A WINDOW IN THE DARK

Dymphna CUSACK

Introduced and edited by DEBRA ADELAIDE
A Window in the Dark, introduced and edited by Debra Adelaide

FROM THE AUTHOR OF Come in Spinner, A Window in the Dark is Dymphna Cusack's account of her career as a teacher in New South Wales.

A Window in the Dark is characterised by Cusack’s critical observations of people and systems, her directness, humanity and above all her sense of humour. The account of her career begins in the early 1920s when she was a student at Sydney University and ends in Newcastle during the war. A 'window in the dark' was a metaphor she used to describe the teaching process: opening up a window in the minds of her students to develop their thinking.

The original manuscript, held in the National Library of Australia, is itself a 'window in the dark' of Cusack's own life and has been painstakingly transcribed by Debra Adelaide. It is published now for the first time and is accompanied by an illuminating introduction.
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by
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National Library of Australia
Canberra 1991
Foreword

This publication of Dymphna Cusack’s autobiographical *A Window in the Dark* edited by Dr Debra Adelaide marks a new direction in the publishing program of the National Library of Australia—an exploration of the wealth of some of the twentieth-century collections which are a strength of the Library’s holdings of Australian documentary materials.

The personal papers of the writer Dymphna Cusack were acquired in a number of consignments purchased and presented between the years 1959 to 1990. The manuscript of *A Window in the Dark* was included in a parcel of papers purchased in September 1976, even though Cusack had not given up hope of finding a publisher to give wider circulation to her experiences as a school teacher in various parts of New South Wales.

Some years later, the manuscript offers valuable insights into the attitudes and values of a conservative era in public education in Australia which has been fundamentally changed in recent time. Cusack’s story is one of frustration and vexation as she provides a challenging account of the enclosed and stifling world she experienced as a teacher in New South Wales in the years from the 1920s to the 1940s. Her account opens a window onto a vanished era and in doing so presents in microcosm a social history of the middle years of twentieth-century Australia.

Through its publishing program, assisted by the Morris West Trust Fund, the National Library is committed to making available to a wider audience of Australians some part of the wealth of rare and unique material which it has acquired as part of its commitment to collect and preserve the documentary heritage of Australia.

Warren Horton
*Director-General*
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Introduction

*A Window in the Dark* is an account of Dymphna Cusack’s career as a high school teacher in New South Wales from the late 1920s to 1944. It is and it isn’t autobiography, for here, finally, Cusack found the urge to describe her years as a teacher irresistible, even though she had constantly scorned the idea of writing about her own life. Despite the omissions of more conventional autobiographical matter, this is a narrative wonderfully rich with detail. The working life of the teacher is memorably captured, as is the formulation of Cusack’s own social and political conscience in a world she found was riddled with injustice. Each place she describes is equally vivid, each school and their characters deftly portrayed with the sure hand of the practised storyteller.

Chapter by chapter, we are taken through her placements as a teacher: Neutral Bay, Broken Hill, Goulburn, Parramatta, back to Sydney, and so on, and each place is enlivened by her discovery of value, meaning or continuity. Each place she lived and worked in excited or stimulated her, spoke to her from its past and its present. Invariably, too, each place disappointed her in that the schools in which she taught were oblivious to their surroundings and their history. Again and again she found the system she was part of, the curricula she was obliged to perpetuate, totally irrelevant to the lives and futures of her pupils; the ignorance of local history which she constantly encountered was symptomatic of this.

A hidden theme of this account of Cusack’s life as a teacher might be summed up in one word: waste. Sheer waste—of all those young lives, of all her efforts and of the lessons of the past. But while she grew increasingly critical of the high school system, her attacks upon it were always constructive, and her criticisms went beyond mere bitterness or resentment. Moreover, from a personal viewpoint, her career was not a waste. On the contrary she felt grateful for her teaching career. One of her greatest joys was observing the effects of opening a ‘window in the dark’ on a pupil: seeing a child begin to comprehend the surrounding world. Despite the drawbacks of the educational system, her years
as a teacher provided her with some valuable assets: a lifelong ability to communicate with people, a commitment to education in principle and to the teaching of one's own language and literature as the way to individual and national understanding.

Now, more than fifteen years after Cusack hoped her book would be published, *A Window in the Dark* gives us a fascinating view of a profession, a period and a person. Cusack began her book thirty years after she left the teaching profession, and by the time she completed it, the Wyndham Scheme, of subjects taught at different 'levels' (devised by Harry Wyndham and implemented in schools in New South Wales in the 1960s), had been dismantled and replaced by the unit system of study and assessment in high schools. In 1988-89 schools in New South Wales underwent a crisis which may in time prove to have altered permanently the face of education in that state. Undoubtedly, Cusack would have maintained strong views on these recent changes and, as a left-winger, she would have certainly deplored the Liberal government's policy of making schools 'accountable' for their successes and failures, both academically and financially. She had disagreed with the concept of corporate sponsorship at least as far back as 1943: there is no reason to think she might have welcomed the idea some fifty years later.

Whether or not she would have agreed that the controversial 'basic skills' assessment was also a regressive move is, however, hard to say. While on the one hand Cusack loathed forcing academically-oriented subjects (such as Latin) onto technically-minded pupils, as a writer and teacher of literature she was deeply committed to literacy skills. Indeed, in chapter three, she declares her firm belief in the 'particular and vital importance of the teaching of the native language'; to her, it was the whole key to unlocking all other disciplines.

Cusack's interest in education went back to her early school years at Guyra Primary where her headmaster occasionally allowed her to take the younger classes. Later, at the Ursuline Convent in Armidale, she spent exceptionally happy years being guided by the highly-educated, aristocratic German nuns, who in turn imparted to their pupils a deep respect for education. Cusack was one of those people whom you could say was a born teacher, although where and who she was born probably had little bearing on that. The author of *A Window in the Dark* was born on 22 September 1902 in Wyalong, New South Wales. She was in fact christened Ellen Dymphna Cusack, although she had been registered at birth simply as Ellen. The Ellen was for her aunt, who was to raise Dymphna for a large part of her childhood, and Dymphna, meaning songster or poet, came from the romantic Celtic side of her Irish-Catholic family. She was called Nell—rarely Ellen—by family, schoolmates and friends, but people she met after university days nearly always called her Dymphna; some of her earliest stories and articles were published under the bylines 'L.N.D.' (for Ellen D.) or 'E.D.C.' To those closest to her she was always known as Nell. But to the rest of her extensive circle of acquaintances—and some of these were also very close—she
was Dymphna. In 1930 she published under the name Dymphna Cusack for the first time, Nell presumably being too homely or familiar for one who had by then decided she would be a writer; and the poetical resonances of the alternative name speak for themselves.

So one could also say that Dymphna Cusack was destined to become a writer. Apart from the significance of that curious name, there are all the signs in her early years pointing her towards her chosen career: a lonely childhood dominated by adults (including a Fenian grandfather with a colourful past), long periods of ill health leading to creative introspection, and of course an enormous interest in reading.

And it is as a writer that Cusack is remembered. Her other career as a teacher has until now been eclipsed by her reputation as a writer. However, it is not surprising that the world-famous author, who continued to receive the most personal and touching fan mail from complete strangers right up until the time of her death, had also been a much-loved teacher. In the two decades she worked in New South Wales' high schools, Cusack influenced a generation of pupils who valued her as much for her teaching as for her writing. They, too, continued to write to their former teacher thanking her, even after thirty years, for the deep interest she took in their education, for her inspired teaching methods, for her dedication to her work and the care she took to ensure that each pupil who passed through her hands was treated as an individual.

Apart from her natural feeling for the vocation, Cusack was propelled into teaching by several factors: she had won a university exhibition and a teacher’s training scholarship following matriculation, and teaching was the obvious career for a woman who graduated in Arts in the 1920s. Obliged to work anyway to assist the family’s declining fortunes, and as that other popular career for women—marriage—was not on offer, it was inevitable that Cusack should accept the exhibition and agree in turn to contract herself to the Department of Education for at least five years.

When she and the Department of Education parted company (with mutual relief) some twenty years later, this was merely the formal termination of her career as a teacher. Cusack’s entire life was one of the born pedagogue. A natural, and by all accounts an excellent speaker, she was an enthusiastic lecturer who rarely refused the chance to talk on any of the issues dear to her: literature, Australian literature in particular, world peace, the cultural cringe, travel, women, history, human rights and so on. During the war she gave talks on the ABC, on Radio 2GB and for Army Education on subjects ranging from housewives struggling on the dole, to the provocative ‘Are we worth defending?’ which was designed to disjoint military noses.

The quick-witted and humorous woman who could conceive of, and execute, such a topic for Army Education probably had her Irish origins to thank for that. Cusack was the fourth surviving child of James Cusack and Bridget,
née Crowley, who had been born in Yass and Berrima respectively, both of Irish families who had settled in New South Wales in the 1850s. Wyalong came into existence in the 1890s following the discovery of gold, and by the end of the century West Wyalong was reportedly the most productive field in New South Wales. When Dymphna Cusack was born in 1902, West Wyalong was not officially to exist for another four years. The two names resulted from a long-standing dispute between officialdom—which formally established Wyalong in 1899—and the gold-miners, who naturally preferred to live on their leases and at the water supply three kilometres west.

James Cusack owned a gold mine in West Wyalong and a sheep property in Wyalong. The True Blue gold mine was pegged in 1892, and by the time of Cusack’s birth her father was quite wealthy. A map in the West Wyalong Historical Museum shows the True Blue to have been quite a large claim compared with the others around it.

A remarkable thing about West Wyalong today is that its appearance gives no hint of the exceptional gold-mining activity on which it was founded. The museum’s map shows hundreds of claims: virtually the entire town of West Wyalong was pegged out. Of all those shafts, extending down many hundreds of metres, there remains barely a sign, hardly a hint, except for the True Blue Ambassador Motel. This motel is indeed built on the very site of the Cusacks’ True Blue mine, which brought the family such prosperity, and then grief, as James Cusack speculated away all his wealth. Sifting through Cusack’s letters in the National Library’s manuscript collection, I discovered, in a letter to her old friend Rene Laws, a reference to the mine, whose ‘entrance and poppet-head’, she claimed, ‘is [sic] preserved in the back garden of the True Blue Motel’. This was in 1974. Since then the True Blue Motel has been refashioned and the poppet-head, which has been ‘preserved’ all too realistically, now stands in front of the motel.

Wyalong is fairly phlegmatic about its most famous daughter, and understandably so, since she had little to do with the place after the age of three. From then on Cusack lived for health reasons with her aunt and uncle in Cooma, Narrandera and Guyra, before attending high school in Armidale. By the time she had completed school her family was living in Sydney and it was here at the university (then, of course, there was only the one) that she completed her education and embarked on her teaching career.

