mennie wasn't just quietly pulling strings on my behalf in his customary off-stage manner, and directing me towards a life-long career as a university teacher. As a scholar I'm also indebted to him. In our first year he taught us about *Land, Leute* and *Sprache* between Flensburg and Konstanz, and took us on an anthropological journey, with folksongs and Lutheran hymns belted out by him free of charge.

It was thanks to his encyclopaedic memory that we were also taken in other courses on a linguistic journey into the remotest nooks and crannies of the Germanic languages. In my recent book *Changing Cultural Tastes: Writers and the Popular in Modern Germany* the first two scene-setting chapters go back to those revelatory lectures about high culture and *Volkskunde*, etymology and *Sprachwandel* he gave. He didn't need any of today's higher educational buzzwords and incentives to enthuse us about scholarship. A mixture of fizzing cerebral energy and a visible passion for communicating knowledge in a jargon-free intelligent language to inquisitive young people were inspiration enough. How many Newcastle graduates of German were moved to follow in his giant footsteps over the years!

Besides Prof Mennie's classes, I greatly enjoyed the lectures of Hans-Christian Sasse, especially on Theodor Fontane, and I say that defiantly, knowing all that subsequently befell Mr Sasse.

Erich Speidel showed me for the first time ever how exciting the study of history could be. He also introduced me to modern German literature and how to read it sociologically and politically. The books I wrote and edited on Martin Walser and Bertolt Brecht bear the imprint of Erich's close and politically critical textual analysis.

Erich personified an ethos at Newcastle, cultivated by his head of department, and it is one that is in danger of being lost in today's world of higher education. It is the transmission of the highest educational values, infused with soul, passion and humanity, from one generation to the next.