



THE QUEEN'S
COMMONWEALTH ESSAY COMPETITION 2018

Winner's Week - The Queen's Commonwealth Essay Writing Competition
Written by Janine Shum

Day 1.

I met the other winners of The Queen's Commonwealth Essay Competition and their parents first thing on Monday morning at the lobby of the Sidney Hotel. There was Floria from Canada, who had written a powerful poem about the environment. Woon Neng was also from Singapore. She was three years older than me and had written an intriguing story where the personifications of Happiness, Wealth, Health and Freedom gathered in a café for a conversation. Finally there was Zahra from Pakistan, who had written a poetic prose piece about a woman dealing with issues of gender equality, arranged marriage and rape. The motley group of the nine of us were greeted by Coral Fleming from The Royal Commonwealth Society, who would accompany us throughout our five days in London. Coral had put the whole marvelous programme together for us and looked after us every step of the way. Whenever I think of this trip, I'm going to remember her. Also with her on that cold and drizzly London morning was Benjamin Hodge, who was great company whenever he was able to join us. Ben was the first person who came over to talk to me and he made me feel very comfortable.

We were tight for time, so we set off toward the Canadian High Commission immediately. Once there, we met Helen Jones, Head of Programmes and Youth at the RCS, and Elizabeth van der Valk, the RCS Public Affairs Officer, who helped make our awards ceremony at Buckingham Palace possible. I had seen their photographs online before coming, so it was good to finally meet them.

We were introduced to Sarah Fountain Smith, the Deputy Canadian High Commissioner to London. She welcomed us all to "Canada House", which had a fabulous view of one of my favourite places in London – Trafalgar Square (where I like to feed the pigeons). She told us about the Canadians that lived and worked in the UK, including quite a few famous ones with important jobs. We were also given a tour of the building. Each room was named after a Canadian state based on its size relative to the other rooms. And every room had something special in it that was unique to the state that it was named after. For example, the Winnipeg room had a stuffed Winnie-the-Pooh bear and a collection of the A. A. Milne stories, because the real bear that A. A. Milne had based Pooh bear on was from Winnipeg. One of my favourite activities at Canada House was when Ben got the four of us to come up with some ideal values and priorities for our own imaginary country.

After that, Coral brought us to the Hodder and Stoughton publishing house, where we found out from Rebecca Mundy, the Senior Publicity Manager, just how many people and departments are behind the process of publishing a book. Becca explained to us that a writer may write a book, but he needs an agent, an editor, an art department to do the beautiful illustrations we see in the book and on the cover, a marketing and sales department to help promote and sell the book, printers to print the book and many others besides.... I never realised that making a book took so

many people and such complicated machines. I think I'll appreciate my books a lot more now, after knowing how much effort is put into each one.

Lastly, Coral brought us to Shakespeare's Globe. Deiniol from the BBC joined us to make some recordings which would be used in the BBC Outlook Programme she produced. The Globe Theatre stage was beautiful and elaborate. It had columns that looked like they were made of red marble streaked with white, but they were actually wood columns painted meticulously to look like natural stone. Upstage, a pair of grand double doors could swing outwards for an actor's grand entrance. Above the double doors was a beautiful balcony that overlooked the stage and the audience. I could imagine Juliet in that balcony gazing down at Romeo. In the floor, near the centre of the stage, there was a trapdoor for props and actors to magically appear or rise out of the ground in the middle of a play. The ceiling of the stage was painted midnight blue, with a red crest in the centre. People and mythical animals representing the constellations danced in the sky as they watched the performance below.

What a privilege to be in that hand-crafted theatre, carefully reconstructed to look just like Shakespeare's original Globe Theatre... What a treat to be allowed backstage and then to walk grandly out through those imposing double doors onto the stage! How wonderful to wander around this fantastical historical structure with almost no one else around....