Apparently it did not occur to Cusack to write about her teaching experiences until, as a letter to Rene Laws in 1973 shows, someone else suggested it. For years she had rejected the idea of writing autobiography, and only reluctantly agreed to cooperate, via taped conversations, in the eponymous biography which her husband, Norman Freehill, wrote and published in 1975. In that book there is no mention of anything which could be the manuscript of A Window in the Dark, although Freehill does allude to her ‘latest novel’ which was the never-
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to-be-published 'Nurse No Long Grief'. The years described in A Window in the Dark are dealt with in the Freehill biography in about twenty pages, interspersed with comments on her literary career (which is very much in the background in A Window in the Dark) and relying heavily on Cusack's own conversation. Talking about her years as a teacher for the book, Dymphna Cusack, may have given her the idea to extend it into a detailed account of the period 1922 to 1944. Comparison of the two narratives reveals some overlapping but no actual repetition of material; it is clear that Cusack did not proceed from the tapes she made with her husband, but started afresh.

A Window in the Dark might be autobiographical, but there are too many gaps for this to be an autobiography. Mindful that the matter at hand is her teaching career, Cusack firmly steers clear of all sorts of topics, as she did when cooperating with her husband's biography. For instance in that book it is never stipulated when or where Cusack and Freehill were married. They actually lived together for several years, as Freehill's previous marriage was not dissolved, and they clearly felt this was no-one's business but their own. Cusack is also tight-lipped over her personal affairs in A Window in the Dark, to the extent where it is frustrating for the truly dedicated biographer. Glimpses of a lively, at times controversial, romantic life are offered from time to time, but they remain only glimpses; she rarely names names and avoids other details which might reveal identities. Similarly, Cusack is also reticent about her day-to-day existence: where she is living, except when it is on school grounds, as at Goulburn; where her family is; what their circumstances are (although she briefly refers to this more than once).

And her steadily rising literary career is given only the minimum of attention. She mentions the novel Jungfrau, which was published while she was at Sydney Girls' High in 1936, but never explains how it evolved, although, with a teacher as its main character, this can hardly have been extra-personal. She is more forthcoming on the subject of Southern Steel (written after she left teaching), and describes the influences of the people and character of Newcastle, where that novel is set. She only once briefly mentions the satirical novel, Pioneers on Parade, written with Miles Franklin and published in 1939 amid quite a lot of publicity. Of the three plays she had published while she was teaching (several others were performed) she only elaborates on Morning Sacrifice, which is set in a school and draws heavily from her experiences. However she doesn’t tell us where and when she began the play, or what the reaction to it was (even though it won the Western Australian Drama Festival Prize in 1942); or even speculate that its bitter denunciation of the conditions for women teachers may have contributed to the end of her teaching career.

It is as if Cusack was deliberately ignoring a substantial portion of her life. And yet, she may have simply felt that the facts of her life beyond teaching had their place elsewhere (but not, she always maintained, in an account she would
ever write). Like so much of Cusack's writing, *A Window in the Dark* shows an intelligent negotiation of facts and events to form an interesting, integrated, readable story. The difference here is that for the first and only time, Cusack wrote the story of her own life, or part of it. When she began writing *A Window in the Dark*, she said (in a letter to Rene Laws in 1973) she had no other book occupying her at the time; it is as if she cast around in her mind and saw her earlier career in a new light: teaching became raw material for a story. And hindsight had shown her the personal value of those years, which she felt compelled to describe. She had several reasons to be grateful for being a teacher. In particular, teaching took her to places where she would probably never have gone and showed her communities which totally changed her political and social outlook. To understand this properly, we have to travel outback.

Broken Hill is often called the most unique city in Australia. 'There is nothing parochial or bucolic about Broken Hill', wrote novelist Arthur Upfield in *The Bachelors of Broken Hill* (1958). 'There is no city in all Australia remotely like it excepting perhaps the golden city of Kalgoorlie'. But unlike Kalgoorlie, Charters Towers and other mining towns that erupted onto the landscape in the second half of the nineteenth century, Broken Hill's immense prosperity continued for many decades. For heat, isolation, wealth, drinking, dust, unionisation, aridity, community spirit and cosmopolitan-ness, Broken Hill is unrivalled. Even today in the recessed 1990s, when a mere fraction of the former mining operations continue, Broken Hill stands alone as the most unusual industrial city in the country.

'There is no thoroughfare in Australia quite like Argent Street', continues Upfield, 'Broken Hill's main shopping centre', and he is absolutely right. The most unusual thing about Broken Hill's main thoroughfare is its faithful alignment with and proximity to the famous line of lode on which Broken Hill was founded. The history of Broken Hill has been told many times, by novelists (like Roy Bridges, in 1920), academics (Geoffrey Blainey, in 1968) and local historians (R.H.B. Kearns, in 1973–76 and 1982). Besides attracting the interest of the historians, Broken Hill maintains long-standing and diverse literary connections. As well as Upfield's and Bridges', several other novels are set in Broken Hill: Ruth Trant Fischer's *The Hog's Back* (1970), Donald Maclean's *No Man Is an Island* (1955), and of course the well-known *Wake in Fright* (1961, later filmed) by Kenneth Cook, who called the town Bundanyabba.

There is also a long list of authors associated with the place, beginning at an unlikely, and admittedly flimsy, connection with Charles Dickens: his two sons Alfred and Edward both managed stations in the district. C.J. Dennis, Joseph Furphy, Myrtle Rose White, Ion Idriess, Tarella Quin, Randolph Bedford, C.E.W. Bean, Rae Desmond Jones, and a few others can claim connections with Broken Hill, some strong, some slender. By stretching it a bit we can include Mary Gilmore who taught at Silverton (about twenty-five kilometres beyond
the city) from 1887 to 1889, and even Katharine Susannah Prichard, who for a year worked as a governess on 'nearby' (for the outback) Turella Station in 1906. John Tierney ('Brian James'), who wrote about the city in *The Advancement of Spencer Button* (1950), and Ruth Trant Fischer were both teachers in Broken Hill. And so was Dymphna Cusack.

When Cusack arrived in Broken Hill in 1928 armed with two years' teaching experience, she was still 'swaddled' in her own irrelevant, imperialistic education. Culturally, politically and topographically, Broken Hill was like another world. Indeed, she 'thought it was the end of the world', describing her initial reaction for Norman Freehill. Certainly it was—and still is—the unofficial end of New South Wales. A mere fifty kilometres from the South Australian border, with only the almost-ghost town of Silverton (now a much-favoured film location) in between, the city is more allied to the next state and its capital Adelaide than it ever has been to far-off Sydney.

In 1928 Broken Hill was exactly as she described it for Freehill, 'an ugly city with few trees, mainly corrugated iron houses—ovens in summer.' But this quotation should never be taken out of context (as it is in the *Oxford Literary Guide to Australia*, 1987). She meant it was ugly to the eye only—not to the heart. Despite its severe discomforts, the place and the people soon became dear to her. In 1928 the people of Broken Hill were only just beginning to enjoy some of the material benefits of the huge profits that had been made from the mines. Lack of water and excess of heat, dust and wind still plagued the city. On the other hand the miners had won substantial rights from the companies. The unionisation of the city was rock solid, so much so that the union movement and Broken Hill had become almost synonymous. The local council was comprised totally of Labor and socialist independent aldermen.

Other legacies of the wealthy mines were becoming apparent, and they were not so beneficial. In fact they were malign. In the early 1920s over thirty ex-miners had been awarded land grants near Griffith. By Cusack's day, four of them had died from pneumoconiosis and seven more had given up their leases due to ill health. By 1928 the deadly effects of lead poisoning were well known, but the miners were still working in dust-filled stopes, in turn filling their lungs with dust as they filled the bank accounts of the mines' shareholders. extraordinarily—appallingly—it was not until the mid-1940s that the miners began using water-spraying drills in the stopes to arrest the dust before it arrested them. By travelling down the mines of Broken Hill and seeing the dusty black holes, feeling the heat, experiencing the truly palpable terror of utter darkness, and hearing the facts for herself, Cusack learned about the conditions of miners in this country.

Why dwell so on Broken Hill? Because it marked a turning point in Dymphna Cusack's political and literary education. It was here she claims that she 'really grew up' (she was twenty-six). It was the true beginning of her career as a teacher. Along with her final years in Newcastle, her two years in Broken
Hill were the most interesting and rewarding of her teaching life. She found the heat oppressive, the lack of water punishing, the dust appalling. She called it a ‘hell on earth’. She developed a rare, curiously-named illness, pernicious anaemia, which was irreversibly exacerbated by these conditions. She despaired of the utter irrelevance of the curricula she was obliged to teach, the absurdity, for instance, of expecting future miners to be classical scholars.

And yet she loved her job and her pupils. She found their pride, wit and independence admirable and educative. She knew that in other circumstances they would have been classed as ‘underprivileged’ or ‘deprived’ but that the strong community spirit which bound them to their city was something precious and enviable. After hearing Cusack reminisce on the radio in 1981, a former pupil in Broken Hill, Eilie McKern, felt moved to write to her old teacher, describing the amazement that she and her friends felt when they learned that Cusack’s first impression of the town was one of poverty. Her letter explains how they thought they were ‘very privileged’; loving the place and finding a beauty there that remained with them all their lives. If this former pupil could now read *A Window in the Dark*, she would see that much of Broken Hill also remained with Cusack all her life.

In her chapter on Broken Hill, Cusack talks about the extraordinary history of the city and wonders if anyone has written a novel based on it. Obviously she was unaware of the two novels cited earlier, both published by the time she wrote *A Window in the Dark*. The wonder is that she didn’t write one herself, since the place inspired her so much, and since the history of it was so dear to her social and political conscience. She did, after all, write a novel about Newcastle, a city that naturally offered many similarities with Broken Hill, and not just because of the connection with the Broken Hill Proprietary. However in Broken Hill her career as a writer, just begun, was finally established. Here she wrote her first novel, *Sounding Brass*, entered it in the Prior Religious Novel Competition (it didn’t win), sent it off to the agent for an English publisher (it was rejected) and eventually lost it. Although it was never published, the discipline of completing a full-length novel revealed possibilities to her. It showed she could be a writer, could meet the demands of longer work than stories and articles. Earlier she had written a play (which Florence James typed for her), ‘Safety First’, which was a runner-up to Katharine Susannah Prichard’s *Brumby Innes* in *Triad* magazine’s play competition of 1927. It was never published but by 1935 she was having other plays performed and published, and winning prizes for them. In addition, as Freehill records, and as Cusack also mentions elsewhere, she had short stories published in the *Woman’s Mirror* and the *Bulletin* while she was at university, although the pseudonym she chose (and would never disclose) has proved too clever for me to be able to identify them. The first story published under her own name, ‘The Gateway’, did not appear until 1930, and in fact over a long and diverse writing career, she published very few short stories.
Of importance, but maybe more for Broken Hill than for her, was an article by 'L.N.D.' in the 23 May 1928 issue of the *Sydney Mail* (the Saturday edition of the *Sydney Morning Herald*), about 'The Silver City'. If the people of Broken Hill had known the identity of the author, she would have been a celebrity there, so rare was it to read in such a widely-circulated paper favourable views on this dry, dusty, remote town at the other end of the state. Though by no means uncritical, Cusack's article spoke fondly of the city's civic pride, its library ('the best municipal library out of Sydney'), and its history: 'What a history this "City of Silver" has had! What romance surrounds its name!'

