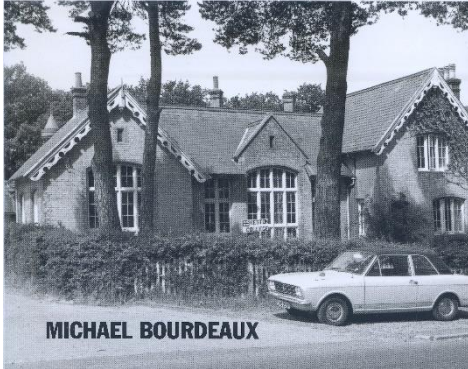


ONE WORD OF TRUTH

THE COLD WAR MEMOIR OF
MICHAEL BOURDEAUX
AND **KESTON COLLEGE**



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The Cold War Memoir of Michael Bourdeaux and Keston College

This book provides a fascinating insight into a part of modern history that I know very little about. *One Word of Truth* is best summed up in its own description:

‘After a series of experiences revealed to him the extent and nature of religious persecution in the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc in the 1960s, Michael Bourdeaux resolved to enable the voices of believers to be heard by the wider world. In 1969, he founded Keston College, an institution dedicated to the study of religion in communist countries. It provided information about churches and the pressures and threats facing Christians there.

Over the next three decades, Keston’s work of defending religious liberty in the Soviet Union was hugely controversial: Michael and his colleagues faced political opposition, while also providing invaluable insight and advice to the British government and leaders including Harold Wilson and Margaret Thatcher. In the days before the misleading concept of ‘fake news’ the information provided by Keston was seen in many quarters as a bastion of truth and integrity. Its unique work was recognised internationally when Michael was awarded the Templeton Prize in 1984.

One Word of Truth recounts both Michael’s story and that of Keston College. It is an inspirational account of a remarkable life, a peerless institution, and the heroism of countless men and women who proved by their lives that the Christian faith is stronger than dehumanising atheist ideology.’

Some of the formative experiences that led to the founding of Keston College included the following.

From small beginnings

It all starts with Michael’s childhood in Praze, with tales of his father’s bakery and village life before his parents decided to send him to Treliske in 1942, as a boarder at the age of eight: ‘the first turning point of my life’.

‘Truro School turned me – and many of my contemporaries – into internationalists.’

Early memories of school life include a bombing raid on Falmouth Docks not long after starting at Treliske, maintenance of the cricket pitch, and tennis during the school holidays. After winning a scholarship to the ‘big school’ in 1944, new perspectives opened out overnight’. In Sixth Form he concentrated on languages.

‘Why did I take up German? It seemed a natural progression from French, but later I came to see there was much more. Freddie Wilkes had something special about

him. I began German soon after the war had ended. Looking back, one might have expected comments from him on the victory, but his approach to language ignored recent politics and he taught us classical German culture... This was a lesson beyond literature, one of tolerance and broad-mindedness, of world values.

Michael's first visit to Germany was as part of the Cornwall Schoolboys rugby tour to Hanover. 'as the only one in the team with some knowledge of German, I became captain. This was over the Easter of my last year in school and my first experience of being a 'diplomat'.'

National Service

'I was just aware of the Soviet Union as our ally while I was at Truro School, yet within a few months Russia had become my life and would dictate my university studies, an academic year abroad, a career, and even whom I should marry.'

A dental abscess prevented him taking up a posting for a course as an interpreter in Germany and set him on a different course for learning Russian, and he was later selected for an interpreter course at Cambridge.

'Every day for the next 18 months would begin with grammar, followed by oral exercises and the production of *rasskazy*, talks or mini lectures to be given by each of us to the whole class, sometimes on set topics, sometimes on subjects of our own choosing. Later in the day, after we had acquired the first elements of grammar and sentence structure, there would be the study of elementary texts... In the afternoons there would be lectures: Russian geography, the Soviet armed forces, reminiscences by individual instructors of their earlier lives. Some had taught in Soviet schools; others had been in the Red Army. Significantly, ours was not an 'anti-Soviet' school, let alone a 'spy school'. There was a studious avoidance of direct anti-Soviet propaganda ... In the main, we were left to draw our own conclusions about Stalin or the Soviet system. This was a clever stricture on the part of the higher powers. We assimilated a new world of culture without being put off Russia for life. I was reminded of my experience of learning German at school.'

'In all, five thousand young men were on JSSL Russian course between 1951 and 1960, of whom some 1500 became interpreters and 3500 translators. This student body, when eventually dispersed, would make an academic contribution to the life of the UK. Not only would Russian, for the first time, become a subject taught at many universities: the *ex-kursanty*, even if they did not follow up these studies, would forever have an understanding of Russia imprinted on their minds.'

Among contemporaries on the course were Alan Bennett, Michael Frayn, Eddie George, later Governor of the Bank of England, and novelist D.M. Thomas.

First trip to Moscow, 1959

This was an academic year abroad in Moscow in 1959, which was a shock to the system for which five years of Russian studies did not prepare Michael for life under

the Soviet system. Officially, he was there to study Russian history and no mention was made of his interest in church history or his degree in Theology. He escaped an early brush with the KGB and decided to persevere with his studies in Moscow, despite the enforced atheism and anti-religious propaganda. It would be later that he became more aware of the physical persecution of religion. There were approximately 35 churches in Moscow in the late 1950s, compared to 600 in 1917. '...I could never have imagined that every single one of those which had been desecrated would be rebuilt and re-consecrated in my lifetime. There are now reported to be over six hundred'.

Trip to Moscow in 1964

'But why did you come to Moscow now?'

'I received some documents – they were letters from Ukraine describing the terrible things happening to a monastery.'

'Which one?'

'Pochaev.'

'What were the documents?'

'They were written by two women, Feodosia Varavva and Yefrosinia Shchur, mother of Anatoli, one of the monks...'

Their faces turned white. There was a stunned silence, then a cry, muffled in tears. 'We wrote those documents. I'm Feodosia and this is Yefrosinia.'

...'What do you want me to do with them? What can I do for you?' I asked. The reply was instantaneous and decisive: 'Take the documents back, then be our voice and speak for us'.

Here was the kernel, in words loud and clear, as to how I should go about my future work and what its essence must be. A hard struggle would lie ahead, with many years of further preparation before I could even properly begin. And yet the objective was unambiguous. My task was not to give my own interpretation: I simply had to speak as a medium for the voice which I had heard so decisively and which I must find ways of continuing to hear.'

Founded in 1969 as the Centre for the Study of Religion and Communism, Keston College got its name in 1974, with a change of venue, and continued to gather facts about religion in communist countries. The College later became the Keston Institute which provides resources for the study of religious affairs in communist and formerly communist countries. The Keston Archive eventually found a permanent home at Baylor University in Texas; the core of the archive is based on material and research collected by Michael. In tribute to Keston's and Michael's work, Professor Wallace Daniel wrote:

'The memories stored in the Keston Archive are often not the most pleasant aspects of the past, but collectively they comprise a nearly unparalleled record of struggle, courage, and commitment to certain values in extremely difficult circumstances. They fill in important gaps in Russia's national story that otherwise would remain unknown.

...one can only appreciate the courage, the energy, and the spiritual vision that went into the preservation of the materials in the Keston Archive...Archival work lies at the heart of original historical research. The Keston Archive needs to be better known. It is a rich, underexplored resource...Michael Bourdeaux has spoken eloquently about the heroism and self-sacrifice of courageous individuals and groups whose voices comprise central parts of a fascinating, multi-dimensional history, which, in this post-Cold War period, is in need of re-examination. The Keston Archive offers a rich source for that project to begin.'