Mary McNulty, an actress and learning consultant at the University of Kent and the Globe Theatre, brought us on a marvelous, unforgettable guided tour. She was very passionate about acting and Shakespeare, and her stories about the theatre were magical. After the tour, she gave us an acting workshop that started off slightly nerve-wrecking...but after a while I got more accustomed to the idea of acting in front of everyone. Gradually the strange words of Shakespeare's Elizabethan England began to make sense, as I said them while I tried to act (badly!). I think the four of us became more confident and comfortable with acting and with reading Shakespeare aloud in the end. Ms. McNulty taught us that the language of Shakespeare is first and foremost for performing, and it is not quite the same if you simply read it off a page. Most of the time, Shakespeare's words cleverly tell you how to act and what to do, and give you a good idea of the environment the character is meant to be in. We acted out two brief excerpts from Romeo and Juliet. It was truly eye-opening for me how a few words could inform a character's demeanor and body language, and so effectively set the tone and meaning of the play.

Day 2.

The BBC Broadcasting House was a rabbit warren of high security studios and offices. In the centre of it all was a great sunken space glowing with the faint blue light of a hundred computer screens and TV monitors. This was where the news was produced. Desks upon desks were arranged in rows in this hectic, but organised pit. There were people everywhere, carrying files, papers, reading from screens...there was a palpable energy and excitement emanating from the sunken space....It reminded me a bit of the NASA mission control centre in movies.

From there, we went into a recording studio. It was a room with many sensitive microphones and that classic screen that flashed "ON AIR" in big red letters that you sometimes see in movies. I felt really special being allowed into the BBC Broadcasting House to make a recording of my poem. Deiniol, Saskia and the other BBC staff were super patient, encouraging and kind. After we had

recorded our pieces, we got a tour of the building. There were quite a few restricted areas, but Deiniol and Saskia still managed to show us many places in the building, including (for some reason) a Doctor Who shrine, with the Tardis and a robot.

Lunch was at the Singapore High Commission. It was located in a grand house in what appeared to be a very posh residential street lined with trees. The beautiful road leading to it was lined with identical white houses. It was dream-like and serene, as we walked along leaf-strewn paths tinted with the autumn hues of crimson red and orange, the colours heightened by the rain. The inside of the commission felt very Victorian, very warm and intimate, like someone's home. It did not surprise me when the Commission later revealed that there were only eight full-time Singaporeans staffing the mission – it must have been rather like a family for them, I thought. We were led upstairs to the dining room, with a large round table in the centre, where Commissioner Foo Chi Hsia welcomed us warmly and hosted us to a curious fusion lunch with Singaporean and Western elements, including a laksa gnocchi and a pandan parfait. I had never eaten anything like it. The gnocchi was fun and chewy with a fragrant sauce – I enjoyed it the most.

The highlight of the day was the play, “War Horse”, based on the book by Michael Morpurgo. I had heard about this play while in Singapore and was really excited to see it. Coral had arranged it so that we got a backstage tour of the National Theatre first, then we watched a panel discussion with the author Michael Morpurgo and the director Tom Morris. The puppetry was phenomenal. Three people controlled a single horse puppet; the one at the head, who made the horse's ears twitch, the one under the horse at the chest, who controlled the breathing, and most importantly the one who controlled the hind legs. According to the brief tour we received before the show, the person at the back would make faint noises, informing the puppeteers at the front what to do next. The horses would canter, whinny, gallop and even rear up at times. They were so life-like when they breathed, twitched their ears and looked around.... The puppeteers captured a real animal's emotions perfectly, from a simple contentness to pure blind terror. Actors could even ride the horses! Although I already knew the plot, because I had read the book, knowing the storyline actually made the show better. I knew what the actors were trying to convey through their (very dramatic) conversations about the war. I also knew what Joey (the horse which was the main character) was thinking. Unlike the play, the book tells the whole story from the perspective of the horse, while the play only follows the horse closely. I was mesmerized, terrified and elated by turns, and watching the horses closely felt akin to being them, and living out their experiences.

Day 3

We had an awesome creative writing workshop, led by Chibundu Onuzo, a renowned author of many books and the Royal Society of Literature's youngest “40 under 40” member. Chibundu gave us each a folded piece of paper, the contents of which we were to keep secret. We then wrote from the perspective of whatever was written on that strip of paper – a hurricane, a math textbook or a hundred dollar bill. After that, we read our stories out, and everyone else tried to guess which object's perspective we were writing from. I got “a math textbook”. It was fun seeing the world through the eyes of something I previously so resented.