Probably most important of all for her career as a writer was Cusack's literary diet in Broken Hill. The 'capital L' literature she studied at the University of Sydney had included nothing Australian or American. She only encountered European authors in Christopher Brennan's comparative literature course, the most modern of these being Nietzsche. Her literature course actually had a hefty serving of language: Anglo-Saxon, Old English, Middle English, with Chaucer and of course that old faithful, *Beowulf*. She studied Swift, Addison, Steele, Boswell and Dr Johnson. Poets included Pope, Gray and Collins. She read a good deal of Shakespeare and later in the course studied the Romantic poets and, to her relief, Austen.

In fact her English course was extensive, if English is taken as literally that; certainly the reading lists were heavy ones. Cusack forgets—or is unaware—that as a university subject English was still a comparatively recent one, and that the critical industry which has fostered it and which we now take for granted, barely existed in the early 1920s. Still, those who have been forced to study *Beowulf* will understand her frustration.

Although Cusack tells us she found Broken Hill 'culturally a desert', she doesn't mention the three Shakespeare plays performed in the year of her arrival, brought to the city by Allan Wilkie and his Shakespearean Company; these could hardly have gone unnoticed by her. She does note the exceptional number of bands, for the size of the town, which she heard practising on weekends. And the cultural desert did have other oases. It was the birthplace of opera singer Strella Wilson (Austral Groves Wilson) who in 1929 left Broken Hill for the opera houses of Europe. There was also an excellent modern library, run by Morry Bannister, a man who had spent some thirty-odd years as a miner. Here Cusack read for the first time modern and European authors such as Erich Remarque, Thomas Mann and Aldous Huxley; she expanded her reading of the classic Russian writers, including Leo Tolstoy and Feodor Dostoevsky. And it was during her time in Broken Hill that she first met Norman Freehill, while on a visit to Sydney. He was then a financial journalist and had agreed through a mutual friend to read her play, presumably the unpublished 'Safety First'. He influenced her literary career greatly. Initially he suggested she might try reading the contemporary American authors he liked. So she read Carl Sandberg,
Theodore Dreiser, Willa Cather, Eugene O'Neill, Sinclair Lewis and so on. Once more her literary boundaries were widening rapidly, even though she’d majored in literature at university.

Later, and for the rest of their lives together, Norman Freehill became her Leonard Woolf. He looked after her during her illnesses, imposed rest-periods when they were needed, read and discussed with her all her manuscripts, and accompanied her on her travels around the world. He also wrote the well-meaning but uncritical account of her life, not so much biography as hagiography. Unfortunately—and this is obvious from comparing Freehill’s comments on her work with the novels and travel books themselves—he appeared to have had a poor grasp of literary criticism. Either that or his adoration of his wife prohibited any objective assessment of her work. (Possibly Freehill may have feared raising Cusack’s ire by publishing his true thoughts on her works; however it seems unlikely that he would have forged ahead with the task of writing his book, difficult enough as it must have been given her reluctance, if he knew he had to dissemble.)

When Cusack left Broken Hill at the end of 1929 she took with her a totally changed view of the world she inhabited. She had gained a keen sense of social and economic justice. She had learned a great deal more about literature. She had lived amidst hardship and seen it could be overcome by a cohesive community. Not coincidentally, she had also finally abandoned her Catholicism.

She also took with her a feeling of despair about the education system she was unwillingly perpetuating, an unpublished novel, and a severe disease. She was both sorry and glad to be leaving. She never returned.

Vastly different though Broken Hill was to anywhere else Cusack had lived, at least it shared one thing in common with her home town: mining. When she went to Goulburn, her next teaching appointment, there must have been nothing familiar but the cold winters, accustomed as she had been to the weather in Armidale where she attended school.

‘No two cities could have been more unlike than Broken Hill and Goulburn’, she observes at the beginning of chapter five, and she doesn’t just mean the weather. Or the landscape, which was, and is, in total contrast to the raw red stretches of the desert-hugging west; while very northern European, with its oaks and beeches and maples, it is still undeniably Australian—genteeel—pastoral. But the main difference Cusack found here was the social climate. Goulburn remains a large sheep-raising district, and in her time was an important railway junction for the transportation of wool as well as other goods. The dominance of the early pastoralists and the snobbo-squatocracy was seen and felt everywhere. For instance, as a ‘mere high school teacher’ she was not invited to local dances and the like until introduced to the upper echelons of Goulburn society by one of the ‘pure merinos’.
Goulburn could have boasted, had it cared to, distinguished literary connections. The famous local writers were ignored both by the school syllabus (something Cusack came to expect everywhere she taught) and the general population, although in this, as in many of the observations in *A Window in the Dark*, she is speaking very much as the retrospect. Certainly Miles Franklin and Mary Gilmore were famous local writers by 1930. But the other writer she cites, Helen Simpson, was yet to publish her book, *Boomerang*, which drew upon local and family history (even though overseas by 1930, Simpson had a dozen publications to her name); this is one of the instances throughout the book where indignation undermines the chronology. Cusack also found the same ignorance or avoidance of local history, including the fate of the Aborigines, which she'd encountered elsewhere in her teaching career; the same head-against-wall-banging approach to education where this time future farmers instead of future miners were uselessly, tediously, inculcated with Latin declension.

Despite her extensive travels and her fondness for the place, Cusack never revisited Broken Hill. She returned to Goulburn several times as it was the home of two particularly dear friends, Rene and Sid Laws. On a visit in 1974, she found the beauty of the city, especially in its springtime profusion of wildflowers, as compelling as ever. She regretted, however, the impending demolition of the Mary’s Mount seminary, which she expressed in a typically civic-minded letter to the Goulburn *Evening Post* on 8 November of the same year.

But Mary’s Mount went all the same, and if she revisited Goulburn today I doubt she would consider the Big Merino a fitting monument towards interest in local heritage and history. Her disappointment in the lack of local historical awareness, not just at Goulburn, but all over the place, helped ignite the satirical shafts of that extremely amusing novel, *Pioneers on Parade* (1939). I first read *Pioneers on Parade* with the bicentenary breathing down my neck, and so found it even funnier in that topical context. Cusack and Franklin began writing it in the year of the sesqui-centenary, 1938, both of them disgusted and amused by the unashamed ‘parading’ of a spurious Australian history. Some of the ammunition for this novel clearly came from her stay in Goulburn. Democratic to the marrow, Cusack despised snobs and snobbery in every shape and form. She brushed aside personal slights—because of her age, height, sex or status—for the foolishness they were; but she always spoke out vociferously for the rights of herself and others because not to have done so was to have silently acquiesced to the undemocratic attitudes behind them.

Still, reading through *A Window in the Dark*, it’s evident that the social prejudice she encountered in Goulburn was quite trivial compared with the intellectual pig-headedness she experienced here and which was to shadow her career as a teacher from then on. She describes the censorship imposed on her reading and discussing the then controversial books: Marx’s *Communist Manifesto*, Mill’s *On the Subjection of Women*, Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of
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Woman, and others. These publications were more suspect within a town like Goulburn than they were in Broken Hill. After a grilling by the headmaster and the local school inspector, she presumably had her books confiscated, although apart from saying she ‘fought a losing battle’ over them, does not elaborate. All we learn is that she and a fellow-teacher were prevented from teaching nineteenth-century and modern history with these relevant documents.

Later, during her years at Sydney Girls’ High, she encountered much the same prejudice, although the emotions accompanying the situation ran higher in the context of the Second World War, which broke out while she was there. Here she was teaching current affairs using a variety of local newspapers to illustrate the role of the media; these included the communist weekly Tribune. Once more she was accused of teaching communism, of being a communist, and so forth. By this time she had more or less decided teaching was not going to occupy her for the rest of her working life. Certainly she had discarded all aspirations for a career as a teacher, making no attempts to gain the promotion which her ‘A’ grade status entitled her.

So when she arrived in Bathurst to discover the mud from the fight over censorship still stuck (the ‘Asparagus King’, R. Gordon Edgell of the famed Edgell Foods, called her a communist) she virtually resigned herself to teaching as a job. Besides which, her time was obviously up due to ill-health. Prior to her five years at Sydney Girls’ High, she had spent a gruelling three years at Parramatta High. The physical demands of the long train journey there and back each day (she was living in Strathfield at first, then later in Sydney, in Macquarie Street) were aggravated by the sprawling layout of the school itself, which obliged her to run from class to class much of the time. Here as in Goulburn, the situation became worse when a lazy, authoritative and offensive headmaster succeeded a very good one, and dominated the school for the second half of her time here.

Her health deteriorated to the point where medical advice recommended some time off and a sea voyage, which she managed thanks to the financial assistance of a friend. And so, aged thirty-three, she took six months off to improve her health, and travelled to Ceylon. A year or two earlier she had taken a short holiday with another teacher to Noumea, and seen enough to strengthen her ‘ingrained hatred of colonialism’. But the Ceylon trip became a more important overseas visit, and not just for the improvement effected in her health. On board ship she met with racial prejudice of a more obvious kind than she’d previously encountered in Australia, when Australian and English travellers refused to associate with the ‘natives’, i.e. the Singhalese. In Ceylon itself she was rightly embarrassed in a rickshaw ride, horrified at being carted around by a sweating, labouring fellow-human being. And on the return journey she met a Jewish refugee from Hitler’s Germany, and others who opened her eyes to the inevitability of a world war. This was in 1935.
INTRODUCTION

Nineteen thirty-five was also an important year for Cusack as a writer. She joined the Fellowship of Australian Writers, the same year that Flora Eldershaw was elected president; later Cusack herself was to become president. She encountered writers both actually and through their books, and became friends with authors such as Mary Gilmore, Louis Esson and Katharine Susannah Prichard. In 1935 her novel Jungfrau was a runner-up to Kylie Tennant’s Tiburon in the Bulletin novel competition. Also in 1935 her play, ‘Anniversary’, won the inaugural Anzac Fellowship of Women play competition; it was based on the theme of the dispossessed returned soldier, which she had already explored in a poem and short story of 1930. ‘Anniversary’ was performed at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music during the Anzac celebrations in April, with the youthful Peter Finch in the main role.

