

MASTERS ALL.

In February 1939, a large number of apprehensive primary school pupils, including me, descended upon the grammar school at Wellfield, Wingate, in order to take the second part of the "scholarship" exam. Success in this would ensure us a place there the following autumn. For some years, I had been aware of being short-sighted, although I had never dared to mention it to my parents. Even so, I was able to make out the severe features of the master who supervised our efforts. In later years, I was to get to know him better and to appreciate what he and many others of the teaching staff at Wellfield did for us. He was the redoubtable Mr Sid Stewart, known to all, though not to his face, as "Stewie".

Moving from a village primary school to the grammar school meant entering a new world. At Shotton Boys' Senior school, one teacher took us for every lesson and had to be jack-of-all trades, even if master of none. They all did a good job. I remember particularly Mr Murray, who prepared us for the exam by giving me test cards to do at home and generally encouraging us. I began to copy his style of handwriting, a sure sign of his influence. We should have shown them more appreciation of their efforts but, sadly, boys do not think along those lines.

Now we came into the domain of the specialist, who was much more likely to be the master of a trade. We learned to carry our satchels (another sign of our enhanced status!) from room to room, often standing chilled, if not frozen, outside them while the wind from the open quadrangles blew upon us.

Stewie took us for English. We used to sit respectfully, even terrified, in front of him. Immediately he launched us into the world of grammatical analysis. Nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs, subjects, objects, and all manner of clauses became our acquaintances if not our friends for months to come. While they did not immediately make us love English literature, they gave us a lasting knowledge of its structure. This stands us in good stead nowadays when pupils hardly know what a noun or a verb is.

He also began to make us grow up. One day he told us to recite William Blake's poem "The Tiger". In our piping primary school voices, we began to say, "Tiger, tiger, burning bright..." when his fist crashed on to the desk and his stentorian voice said "Stop!" We stopped, paralysed, like a rabbit in a car's headlights.

"Have you ever seen a tiger?" he demanded. "Do you think it makes a noise like a pussy cat? This is how the poem should go". Then he began to give us an insight into the forest life of the predator and another slice of our childhood disappeared. Many years afterwards, the memory still remains in my mind.

Later, Stewie also helped us to appreciate poetry and Shakespeare, two subjects which fifteen-year old boys from mining villages were not into at that time. We studied Henry V and although we had to learn passages from the play, we came to appreciate them, even to the extent of reciting them to one another at odd moments. Years later, in an attempt to impress my children, I would sometimes begin Henry's speech before Harfleur "Once more unto the breach dear friends, once more, or close the wall up with our English dead". I am never sure that I succeeded. Likewise poems such as "St. Agnes' Eve (ah, bitter chill it was!)", the Lotus Eaters, Tam'o Shanter and the Sensitive Plant" remain in the mind. The novel we read, "Guy Mannering", sadly, had disappeared completely from memory.

Other teachers also made their mark with their individual personalities and idiosyncrasies. We knew Mr Thompson, the physics master as "Scoff" because of his mordant humour. Mr Dobson or "Corker" was a diminutive Scotsman, likewise possessed a biting sarcasm that did nothing to aid my unself-confident attempts to produce mortice and

tenon and other joints. "Benny" Horrocks of geography used to entertain and embarrass us by singing solos at our annual Speech Day. Men who played games such as Harry Sill carried more esteem for this, and when Jack Dormand came to be our P.E. master in the Sixth Form, we enjoyed halcyon days. No doubt when people read of him nowadays as Lord Dormand, many in Co. Durham will think, if they do not say, "Whee would ha thowt it?"

The grammar school introduced two new factors into our lives, mixed classes and women teachers. In the early years, the boys largely ignored the girls but as time went on this changed. Liaisons developed and several marriages, including my own, owe their origin to schooldays. The women teachers taught us efficiently but do not stand out in our minds as much as the men. They concentrated more on languages and art subjects, and I remember only minor incidents. Miss Roxby, the senior mistress, diminutive in stature, brooked no misbehaviour. Miss Mackenzie, who taught us Latin, used to begin her lessons with the greeting "Salvete discipuli!" (I leave readers to translate this) whereupon we were supposed to reply, "Salve magistra!" Some of the more irreverent members of the class corrupted this to "Sal maggie". This meant that we had to go through the process twice before getting down to our conjugations and declensions. Miss Thombé took us for music in the Hall and quite often she would leave the piano and visit the "backbenchers" to hear their unaccompanied singing, .. "There's someone grunting around here"! It was Brian Metcalfe, for long afterwards a respected G.P. in Sunderland.

Nevertheless, Stewie is the person who figures most in one's memory and I imagine that whenever old students returned to the school, as they did regularly, he was probably the one they went to see most. I owed him another debt of gratitude. In my year as Head Boy, I had to propose a vote of thanks to our guests at Speech Day. He called me in to look over my attempt and made a number of suggestions that transformed my rambling words to something much more sensible. This earned me some praise from members of Staff but I did not reveal my source! He also did the same for the Head Girl, who later became my wife.

Some ten years after leaving school, she and I were working in the then Belgian Congo, where I was Directeur, first of the Boys' Primary and then the Secondary School at Bolobo. The Congolese used to give us African names. Ours was "Eziba". Only a few months ago, a former pupil of the school who married one of our nurses and who now lives in Torquay, told me that they had another name for me, of which I was quite unaware. It was "Mongonzoto". This meant, "You don't answer back to him", or perhaps "He who must be obeyed". This probably owed more to my white skin than to any dominant personality but looking back, one can see that Stewie was the original "Mongonzoto". From Wellfield he moved to become Headmaster of Easington Boys' School and later returned to Wellfield as its Head. Nobody rebelled in his day! An entry in a contemporary school magazine likened his entry into Assembly to "the Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold". Writing in the School's fiftieth anniversary book, he said that discipline problems were few and slight in nature. Life in the grammar schools of that time, if not exactly a doddle, was pleasant, for both teaching staff and pupils and we owed our mentors more than we were aware of at the time. It is good to record an appreciation now. Other readers of "Durham Town and Country" who attended such medium-sized grammar schools no doubt have their own list of names which still produce the wry grin and pleasant memories.