The best part was right at the beginning of our visit to the Society, when Molly Rosenberg, the Director, and Annette Brook, the Communications Manager, showed us the Roll Book and a set of

wonderful pens belonging to Charles Dickens (a quill with a tatty feather, actually), Lord Byron, George Elliot and T.S Eliot. The magical moment was when I got to touch the quill of Charles Dickens. His DNA is probably still on my hand. We also got to sign our names with all the pens. I am sure no one has ever drawn a smiley face with Lord Byron's pen until that moment.... The Roll Book had the signatures of famous UK authors from more than 200 years ago! It was fascinating. There was a general flurry of excitement when we saw J.R.R Tolkien's signature, just causally sitting there amongst the hundreds of other signatures from incredibly famous authors. Monarchs also signed in the book, but being monarchs, they signed their names in the middle of a Prussian blue frame decorated with gold leaves, and took up a whole page. We saw the signatures of Queen Victoria, Albert and Leopold, two queen Elizabeths, and Winston Churchill (ok he's not a monarch but he took a page!).

After that, we moved on to a tour of Westminster Abbey. Westminster Abbey was a massive, imposing, airy cathedral, with reposeful angels and saints perched on ledges filled with intricate carvings, frozen in time. Colossal pillars stretched up into the sky like trees, their branches morphing into domes of white and gold. Despite its grand appearance, Westminster Abbey had a serene peacefulness to it. The people in the stained glass windows stood tall as they gazed down at you, their flowing robes of blue and green glowing faintly with sunlight. But they were more comforting than intimidating; guardians to watch over you, protecting you from harm. Sitting there, I could imagine the Abbey in its full spectacular glory, with hymns reverberating through the vast marble hallways and light filtering through stained glass windows, casting a rainbow of rippling colours onto the stone floor.

But a peaceful place is not a place devoid of mystery. Did you know that if you released a certain hidden catch, a particular stone slab in the Abbey could then be lifted up, leading you down an ancient stone staircase, into a tomb with more royal bodies? The last person went down there more than 50 years ago. Who knows what it looks like now?

Our wonderful guide Aaron Paterson regaled us with story after story, set against the rich history of the United Kingdom... and from that history, many lessons could be learnt.

There were so many interesting things about the Abbey I never knew. Did you know that Queen Elizabeth I is actually buried on top of her Sister Mary? The marble effigy of her face and hands were also casts from her body, making her look unnervingly real, as if she had passed away just a few minutes ago and turned to stone.

Walking through the Abbey, I felt like I had come out of a time machine. Just an hour ago I had held the pens of famous authors and poets, even signed my name with them. Now, I was jolted back to the present as I looked down at their names etched on graves that lined the Abbey floor.

Next, we moved on to a tour of the Parliament Houses, led by a very kind and knowledgeable Lord. During the tour, I learnt that there are two houses of Parliament; the House of Commons, which deals with the politics, and the House of Lords, which deals with the details of the matter. The House of Lords is an essential part of the UK parliament that checks and challenges the work of the government. Members of the House of Lords were some of the most respected professionals and practitioners in the UK. Outstanding lawyers, doctors, artists might be given the honour of becoming members, and they brought their expertise to the debates that helped decide important issues like education, farming, jobs and helping the disabled. I got to see a real

parliamentary debate in progress. Watching the debate felt very surreal, as if I were a lawyer on a case, or a spectator in a movie. I was very hungry and rather tired by the time we had the tour, so I was very grateful for the hot chocolate and banana the kindly Lord treated me to before saying goodbye.

Day 4.

Today we went to Buckingham Palace for our awards ceremony.

The great black wrought-iron gates of the palace were very imposing, and so were the guards watching us. We walked across the graveled path...a side door at the front opened for us...and suddenly, we were inside the palace.

It was surprisingly cosy and warm. The room we found ourselves in was more pleasant than grand, homely rather than imposing. A row of well-dressed people standing at the doorway gave us a friendly greeting, and they made us feel welcomed even though we had never met them before.