Cusack taught in fourteen schools over twenty-two years. Her teaching career began before she undertook any training, at a private girls’ school, and even earlier than that she’d tried her hand under the benevolent auspices of the headmaster at her old primary school. She spent the longest time at Sydney Girls’ High, five years from 1935 to 1939 (with a six-week interlude at a Canberra high school), and the shortest time at Fort Street, where she marked time for a couple of weeks in September 1941 before being sent off to Parkes for the remainder of that year. Of all those schools, ironically it was the very last, Newcastle Boys’ Technical High, in 1943, that gave her the most satisfaction of her teaching career. As a technical high, and one sponsored by BHP at that, it had adopted a more realistic approach to the education of young men, training them in preparation for work rather than study. Cusack certainly did not agree that the best thing for young boys was to be swallowed into the great industrial gut of BHP, but accepted that under the wartime circumstances it was far better to train boys to enable them to find jobs rather than torture them into travesties of classical scholars.

Probably she would have stayed here much longer, but by the end of 1943 her health was too badly damaged for her to continue teaching under any circumstances. And her reputation with the Department of Education was by then such a poor one that she no longer felt inclined to fight. There were two struggles in particular: the worker’s compensation case involving her coccyx in a very public brawl, which finished in a moral but not a financial victory (the law then not allowing for monetary compensation for public servants injured while at work); and in 1944 a battle to obtain rightful accrued sick-leave, following her ‘boarding-out’ from the department after prolonged ill health. These two areas of conflict would make for fascinating elaboration were it not for the fact (which I cannot find coincidental) that under the culling of the Department of Education files over the years, there is not a scrap of paper relating either to the landmark compensation case or her fight for accrued sick-leave. The collection of teachers’ personal files does not include one on Cusack. Nor are there any other documents concerning this high-profile teacher.
Cusack's health problems are another example of her own selective reticence in this narrative; she mentions them from time to time but without any detail. If there wasn't ample evidence to the contrary, her life might seem to have been hypochondriac; so copious, persistent and unusual were the illnesses she experienced. Pernicious anaemia sounds alarming, for a start, although these days no-one seems to have heard of it much. And trigeminal neuralgia, the other disease which she had for much of her life, has a decidedly psychosomatic ring to it. Apart from these two illnesses, a bad bronchial condition made her doctors strongly suspect tuberculosis when she was boarded out from the Department of Education; hence the three incurable diseases she mentions on her discharge.

Soon after leaving teaching she went to live in the New South Wales Blue Mountains township of Hazelbrook with Florence James; the drier mountain air was supposedly good for bronchial conditions. This turned from a rest for health reasons into the brilliant collaboration of Come in Spinner (1951). It was while here in the mountains that she came into close contact with tuberculosis sufferers; an experience grievously intensified when her old friend from Fort Street practice teaching days, Kay Keane, died. By then, Cusack herself had thankfully been cleared of the fatal disease, and had seen and heard enough over the last few years to boil over into the writing of Say No to Death (1951).

As a sufferer of pernicious anaemia, all her life Cusack had to beware the signs of fatigue and force herself to rest, relax, slow down. It is obvious she was a woman of remarkable energy, and her periods of self-imposed convalescence must have been very difficult. When, therefore, Cusack claims that in spite of the effect the great heat in Broken Hill had upon her health, 'I can never be grateful enough for the insight my years there gave me into the world we live in', or that her two years in Broken Hill 'were of enormous value to me in every other way', we can feel some indication of the outstanding regard she had for the place. This regard takes on a greater dimension altogether when we learn that part of the treatment of pernicious anaemia involved eating raw liver sandwiches and swallowing grated hog's stomach.

In her second year in Broken Hill, Cusack began suffering from the 'prostrating headaches' which signalled the onset of another disease: trigeminal neuralgia. Fortunately this disease attacked intermittently and she was able to find some creative, imaginative good out of the maelstrom of pain when it overtook her. During her stay in Hazelbrook following her boarding out she suffered bouts of this disease. When she felt an attack coming on, Cusack took to her bed; two or three days of complete rest and silence might stave off the pain. But when in pain, she was so acutely sensitive to her environment that, according to Florence James, 'even the sound of the cat stamping its feet' was unbearable. When free from an attack, her working day was prescribed by the need for rest and routine. Cusack and James spent the mornings working on Come in Spinner; the afternoons were devoted to the former's nap while the latter
typed and revised the morning’s composition. By four o’clock, when the three children of the household returned from school, their working day was over.

One would think, given the prolonged exercise of the jaws and so forth during speech, that the method of writing via dictation which Cusack developed while writing *Come in Spinner* would in fact aggravate the neuralgia, but this was not the case. In fact this system was so useful that she dictated all her books from thenceforth onto reel-to-reel and later cassette tapes, sent them off for typing, made corrections by hand, had them retyped and so on until she arrived at her final drafts. Typing was not possible (although much later in life she did type some of her letters), but handwriting was always manageable—in fact she handwrote hundreds of letters over the years.

As well as her illnesses, Cusack had a lot of outright bad luck with her health. While teaching at Goulburn she broke both knees. She had an operation to repair them in the last weeks of school term, expecting to recover during the holidays. This didn’t happen and she was forced to take more time off, thus initiating the first of her health-related fights with the Department of Education, which docked five weeks’ pay as a penalty for being off school both at the end and the beginning of term. This on the surface was not unreasonable; it is still departmental policy that a teacher be on duty either at the beginning or end of term-time to ensure against extended holidays. Rather than being an instance of persecution—as Cusack is hinting—it was really more a case of rigid bureaucracy; however her peevishness with an administrative system which was unable to cope with individual cases is understandable.

Around 1939–40 she had three operations, although characteristically she does not say what for. She tells us they ‘all ... went wrong’ because of her anaemic condition, but again what went wrong remains unsaid. However it is clear enough that, for whatever reasons, here was someone who seemed to have drawn the short straw as far as good health was concerned. While at Sydney Girls’ High she suffered the fall in class which made her coccyx so ‘famous’. Yet another operation and several weeks off school were followed by the department docking her pay once more and denying her sick leave. By this time Cusack was sick of them and readily agreed to be the guinea pig in a test workers’ compensation case against her employers.

I have explained Cusack’s problems with her health at some length because I think it is important to realise how resourceful, hardworking and committed she was as a teacher. Any teacher will testify how exhausting the job is, and Cusack worked in the days before the ancillary staff and smaller classes which are now rightly taken for granted. But poor health was not the only impediment to her career.

When Cusack worked for the New South Wales Department of Education she was automatically, inevitably, treated as an inferior because she was a woman. Although the Married Women Lecturers’ and Teachers’ Act was not passed until
1932, it was common practice for women to resign upon marriage. The department expected it, and if it did not receive a resignation then it issued one for you in the form of compulsory retirement. Bonded teachers, that is those who had gone through their training under the scholarship system, were prohibited from marriage until their bond was either repaid or worked off. In Cusack’s time this was five years, although this was later restructured so that one worked for as many years as one had received the grant and there was no prohibition on marriage (in fact the married allowance was higher). In 1976 the bond was lifted altogether since by this time economic circumstances meant that the promise—or in some cases threat—of a job could not be fulfilled by the department. For Cusack the bond proved to be a two-edged sword: as she explains, it saved her from agreeing to a marriage which would have been disastrous, as much as she thought she was ‘in love’. Fortunately by the time her bond expired, so had the affair.

The Married Women Lecturers’ and Teachers’ Act ensured that the practice of the Department of Education had legal status, although it changed very little about the conditions for women teachers, which were always poor. The act’s justification was on economic grounds. During the Depression there was deep resentment about married women working. ‘Taking men’s jobs’, it has always been called, although by and large women still do jobs that men would never consider. But in bad economic times there always has to be a scapegoat and married women teachers served this purpose as well as anyone else. The act was mitigated by provisions for some married women to work, such as those whose husbands were unable to find employment, or widows; nor were married women employed before the act necessarily dismissed, although the pressure to leave, especially from resentful peers, was frequently irresistible.

In Morning Sacrifice, Cusack’s award-winning play, a girls’ school is faced with questions of power in corruption, emotional manipulation and sexual frustration amongst the all-female staff. Cusack acknowledges that the central figure, the dominating headmistress, Miss Kingsbury, was based upon types she met in her actual career, notably the smooth-talking ‘Honey-tongue’ of Fort Street, and ‘Odora’ from Sydney Girls’ and later Newcastle Girls’. (Cusack was reticent about using the actual names of these women, along with those of six other teachers about whom she is scathing; a letter from the State Superannuation Board of 5 May 1976 in reply to her request for information on individuals, show there was some question of libelling the persons involved. Her notes provide the names of Honey-tongue, Odora, and others, but I cannot see the point now in broadcasting them.)

But while in A Window in the Dark Cusack admits that ‘frustration, professionally and sexually, was the lot of women teachers’ she refuses to subscribe to the sexist view which sees unmarried women grouped together like a bunch of cats on heat. If there were problems (and there were) it was not the
nature of women which was to blame, but the 'inhuman conditions under which we worked'. Later in her account, she pauses to make a few observations upon the 'much-maligned' woman teacher. With the ban on marriage, there was sexual frustration of an obvious kind, but in all her years as a teacher, only once did she believe she suffered from the meanness or pettiness which is said to be the result of enforced virginity (vide Freud, whom she deals with summarily). In fact, those girls from her convent school who became nuns struck her, in their later years, as being some of the most serene and fulfilled individuals she had known. And, she maintained, the teachers she worked with were outstanding examples of the 'resilience of the human mind and frame, particularly the female frame'.

During the Second World War many of the teachers whom the department had dismissed under the Married Women Lecturers' and Teachers' Act were able to return to work, filling gaps left by men who had enlisted. By the end of the war, a married woman who taught was no longer seen as a pariah, a leech on the system, a usurper of the working rights of men; and those women who chose to stay teaching could do so. The act was repealed soon after, in 1947. But it was not until the 1960s that moves began for equal pay for women, another issue altogether. And as for equal opportunity, this was unheard of in Cusack's day.

It was not until Cusack taught at Broken Hill, her first mixed staff and co-educational school, that she could confirm what 'second-class citizens women were'. She was fortunate in having a headmaster who did not discriminate, but even he was unable to overturn rules and practices encoded in law or custom, for instance the fact that women only received four-fifths of the male salary, or that they were never appointed as subject masters in co-educational schools.

With legalised discrimination against its female teachers, there is little wonder that the girls in the school system came off second best too, and so Cusack found that 'girls, like women teachers, were second-class citizens'. Moving from school to school, she saw the same sexist attitudes promulgated again and again: an ultimate punishment for an intransigent boy being to sit him near a girl; the belief that most girls should regard their place as German girls once did: Kinder, Küche, Kirche; the encouragement of bright girls into impressive scholastic achievements but rarely any vocational guidance so their outstanding exam results would lead to careers or professions.

