

8th September 2021

Interpretations

“There is more business in interpreting interpretations than in interpreting things, and more books on books than on any other subject.”

Montaigne, Essais (1580)

Most of us will remember “interpretation exercises” from English classes in school. What is the writer seeking to say? What insights can be gained from this? What opinions do others have that I might agree or disagree with? “Don’t assume,” my English teacher always said. “Look behind the words. Keep asking questions. Think, boy, think!”

Montaigne, the 16th century French moralist, had a jaundiced view of “interpretating things”, fearful that if all we do is interpret interpretations, we go round in circles and come up with nothing original. While I appreciate such frustrations, I believe there is still a place for interpretations. What about the importance of our decision-makers gathering and interpreting the views of the people they represent?

Thomas Babington Macaulay, 1st Baron Macaulay, was a British Whig politician, and there is much in his work that I find distasteful. He played a major role in the introduction of English and western concepts to education in India, publishing his argument on the subject in the “Macaulay’s Minute” of 1835. This led to “Macaulayism” in India, and the systematic wiping out of traditional and ancient Indian education, vocational systems and sciences. I find little to admire in this man. However, I found an interesting quote in his 1835 paper, which runs:

*We must at present do our best to form a class
who may be the interpreters of the millions whom we govern.*

Macaulay never carried forward the approach he was espousing. He did, however, point to an important truth. We need our interpreters, those whom we can trust to listen to the people, and to communicate to the policymakers what those whom they govern actually think and believe. And if those interpreters are to do their job well, then we, the people, have to be bold in making our voices heard, so that our decision-makers have appropriate things to interpret in the first place.

A prayer for today

*Lord, if my role is to interpret your love and put it into action,
let me be the best interpreter I can be. Amen*