To me, the most interesting thing about Buckingham Palace was not the priceless antiques or its sheer size; it was the grand state rooms named after different colours. There was a room called the Green room, where everything was a different shade of green: Olive, mint, sage, emerald... green on the china, the walls, the ceiling.... There was a Blue Drawing Room where the silk sofas were shades of shimmering blue, but the carpet was mostly red. The grandest of all the colour-themed rooms was probably the white room, which was ironically more gold than white. The walls were actually covered in a very pale yellow, so that the entire room seemed to glow. The room had a massive, grand chandelier hanging low over our heads, its crystal-reflected light illuminating elaborate furniture gilded with gold. The mirrors in the room looked as if vines of gold had come alive and entwined themselves around each frame. One such mirror – a large one running almost the height of the room, held a little secret that caught me by surprise. As I was admiring a large portrait, the mirror, together with the entire side table it was attached to – along with candle holders, Sèvres porcelain vase and all – swung open, revealing a hidden door. A man holding a tray casually stepped through from behind this doorway, as if swinging cabinets and secret passageways were an ordinary thing. I was quite startled, but according to our guide, there are multiple hidden doors like this in the palace. This one happened to be the most famous, because it enabled Members of The Royal Family to suddenly appear in the state rooms and meet their guests. I wasn't so sure I liked the idea. I could see myself innocently eating a tasty little canapé when suddenly The Duchess – or The Queen herself – might appear behind me and catch me unawares....

During the tour, I didn't realise that Sharlene Teo, an award winning Singapore author, was in the tour with us. She had written a book entitled "Ponti" that my mother had heard about from friends living as far away as Boston. Later, Sharlene was the author who read my piece during the ceremony. Each of the four essay winners had an excerpt of our work read out in front of the audience by a famous author. It felt so surreal to meet authors whose names I have only seen in bookstores. Many of the famous writers at the palace were judges of the essay competition. Final Panel Judges Jaspreet Kaur, a spoken poetry artist, and Dominic Lawson, an editor and journalist, came by to speak with my family. It was amazing to me that such a wide range of writers had

served as judges. I could barely believe that so many people had read my poem. I had written it as an exercise to improve my writing skills and only ever expected my parents and English teacher to read it. I certainly never expected that writing a poem could get me to Buckingham Palace.

The Picture Room was where our awards ceremony was held. It was a very long, grand room filled with rare and beautiful paintings by artists I knew of from visits to museums in the past: Rembrandt, Rubens, Vermeer, Van Dyck and Canaletto, to name a few.... My father was really excited by these paintings. He went around the room looking at them intently and making noises like "Aah!", "Wow!" and "That must be a Rubens!".

Meeting The Duchess of Cornwall was of course the highlight of the ceremony. I still can't believe I shook the hand of a Member of The Royal Family. She came over to my family and told me, "Well done. Your poem was very inspiring. You have to keep writing." I wanted to ask her what her favourite part of my poem was. I wanted to ask her about The Queen's corgis. I wanted to ask her more about the other rooms and secret doors in the palace.... But I didn't get the chance, because everything was happening so quickly, and there were so many important people in the room.

After the ceremony, we went for a tour of the Tower of London. My favourite part was looking at the Crown Jewels and having a Yeoman Warder tell us stories about every precious object. According to legend, there is a diamond called the Koh-I-Noor that is said to be cursed, but it brings good luck to females. Fortunately, it sits on The Queen's crown.

The last thing we did that day was watch the play, "The Women in Black". I was really looking forward to this iconic play. Many years ago, before I was even born, this play had been staged in Singapore. The two actors were excellent; they carried the play with their convincing acting and powerful emotive voices. The sets and props were very simple, so their acting had to be outstanding to compensate for that. Overall it was a great play. For horror, it wasn't terrifying, but it was still creepy. I had read the book by Susan Hill beforehand, so I wasn't as scared as I could have been. It was interesting to see how the book and the play used different methods to frighten you. The book foreshadowed ominous events with dark hints and descriptions that built up the tension, while the performance played a lot with light and darkness, sound effects like sudden screams and a few jump scares from none other than the woman in black!

Day 5.