But Cusack's outspokenness against the sexist nature of the school system both for teachers and pupils is nothing compared with the passion, the vehemence, the outrage with which she condemns the entire school system. At university and teachers' college, she had encountered 'mouldy, rigid scholasticism'; methodologies so old they had white hairs; hidebound academics and administrators with both feet way back in the nineteenth century; a view of Australia only in relation to its role in the Commonwealth; an upholding of everything British and imperialistic; and courses and texts which reflected all this. In fact, she found her tertiary education was the opposite of everything the word 'university' was
meant to imply. It was 'a world as narrow, in a different way' as the 'conventual isolation' of her school years. Then, as now, the university dominated, if not dictated, the school curricula.

Thus, in Broken Hill, the pupils 'groaned their way through subjects that had no relevance to the life they would live or the community they would live in'. By the end of her appointment in Goulburn, Cusack concluded: 'the sum total of my years of teaching in Broken Hill and Goulburn was the conviction that the high school curriculum was insane'. At Parramatta High she found 'all the defects of the educational system' that she had already found and would continue to find elsewhere: the habit of forcing all students to undertake academically-inclined subjects in order to matriculate; the relentless examination system whereby students sat for weekly, monthly and term tests yet still had to face awesome end-of-year examinations; the complete reverence of sport (at Goulburn 'Sport was God'); the lack of any technical or vocational training. In all the schools in which she taught the syllabus was similar: English and European history, which stopped before the twentieth century; English literature (which meant literally that and not, as now, literature written in the English language) which also loitered in the nineteenth century; geography, science and nature studies which never extended beyond the classroom, although places like Broken Hill had some of the most geologically fascinating histories in the world. For someone like Cusack, with her voracious interest in the history of her surroundings, it must have been frustrating indeed. Furthermore, her educational credo held as number one the belief that an individual as a responsible member of society cannot fully understand herself or himself until their language, literature and history have been assimilated, through education.

By the time she reached Sydney Girls' High, Cusack was glad to take on the new position of school counsellor—vocational guidance officer, since it was her chance finally to investigate the deficiencies in the school education system. Unfortunately the material she collected, such as her documented proof that the Intelligence Quotient assessment (which was not to be discarded for another four decades) was not only useless but damaging to pupils, came to very little or nothing. Following her removal to Bathurst after Sydney Girls' came what was meant to be an ignominious posting to Parkes, a place she liked very much. However yet again she found as teachers 'we were wasting our time cramming the children with material that had no relation to their community and little relevance in the lives most of them would lead'. In the midst of this great wheat-producing region, where the boys had approved time off school to help with the harvest in season, there was not even the slightest acknowledgement to the pioneers of the wheat industry which gave everyone employment.

Newcastle in 1942 probably felt like one of the most dangerous places in Australia. While the Japanese assault concentrated on the northern coast (Darwin received the worst raids during the war), Newcastle, with its massive steelworks right on the coast, was uniquely vulnerable to enemy attack. When
the inevitable raids took place, this vulnerability must have been hard felt: Japanese submarines eventually penetrated Australian waters to shell the city, although little damage resulted. But people living in Newcastle then must have felt it was only a matter of time before the great iron and steel industry, which was so vital to the war, would be seriously threatened.

This sense of constantly living on the edge of disaster lends a faint quality of exhilaration to the account Cusack gives of her stay in Newcastle during the war. Yet there are other reasons why she found the place appealing. In 1942 Newcastle was so crowded with personnel that finding a place to live was a major achievement. When she did eventually succeed, Cusack's landlords proved to be a close-knit working-class family, whom she later used as a model for her family in *Southern Steel*. She remained grateful, not just for the characters this family supplied, but for the experience of living with people and discovering first-hand how the war and economic hardships affected their lives. In this she was re-living the experience of Broken Hill, although now she was at the end of her career rather than the beginning.

Newcastle's history is an unhappy one, and, like other industrial cities, it has also suffered from a poor image. One of the most cruel of all the cruel penal settlements, it was established on the Hunter River in 1804 for twice-convicted felons: they were sent down coal mines under indescribably brutal conditions; even worse, they gathered lime for Sydney's mortar from the oyster shell-strewn muddy beaches, suffering agony whenever the wet lime, which they carted in baskets on their backs, seeped into lash wounds.

Some of the best-known literature about Newcastle records this sorry past. James Tucker wrote the convict novel, *Ralph Rashleigh*, in the 1840s (although it was not published until 1929), basing part of the tale on his own experiences in penal servitude in Newcastle. James Hardy Vaux, also a convict at Newcastle, published his *Memoirs* in 1819, and the convict poet Francis MacNamara also wrote about the place. Later, the city was to be maligned for other reasons. James McAuley, like Cusack, was also teaching in Newcastle in 1942: in the poem 'Self-Portrait, Newcastle, 1942' he expresses dismay at the city's filth when he finds the blank page he has intended writing on covered in coal dust before his eyes. So when Cusack's *Southern Steel* appeared in 1953, it was read with delight by the citizens of Newcastle, who had never before found such a favourable portrayal of their city in literature.

Despite the wartime conditions, despite her poor health and despite the imminent end to a profession she had loved, Cusack was happy in Newcastle. Relief at having fully discarded her ambitions for promotion in her career certainly contributed to the geniality with which she approached her final teaching posts. The first year at Newcastle Girls' High was blighted by the presence of the deputy head, whom she calls 'Odora', who had helped create the difficulties at Sydney Girls'. Because of this she was given the lower classes—
meant to be an insult to one with Cusack's high teaching grade—but this was just what she wanted, having no further desire to cram students full of exam-oriented information. Here she felt instead she could 'concentrate on teaching the things that would enrich their lives as normal human beings', and consequently she began to enjoy teaching in a way she never had before. But the next and final year, 1943, marked the real difference in her opinion.

At Newcastle Boys' Technical High she found a 'more intelligent kind of school' and spent the most satisfactory year of her whole teaching career. It was true that BHP helped finance the school but the teachers successfully resisted attempts by the company to dictate the school curriculum. However, it was a technical school, teaching craft and trade subjects like metalwork and woodwork, and it was accepted that the boys would either progress straight into BHP from their fourth year, or matriculate and complete BHP-sponsored engineering degrees before joining the company. This relative freedom from the usual academic pressure made an enormous difference, as the students could see some immediate connection between school and work and their futures. Cusack found two other new features in this school which she approved of wholeheartedly: there were no exams, instead an assessment system; and there was an infant subject known as social studies, which eventually became a standard school subject.

By the end of her second year in Newcastle and final year as a teacher she was in bed and looking the end of her career in the face. The climate, the fumes and the hard work had on top of everything else inflicted a series of colds on her, accompanied by a persistent cough. Typically she doesn't say, but this was the suspected tuberculosis which shadowed her for several years afterwards, one of the three incurable illnesses which forced her to abandon her career as a teacher. It was a grim future which a not-quite middle-aged woman (she was forty-two in 1944) was facing. But despite being told she would never work again, Cusack then launched herself into her second career as a writer; after 1944 she went on to have ten further novels published, five further plays (several others were performed but not published), three travel books, plus numerous reviews and articles. And she withstood the effects of her various illnesses, living to a fairly respectable age: she died in 1981.

But the teacher in Cusack never disappeared. Her pupils remembered her with deep affection and respect. 'What can one say', wrote former pupil Nina Martindale, in 1978, 'to a teacher whose influence left an indelible impression for 40 years?' The letter continues, confirming the outstanding regard felt for this teacher:

thank you I must, so that you would know ... how much the warmth and depth of your perception as an educator influenced me ... Reminiscing back to those dull and uninteresting secondary years of study, the bright and single inspiration was to have had the good fortune of meeting you. Your fame as a writer prevented me from letting you know how much more you were loved as a teacher ...
INTRODUCTION

When we ‘lost’ you at the end of the second term in 3rd year to the court case with [the] Dept of Ed. we were inconsolable. We couldn’t find you to send you the flowers we bought. Story had it that you fractured your ankle and injured your spine on the broken gutter grille outside our school, were hospitalized and claimed damages. We rang all the hospitals [at] the time and even pestered [the] Dept of Ed. clerk for your address to no avail. The flowers graced the dark vestibule ... as our tribute to you. I walked from Bondi to Moore Park to save 2d from [the] daily 3d given me for fares to donate the large sum of 4/-!...

It was very meaningful for me to have known you as a teacher during the character forming years of my early adolescence and for this I thank you and shall always be grateful.

The gratitude of this letter is not alone amongst the many Cusack received, especially during the 1970s, when her permanent return to Australia and the fairly consistent publicity prompted many people into contacting her (she appeared on popular television and radio programs, as late as 1980, and even ‘made it’ on the ‘Mike Walsh Show’ on Sydney’s Channel 9, and on John Singleton’s 2KY program). There are many letters expressing, though not quite so eloquently as Nina Martindale’s, the fondness which people felt for Cusack after many years. Complete strangers, responding to the warmth and humanity which emanated even from a radio interview, wrote to ask Cusack’s advice on how best to write up their life’s story, or start a novel. One can fully understand Norman Freehill’s sometimes embarrassing reverence of his subject in his biography. He, who loved her exceedingly, naturally found her more remarkable than anyone.

Sometimes the person revealed through *A Window in the Dark* is annoyingly coy about her capabilities, or irritatingly arch in her views. It is a person who in all her arguments is more in the right than not, something readers know instinctively is not the case in ‘real life’. It is someone who fancied being a public person, who relished attention now and then, particularly if a bit of controversy was involved. At times this person is not being altogether frank. And at other times she is trying too hard to be frank, which leads her straight into that false self-deprecation which ambushes any autobiographer.

Furthermore, *A Window in the Dark* is guilty of the insight and wisdom that, superficially at least, doesn’t belong in a chronological account. It is written very much from a retrospective’s viewpoint, and hence contains conclusions and judgements which would be impossible from the mind of the teller at the time. Her scathing opinion of her university education, for instance, developed over many years. Cusack has exploited the ostensible story of her life to offer frank views on several matters; this has led to some problems, where large digressions or quotations interrupt the narrative. Her own views were neither insincere nor half-baked, but unfortunately her tendency to over-quote the opinions of others has weakened the authority of her statements. Perhaps, too, her wavering between the naive and the insightful (such as on the matter of educational
reforms) reflects her own ambiguous position in the educational field at the time of writing *A Window in the Dark*. By 1975, over thirty years after leaving teaching and now in her seventies, Cusack was clearly an interested bystander only.

But the person revealed through these pages is also someone profoundly engaged in the world around her, from the world at her doorstep to the one thousands of kilometres away. She taught during the grim years of the Depression and the war, and these two catastrophes dominate this account in a significant manner: her moral and political conscience was permanently moulded in these crucial years, and to the end of her life she remained vehemently opposed to war. Cusack was someone whom you could never accuse of mental laziness. Her wish to excel as a teacher was well met. Her commitment to education was unshakeable. Her participation in current affairs was genuine and active. Her politics were idiosyncratic but her alliance with political issues, such as opposition to sexism and other forms of discrimination, was beyond question.

And, above all, Dymphna Cusack had in abundance two qualities which balanced each other: humour and humanity; which is why she made such an outstanding teacher and became such a splendid writer.

Acknowledgements

Permission to publish *A Window in the Dark* is gratefully acknowledged to James McGrath.

The writing of this book was assisted by a category B fellowship from the Literature Board of the Australia Council in 1990.

I also wish to thank: Mrs Nina Martindale, for permission to quote from her letter to Dymphna Cusack; Lyn Tranter, for her initial involvement with the project; Florence James, for her helpful comments on the manuscript; Marilla North, for the contact with Lydia Lo Schiavo; and Margaret Chalker and Carol Miller of the National Library of Australia for the keen interest and guidance they offered throughout the various stages of publication.

D.A.
In 1973 in a letter to her friend Rene Laws, Cusack mentions her intention to start a book about her teaching career:

An ex-colleague of mine suggested to us last week that my experience as a teacher would also make a fascinating book so I’ll start on that next having no novel on the stocks. Funny to think we’re now history, isn’t it?

Very little documentation has survived to enable us to trace the creation and subsequent history of *A Window in the Dark*, or, as it was also called, ‘Boo to a Goose’. Only the one, undated copy held in the National Library in manuscript form has so far been located. But by 1976 the manuscript was complete, and in March 1977 was sent to the Alternative Publishing Co-operative in Chippendale. A note on the letter of receipt from APCOL advises the ‘manuscript is being read by the Teachers’ Federation’, and that the secretary of APCOL, Beryl Daley, will ‘keep you informed’. There are no other letters amongst Cusack’s papers in the National Library or in the APCOL files which indicate the manuscript was progressing towards publication. However, from this note, Cusack apparently formed the idea that the manuscript was to be published by the New South Wales Teachers’ Federation, of which, during her teaching career, she was an active member. There is no proof of this at all, either amongst Cusack’s papers or those of the Teachers’ Federation. One of her throwaway comments in a letter to a friend, Lydia Lo Schiavo, implying that the Teachers’ Federation was not only going to publish it, but that they had asked her to write it, proved to be a time-wasting red herring: there is not even a file extant on Cusack in the Teachers’ Federation Archives. It was only coincidence that one of the board members of APCOL was also a Federation member, and it was merely to his interest in the manuscript that Beryl Daley’s note referred.
Towards the end of Cusack’s writing career she began receiving rejections from publishers; her last two novels still remain unpublished. Stormy though her relations with publishers had at times been (see the publishing history of *Come in Spinner*, for instance, in Freehill, pages 52–63), she had never experienced such outright rejection (and from so many different publishers), and at this time in her life it must have been hard to take. The letters offering her second-last novel, ‘Triple Concerto’, become increasingly pathetic in their appeals to publishers: after one particular rejection (from a small new Melbourne publisher tendering economic stringency as a reason for their inability to take it on), Cusack even offered to have the typesetting done at her own expense. Their reply to this offer is a model of courteous publisherly evasiveness.

Of her final unpublished novel, ‘Nurse No Long Grief’, or, ‘The Tide Is Running Out’ (as it was called when one publisher explained he couldn’t accept it simply because the original title—a quotation from Mary Gilmore—was too obscure), in a letter in 1974 to Rene Laws Cusack spoke with confidence of its imminent publication by William Heinemann, the London-based firm which had brought out all of her novels (except *Southern Steel* and *The Sun in Exile*) since *Come in Spinner*. Indeed the reference book, *Modern Australian Prose 1901–1975* by A. Grove Day (1980) actually lists two unpublished novels in Cusack’s bibliography, presumably from information supplied by the author. In fact ‘Nurse No Long Grief’ was never accepted by Heinemann, nor by any other publisher. But Cusack clearly believed it had been and that the letter confirming it was just a formality.

Hence she may have felt the same confidence about the manuscript of *A Window in the Dark*, even though the only documentary evidence that anyone intended publishing it is confined to a note dated 1 April 1977 on her file at APCOL stating ‘Returned to author to tighten up’. APCOL seriously considered publication, and at least one senior member of that company, David Cleaver (a friend of Cusack), supported it wholeheartedly. According to Cleaver a decision was made to reject the manuscript, although this was not documented but was presumably conveyed to Cusack personally. Around the same time, APCOL also rejected her ‘Nurse No Long Grief’.

There is only one known copy of *A Window in the Dark*, the one which I located amongst her papers in the National Library. It is there quite clearly marked and catalogued with other papers received from Cusack herself in September 1976. However this cannot have been the manuscript which she sent to APCOL or any other publisher; the fact that in 1977 her manuscript was being read by publishers makes this impossible for a start. And then, she was a thoroughly professional writer who knew how to present a manuscript for publication, and this final manuscript must be presumed lost.

The manuscript of *A Window in the Dark* held in the National Library is almost certainly Cusack’s final draft. This manuscript is not dated, however from
several comments scattered throughout (such as Cusack’s reference to International Women’s Year) it is possible to deduce it was written in 1975 and rewritten or added to later in the year or early in 1976. One of her letters, to the Retired Teachers’ Association in March 1976, mentions having completed a ‘first draft’ of a book about her experiences as a high school teacher.

From *Come in Spinner* onwards, all Cusack’s books were dictated onto tapes before being sent to a professional typist. She then mercilessly reworked her manuscripts and her propensity for editing and rewriting increased as she grew older. She had a habit of cutting and pasting and rewriting by hand; draft after draft of her other manuscripts survive in her papers in the National Library, however none of these is as scrappy as *A Window in the Dark*. Almost every page of this manuscript has been cut and pasted and overlaid with numerous handwritten emendations and additions, mostly by Cusack, but some in the hand of her husband, Norman Freehill. It was only after I had spent several months transcribing this awful mess into a clean typescript that the manuscript became properly legible. And then I could confirm what I’d suspected from my first browse through it: this might have been a rough set of papers, but it was a fairly complete piece of writing which she would have sent off to be typed before submitting to a publisher.

Helen McLeod, who typed for the last four years of Cusack’s writing life, from 1976 to 1980, has no recollection of typing the manuscript—and whoever typed it was obviously not a professional anyway. Since no tapes exist (as for most of her manuscripts), one must assume the typist worked as Cusack spoke. The possibility that the tapes may have been lost must be considered, although Cusack seems to have taken great care with all her tapes, and those of other unpublished manuscripts from around the same time have survived. It is possible that Freehill typed it for her, or the typist was the author herself. On the surface, this is unlikely but it is not completely impossible. The neuralgic disease which had prohibited her from typing since writing *Come in Spinner*, did, in fact, disappear altogether after a severe knock on the head when she slipped in the snow during a visit to Romania in 1970. In her letter to Rene Laws in 1973, Cusack speaks of her writing technique:

> You know, from being obliged to learn a new technique when I was so ill in 1945, I have reached the stage where I can’t think without a microphone in my hand.

But that she did type at times is evident by many letters from the mid-1970s, some of which, for instance, complain of the contrariness of her typewriter.

Like many people who lived through the Depression and then the Second World War, Cusack had a bowler-bird mentality. This never bore any relation to her actual financial condition which, for an author, was a fairly healthy one. Carbon copies of her letters were typed on the back of letters received (something
other authors, such as Miles Franklin, also did). Cusack collected and hoarded scraps of blank paper to be used, as in the case of *A Window in the Dark*, for later typing, some of it tissue-thin and perilously flimsy. Even the blank borders of sheets of postage stamps were saved, for sticking over page numbers or words that were to be rewritten.

Norman Freehill also had a mania for thrift. Florence James remembers one of his habits in particular, which was to revivify a faded typewriter ribbon by oiling it. When she tried it on his recommendation she found it blocked in the characters abominably, and decided she wasn’t in such dire need that she couldn’t afford new ribbons. There are two typefaces evident in the manuscript of *A Window in the Dark*, elite and pica, and in the elite 12 the characters are blocked in—the result of either a new and too-damp ribbon, clogging up of the metal type itself, or, as Florence James could testify, oiling of the ribbon. If Freehill or Cusack typed the manuscript, it would help explain why not even her typist of the period was aware of its existence.

While an enormous amount of research has gone into this publication of *A Window in the Dark*, editorial intervention has been deliberately kept to a minimum. In other words this is still the book Cusack wrote, with all its faults and inconsistencies. It was tempting to cut several long passages and quotations which threaten the continuity of the narrative, but to have done so indiscriminately and without authority seemed to be taking too many liberties with the text of a deceased author. In addition Cusack’s prose, on occasions, doesn’t quite make sense, but these have been left intact rather than tampered with.

All of Cusack’s quotations were sourced wherever possible, checked and any minor inaccuracies corrected where necessary. Her dates and other facts were also checked, although some of these proved impossible to verify; for instance she writes about having articles published in *Education*, the journal of the New South Wales Teachers’ Federation, during the early 1930s, but these could not be identified. Brief footnotes have been provided wherever possible to explain many contemporary references to people, books, events and so forth.

Most of Cusack’s old-fashioned and unnecessary capitals have been converted to lower case, and her heavy-handed use of capitals for emphasis has been converted to italics; punctuation and paragraphing have been tidied up and made consistent; spelling and typographical errors have been silently corrected and there have been other minor emendations to style and grammar in the interests of readability and clarity which I believe Cusack herself would have corrected had she been the one seeing the manuscript through to publication. And of course despite being almost complete, it should be recognised that the manuscript of *A Window in the Dark* would have certainly been further revised and tidied-up both by its author before publication and by her publisher’s editors.
On the advice of Florence James, Cusack’s co-author of Come in Spinner, her lifelong literary adviser and close friend—and a person of prodigious editorial experience—and in the interests of offering an uncluttered text, these emendations have not been noted. Anyone who is interested may consult the original manuscript in the National Library of Australia. It is held in the Dymphna Cusack Papers, MS 4621, box 17, folder 8.

Of further interest to readers may be another unpublished autobiographical item: a transcript (of a recording which Cusack probably made in 1968) which she calls ‘The Uncorrected Transcription of Notes Done for an Autobiography I Shall Never Write’. The transcript is held in the Dymphna Cusack Papers, MS 4621, series 9. Encouraged by Carole Ferrier, Cusack tidied up a small portion of this transcript for publication in Hecate (1980). While this transcript is obviously far more pleasing to the eye than the manuscript of A Window in the Dark (the transcript was professionally typed from the tape) in fact it is extremely rudimentary with little obvious order, and, without an enormous amount of guesswork, would be very hard to prepare for publication. Nevertheless it provides some useful information on Cusack’s early family life and background and to her development as a writer.