Today we visited beautiful Cambridge. We took a train from London and found ourselves in a quaint, beautiful little town with a market in the square selling delicious food like cheese and oysters. We were taken on a tour of the town and the colleges by a guide with a very funny, dry wit who was a Fellow of Trinity Hall. Quaint, medieval-looking buildings lined the cobblestone streets. Pastel blue, coral pink, olive green... the houses were so cheerful. Signs outside the little shops showed images of ice cream, jewelry, handbags and more, enticing people to enter. In a small narrow street just off the main thoroughfare was a cheerful looking inn, called "The Eagle". The guide told us it was one of the oldest inns in Cambridge, dating to the 14th century. It was here on 28th February 1953, that Francis Crick and James Watson announced, "We have discovered the secret of life", referring to their discovery of the double helix structure of DNA. But that wasn't the most exciting bit for me. The most exciting bit was when our guide pointed out that up on the second floor, a window had been left mysteriously open even though it was a rainy day. Our guide

explained that the window should never be closed.... The story goes that, a few hundred years ago, there was a little girl who lived in the room where that window was. A fire raged through the upstairs bedrooms and the young girl, unable to open the window, was trapped inside. She burnt to death. Ever since, the window had been kept open, even fixed so that it would be hard to close. This was because on the two occasions when it had been closed, mysterious things had occurred... such as a child's scream echoing throughout the night or a fire starting in the pub of the inn. That day, as we looked up, the window was indeed still open. Thank goodness.

We also visited some of the colleges, including Trinity and King's College. Before this, I never knew Trinity was founded by King Henry VIII, making it far older than I had expected. I loved the story about the chair leg (instead of a scepter) that the statue of King Henry was holding. King's College was founded by King George IV, and it has a large college chapel, which was breathtakingly pretty. It was filled with stained glass, like a jeweled lantern. I was struck by the lace-like stone carvings that reached up into the vaulted ceilings.

We then went to the Cambridge University Library, where we met two lovely curators, Rachel Rowe and John Cardwell, of the archives. We were allowed to head underground into the basement of the library, where The Royal Commonwealth Society archives were. The archives appeared to be part of a maze of endless, dark rooms, with shelves upon shelves filling each room. Each shelf was packed to the brim with ancient books, artifacts and files. Centuries of knowledge must have been stored within those rooms, and one could easily get lost down there.

We were led into a specific room. On the table, some folders and files had been thoughtfully laid out for us to look at. They contained papers and objects specific to our home countries – Singapore, Canada and Pakistan. Because we were Singaporean, Woo Neng and I were shown old photos of colonial Singapore that our own museums did not have copies of. They were kept in a thick binder bursting with black and white photos of long forgotten buildings and people. There were many pictures of the Singapore river, with sail boats and old steam sailing ships that you would no longer see today. It was fascinating. Most of the buildings I was familiar with were replaced by empty fields, or rows of tiny shop houses. A picture that had particularly struck me was one of a small boy dressed in old, worn-out clothes. He grinned at the camera as he balanced on a rickety wooden stool. I wondered what his life was like, what his story had been. I wondered if he was still alive, or if his grave was somewhere in Singapore. That file was full of other people just like him, their memories forever encapsulated in those old black and white photos, their stories unknown.

We were also shown the Cambridge Digital Library. This was a room with a few experts working with very powerful camera equipment to carefully record every tiny bit of the most important documents in the library. If you went online to their website (cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk), you could see the most amazing, precious objects and texts, such as Newton's handwritten notes, Darwin's letters, Captain Cook's observations on his sea voyages... and you could zoom right in to see the tiniest details on a page. They even made real and virtual 3D models so you could look at an ancient object from every angle on your computer screen, or even print it out in 3D. The best thing about the digital library is that it is free to anyone, anywhere in the world!

What an eye-opening, marvelous trip this had been. We got to see things we would never otherwise have seen as ordinary tourists, and even more importantly, we learnt from experts who were kind enough to patiently show us tantalizing glimpses of their wonderful worlds. All this

would not have been possible without Helen, Coral, Ben and the other members of The Royal Commonwealth Society. Thank you so much for organising this competition, and for the unforgettable experiences. I hope other children will be encouraged to participate in The Queen's Commonwealth Essay Competition, and who knows – win it and have a once-in-a-lifetime adventure!

The views and opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of The Royal Commonwealth Society.