Debra Adelaide
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A WINDOW IN THE DARK
CHAPTER ONE

It was on a bright day in March 1922 that I took my first steps into the career which was to be mine for nearly a score of years, and to which I have remained bound by ties of interest and affection for the rest of my life.

Huddled in a corner of a Coogee–Railway tram, I trembled at the ordeal ahead of me. Here was I—product of a country convent boarding school—going to face that hot-bed of irreligious instruction, the Teachers’ Training College at university. As an ultra-pious teenager I had tremors that I was hell-bent for damnation. Those were the days of deep-rooted sectarianism and I had imbibed the belief that she who is not for me is against me. Time and the Church have changed.

A girl got in and sat opposite me. We eyed each other warily. I thought, Surely no-one but a convent-reared girl would have so slavishly obeyed the rules of the prospectus sent to me by the Department of Education. We were dowdily clad in the worst clothes for a hot, humid day: navy-blue serge skirts ten inches from the ground, white blouses and a wide-brimmed black hat borrowed from my aunt. I looked like a perambulating black mushroom. Hers was a smart straw sailor. To this we added flat black tie-up shoes suitable for mountaineering and black lisle stockings. We had both baulked at the woollen ones prescribed. Only two girls trained in the conformist atmosphere of convent boarding schools would have followed so faithfully the rules laid down for us by some female sadist reared in the Victorian era. We smiled at each other timidly.

By the time we had reached the railway, we were practically bosom friends, so quickly do mutual fears and nervousness bind you at that age. We knew all the superficial things about each other. We were never to know anything else. Convent-bred Lalla might be bound, like me (but not dedicated), to the most disciplined of professions. In other respects we were poles apart, but that day we clung to each other like life-belts in a choppy sea.

We had both won exhibitions and teachers’ training scholarships at the Leaving Certificate exam. This meant free education for the Arts course at
Sydney University with a grant for books. At the end of the degree years, the teachers’ training course provided a free course for the Diploma of Education. And for the whole of this four-year period it gave us £5 a month! For this we had to sign a bond\(^1\) promising that we would teach for five years or pay back the £1,000 for which two of my uncles had stood as guarantors.

My year’s delay in starting the course was due to the fact that I left school with the firm intention of joining the convent. There need be no pressure put on a highly emotional girl to join the convent in which she has spent happy school years. The peace, the beauty of the Church’s superb ceremonies, seduce the heart that is seeking something better than the not-too-attractive world outside. Three of my school friends joined the convent, two the Ursulines, one the poor Clares. Only a few months ago, being in Sydney on holidays (times have certainly changed!) they rang me and we spent a delightful day together as though there weren’t fifty years of utterly unlike life between us. But in 1921 my good Roman Catholic family was horrified. Here was the hopeful one of the family who, thanks to a generous uncle and aunt,\(^2\) had had more educational privileges than her even brighter older brother and sister,\(^3\) wanting to throw it all away! I’ve seen it happen often. The most devoutly religious react to such announcements in a similar way. Anyone else’s daughter but not mine! When you’re twenty-one you can make up your own mind!

So emphatic were they that I yielded, which has always made me suspect that it was a sentimental obsession on my part rather than anything else. I have never yielded easily any point on which my heart is set.

So that year I got a job at a private school on the Hornsby line. It cured me of any belief I had in private schools. It nearly cured me of my desire to teach. Set in an old-fashioned cottage by the railway line, it possessed all the defects any school could have. Not enough space, not enough teachers. So far as I can remember, there was only the headmistress and me. I taught fifth year (then the final year), English, history and kindergarten. I remember with shame and horror the mother who wrote to me saying that while her five-year-old Margaret enjoyed my lessons, she thought that it really was too much for her to try to learn the verse of Wordsworth’s ‘Ode on the Intimations of Immortality’ in one weekend!

The things I didn’t know! The educational rules that were much more honoured in the breach than the observance! What awful things are perpetrated in the name of private schools which confer, in general, less of educational material than of snobbish exclusiveness.

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1. This bond existed until 1976.
2. Nell and Tom Leahy. Cusack lived with them as a young child and, when the family fortunes declined, returned to live with them at Guyra where she attended primary school before proceeding to St Ursula’s convent school in Armidale. Her uncle and aunt provided for her during this time.
3. Her older brother and sister, Leo and Margaret.
Yet the headmistress was a fine woman, well-educated herself in the English mode. The school bore the name and wore the uniforms of the school on which it was modelled, founded in England in Queen Victoria’s day. Her only defect was that—like me—she knew nothing about teaching, and even if she had, had no money to carry out her ideas. The thing that left the most impression on me was the privileged sandy mongrel that lay across the main door and snapped at all heels but the head’s every time we passed.

That first day at university I didn’t tell Lalla that. Indeed I told no-one in all the years to come. Then we were too busy comparing passes, anticipating with dread what we both felt was a heretic conclave. What I took for my companion’s sophistication fascinated me. I was the country mouse, barely five feet, less than seven stone and with ambitions much too large for me. She was practical, down-to-earth, relatively chic in spite of our sober garb which she had smarted with a floppy navy bow at her throat. My blouse was modestly closed with a brooch in the form of a digger’s shovel which my father, then a wealthy mine owner, had made from the first nugget from the True Blue mine in Wyalong. It was an engagement present for my mother and even today I treasure it as a talisman, though in fact my father went bankrupt over his dabblings in gold.

Winding our way through the university grounds to the Teachers’ Training College, we were both overawed by the architectural muddle of this complex of learning. Once in the red-brick college we went with tremulous footsteps to the lecture room where the other students of our kind were gathered. I was rather shocked at being plunged into a co-educational group. Lalla cast hopeful glances round. We looked our worst among a group of normal young women looking like a flock of parrots in gaily coloured frocks, as they interchanged holiday gossip. As the products in the main of Sydney schools, they all seemed to know each other. If they didn’t, they knew each other’s exam records. Above all, they knew enough to treat the ridiculous, outdated rule about dress with the contempt it deserved. They stirred sympathetically rebellious feelings in me and my fellow-traveller. We looked at each other in mute dismay, feeling that we were marked forever. To me that day, those chattering girls seemed to radiate the sophistication country girls expected city girls to have automatically. It was a long time before I realised that they hadn’t.

Only today when I have visited modern colleges with a similar function do I realise the reformatory school ugliness in which we were supposed to learn that ‘Beauty is truth and truth beauty’ by some process of osmosis unrelated to our background. When I remember the happy days in delightful surroundings I spent only a few months ago lecturing at the College of Advanced Education at Newcastle, I realise how ‘disadvantaged’ (in contemporary parlance) we were then. The drab colours of early educational Australia still surrounded us; bare

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Osborne College, Sydney.

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floors, uncomfortable furniture that was also unbeautiful. Oh, for the tangerine and orange and yellow that made the Newcastle college a delight to the eye as well as the spirit.

My three years at the university working for my Arts degree have already been written about elsewhere. Somewhere early in the piece, Lalla disappeared from my life and the academic world, having succeeded in corrupting my ultra-piousness with her obsession for boys and dancing, and infuriating every lecturer who had to deal with her excellent haywire brain.

If we had been immured in conventual isolation in our school years, the university offered us a world as narrow, in a different way. In the one we were cut off from the world and its sins. In the other we were insulated from the new world that was emerging after the holocaust of the First World War. Those who taught us had inherited the Empire, the glory of World War One, the sanctity of sex. But for us, the Empire in which we had been carefully raised (unless, like me, you were lucky enough to have a Fenian grandfather) had started on the steep slope down which Spain and Portugal had already slid, rather more slowly, to end up today in what Geoffrey Blainey calls ‘a leading place in the international dole-queue’.

Even after the First World War, Australia, and still more Britain, had no conception of the fact that her decline was a virus inherent in the bloodstream of Empire. Like every great empire, Britain over-estimated her power, and we were taught to accept this in obsequious worship. Think of Australian children learning to recite that stupid eulogy of an idiotic military mistake, ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’, bawling unharmoniously, ‘Hearts of Oak’ and ‘Britannia Rule the Waves’.

Again as that excellent historian Geoffrey Blainey points out, the British created an astonishing empire. But their ranking on the ladder of international power in 1850 or 1914 or 1939 was probably not as high as the recent wave of nostalgic writing and filming tempts us to believe. Make a list of the recent great economic innovators of the period ... Look up the accepted indicators of manufacturing supremacy and you see that Britain was outstripped by Germany and the United States, even in the output of steel by the end of the 19th century. Scapegoats were too often seen as the reason for Britain’s economic ailments. Even now the lottery of World War II is popularly blamed for Britain’s industrial decline and for the industrial might of Japan and West Germany. That theory conveniently forgets that even on the eve of that war, Britain’s relative industrial strength was no longer dazzling.

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6 Michael Joseph Crowley (1836–1915), who came to New South Wales from County Clare in 1858.
7 This, and the following quotations, are from Blainey’s article ‘John Bull’s Long Slide’, Australian, 30 December 1974, p. 6.
The extraordinary facet of Britain's economic decline is the slowness of most people living under the British flag to realise that decline was occurring. A tangled web of interacting causes no doubt hastened Britain's economic and political decline. But one of the strongest causes was that quiet morale which is valuable in wartime crises but corrosive in the long and unnoticed crises of peace.

But in 1922 all this was in the future, though the informed prophet could no doubt have foreshadowed it. Evidently we had no prophets popular enough to get into the press or any influential positions where they might have told us the truth. They were horrified that England was fighting the last battle against Imperial repression. India was growing increasingly restless under the influence of Gandhi and the youthful Nehru, and proving that non-violence is as much a destroyer of colonial ways as violence. The poems of Wilfrid Owen, the books of Barbusse and later, Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*,\(^8\) obliterated what was left of the glory of war after our returned soldier relatives told us the truth about it. Flaming youth blasted the last of the sexual inhibitions that had survived it.

On a world scale, the Russian Revolution had destroyed an age though it was a long time before the traditional conservatives realised it. And longer before they admitted that it had started another. The Austro-Hungarian Empire and the mighty German Empire disappeared with scarcely a word. But we were stuck in a groove, where we were to stay for many years to come. It was not till about 1935 that a remarkable man, Professor Charteris,\(^9\) tried to knock into our collectively stupid heads the obvious fact that for us the so-called Far East was the Near North, coming ever nearer. Though in the twenties Australia had ceased to be a colony for over a score of years, she was to remain one mentally for another fifty years in many respects: a sycophantic worship of everything English and a slavish denigration of anything home-grown.

The university embodied all the vices of our snob-ridden community. I remember an experience in my first year when, with a country partner, I entered the Arts tennis competition. We were soundly trounced and when our vanquishers said, 'What about a cup of tea?' fresh from the relative democracy of a country town, took it the invitation included us. I still writhe as I recall how we sat at that table and were pointedly ignored by our former opponents. I knew what it meant when the crack went round, as summed up by one of the upper crust (socially if not intellectually): 'There are three classes at the university: Bursars, Exhibition-holders, Teachers' College Scholarship, and us!'\(^*\) to which I riposted in the words of the university song, 'Of course, some are fools and some are clever.'

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8 Wilfrid Owen (1893–1918); his *Poems* were published in 1921. Henri Barbusse (1873–1935), poet and novelist whose anti-war novel *Le Feu* (1916) was a bestseller. Erich Remarque (1898–1970), German author; *All Quiet on the Western Front* was published in 1929 and its sequel, *Der Weg Zurück (The Road Back)* in 1931.

9 Archibald Hamilton Charteris (d. 1940), Professor of International Law 1920–40.
As women we had few rights. We were taught to know our places. It was considered only a mild eccentricity that an emeritus professor of English could toddle to the edge of the dais, peer at the women in the front rows of the lecture-hall, lift his bearded face and say, ‘Gentlemen.’ A friend, Connie C, who sat next to me all those years, reminds me today that when he felt particularly frivolous, he would titter, ‘Of course, gentlemen embrace ladies.’

Our sex disqualified us from belonging to the students’ Union. We were debarred from eating in its café or restaurant or in any way using its amenities. The time was long past when that remarkable scientist Georgina Street was debarred from reading her thesis at the Royal Society of Victoria when she graduated as Bachelor of Science at Melbourne University in 1896. Women were not admitted to that distinguished society so Professor Baldwin Spencer read it for her! There was no woman professor in the university. No matter what her qualifications no girl had a chance against a male candidate for a lectureship. Dr Johnson had protested nearly two centuries before that botany was unsuitable for women. Yet a brilliant graduate in our year did not get a lectureship in botany because she was a woman. If we thought that we had got beyond Lord Chesterfield’s belief in the eighteenth century that ‘women, then, are only children of a larger growth’, there were many things in our surroundings that emphasised it.

Today, in International Women’s Year, it is incredible to remember that in our student days over fifty years ago, it could have been written,

it is time to restore women to their lost dignity and make them, as a part of the human species, labour by reforming themselves to reform the world ... Woman was not created merely to be the solace of man.

(Twenty years later it was part of Hitler’s creed that woman was designed for the recreation of the tired warrior.)

Women are told from infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, outward obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of a man; and should they be beautiful, everything else is needless for at least twenty years of their lives.

However apposite that may tragically have seemed to us in 1922 (and alas fifty years later!), it was in fact written by Mary Wollstonecraft in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 130 years before. Protesting in her day at the view of the relations of the sexes as promulgated by Rousseau, she refuses to accept his suggestion that ‘a woman should never for a moment feel herself independent, that she should be governed by fear to exercise her natural cunning, and made a

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10 Almost certainly Sir Mungo MacCallum, Challis Professor of Modern Literature 1887-1920 and Honorary Professor in 1922.

11 Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97), writer, Radical philosopher, educationalist. *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was first published in 1792; the quotations may be found on pages 100, 108 and 132 of the Penguin Classics edition (ed. Miriam Kramnick, 1975).
coquettish slave to render her a more alluring object of desire, a sweeter companion to man whenever he chose to relax himself.’ Yet in 1922 my mother, an excellent woman, could warn me against letting men know that I was clever, and ten years later a high school teacher told me that she never let it be known that she was a graduate teacher when she went on holidays because it ruined her romantic chances. And you have only to look at any woman’s journal today to see the same ideas inherent in cosmetic and fashion ads. We are still a long way from Mary Wollstonecraft’s contention that ‘women, as sharing with men an immortality of soul also share with them a rational nature capable of perfectibility’. While today more girls than ever prove it, the ratio of girls to boys in tertiary education and the few women in higher administrative jobs still bear witness to our general backwardness.

Surely in nothing has the human race moved so slowly as in its attitude to women. In 1822 William Thompson’s *Appeal on Behalf of One Half of the Human Race* (1825) could have been made for us in 1920 in all practical affairs; John Stuart Mill could have written on *The Subjection of Women* regarding the average Australian middle and working class families in the early twenties. The originality and brilliance of Marie Curie cast no reflected glory on her sex; the courage of Edith Cavell and countless lesser heroines meant nothing for our reputation; the appointment of Alexandra Kollontai as Ambassador to Sweden was considered only the thing that would be expected from that generally execrated Soviet government. In my passion for literature, I decided to take the English honours course. Then I found I was bogged down in the study of Anglo-Saxon, not remarkable for the richness of its literature or anything else. That combined with a diet of minor seventeenth-century poets and novelists who didn’t even deserve the epithet of minor, finished me. I gave up English honours and decided to do my honours course in history and philosophy, a very wise decision for my general culture as well as my education. The two were widely separated in our university course. At no time was it ever implied that one read for pleasure as well as mental discipline. Indeed what pleasure could be found in one of the texts, a Victorian novel of depressing dullness. Throughout, we never learned the heroine’s Christian name; from beginning to end she was Miss Milner. And she fainted on every third page. A decade later, re-reading the

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13 Miss Milner is the principal character in *A Simple Story* (1791) by Elizabeth Inchbald (1753–1821), novelist, playwright and Britain’s first drama critic. Cusack is mistaken in calling it a Victorian novel.
book to discover if I had missed something, I asked Dame Constance D’Arcy,\textsuperscript{14} the remarkable doctor I had the honour of sitting next to at a graduates’ dinner, what was the reason for such swooning habits. She replied in her booming voice, ‘Constipation, my dear, constipation’ and the whole table turned reproving eyes on me as one guilty of seeking cheap advice at a sacred function.

The one really interesting book we had set for us was \textit{Pride and Prejudice}, and that was spoilt for me when an essay-marker (a librarian, not a lecturer) refused to give me a mark for an essay in which he complained that he could not find my ideas in any book of criticism set for us! My retort that I thought I had come to the university to learn to think, not to parrot other people’s ideas, laid the foundation of a lifetime dislike. Thirty years later he wrote me a virulent letter about \textit{Say No to Death}. Alas, not then realising its value for the archives (mine as well as his), I destroyed it.\textsuperscript{15}

Nothing of the changed and changing world outside Australia was mirrored in the narrow reactionary universe in which we had our being. Only our university history courses under Professors Arnold Wood and James Bruce, and Professor Lovell’s psychology gave us a faint inkling of something cataclysmic happening in a society we were taught to consider final; though there was actually a Teachers’ College lecturer (breathe it low!) who had established a study-group about the new Soviet government. Fortunately before he could do much harm he went overseas, whether pushed upstairs or not was never said. There (so I was told by one of his group) he made sufficient impression to feature as hero in one of Ethel Mannin’s books.\textsuperscript{16}

We were just getting into our period of maddest censorship. In 1927 Professor James Bruce complained in the \textit{Labor Daily} that he was not allowed to import books on Bolshevism and the Russian Revolution for a course on the history of the present century.\textsuperscript{17} Head in the sand! In the same year the new Professor of Philosophy, John Anderson, an anti-communist, protested that if communist theory is plausible we should discuss it; if not, it is no danger to us.

Towards the end of the twenties, the appointment of Professor Wood’s successor anticipated the Wheelwright controversy in the Faculty of Economics at Sydney University in 1975.\textsuperscript{18} For much the same reasons as the refusal to appoint Wheelwright to the Chair of Political Economy today, James Bruce was

\begin{itemize}
\item Constance D’Arcy DBE (1879–1950), obstetrician and gynaecologist, was the first woman to be elected to the Senate of Sydney University (1919–49) and was also deputy chancellor from 1943–46.
\item Ethel Mannin (1900–84), British novelist and author of over 100 books; her third novel, \textit{Sounding Brass} (1926), shared the same title as Cusack’s unpublished, lost, first novel.
\item This reference could not be located.
\item Associate Professor E.L. Wheelwright was passed over for a Chair in favour of a less qualified candidate. See Evan Jones and Frank Stilwell, ‘Political Economy at the University of Sydney’, in Brian Martin \textit{et al} (eds), \textit{Intellectual Suppression, Australian Case Histories, Analysis and Responses} (1986), p. 34.
\end{itemize}
CHAPTER ONE

not appointed to the Chair of History. In those days it was all very hush-hush but we all knew that James Bruce was refused the professorship because he was too progressive, or as one of his students put it, 'because he was too intelligent'. To Sydney's irremediable loss, Bruce went elsewhere and there began for Sydney University what that fine historian Robin Gollan has called 'the dullest period in Australian history'. Bruce's course on the Industrial Revolution deepened my innate beliefs in the evils of the system we lived under. It may seem strange to more hard-bitten students today that Wood once had to break off his reading of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'The Cry of the Children', so overcome was he by his emotion. So were we.

Professor Bruce—unquestionably one of the most brilliant minds to have taught at Sydney University—lifted us into the realms from which modern history developed with his superb lectures on the Renaissance. This, added to his protests about the absurd extension of political censorship, was enough to bar him from accession to Wood's Chair when that remarkable man died.

It is a depressing fact that a country that, as Professor Wood pointed out, emerged from being a convict settlement to being, by the 1850s, politically and socially the most advanced country in the world; that had introduced the eight-hour day in that decade; that had put into action the welfare ideals for which the Chartists and Socialists fought in Europe; that was one of the first to introduce universal suffrage for men and to give the vote to women as early as 1902 (New Zealand anticipated us), should by the middle twenties be bogged down into a morass of social and sectarian bigotry and educational conservatism.

Our high school courses had contained little about Australian history, and what there was, was written from the colonial point of view. There was nothing about it in my three years' history for my degree. The only objective account of our founding and early history I got in the course I attended at the university during our Diploma year, a superb series of lectures given by Professor Wood.

By then even Australia was beginning to stir as was shown in some of our writers. But we were not encouraged to read our writers. Indeed we were discouraged from reading any modern writers at all. The glowing wonders of literature reached me, incongruously enough, through the superb lectures on comparative literature given to all and sundry by that big, shambling, giant professor of German, Chris Brennan, great poet as well as scholar. The scandal of the day was his being dismissed from the university for his drinking problems and his marital improprieties.

In my whole university career, only the history courses I took with that non-conformist liberal (with a little 'l'), Professor Wood, opened my mind to a

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19 Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–61). 'The Cry of the Children' from Poems (1844), was critical of the child labour system.

20 Christopher Brennan (1870–1932) was Associate Professor of German and Comparative Literature from 1920 until his dismissal in 1925; see Axel Clark's Christopher Brennan: A Critical Biography (1980).
new world. He had the reputation of being a ‘bit of a rebel’, something which called to my innate rebelliousness. It was a reputation which stemmed largely from his attitude in the Boer War twenty years before, when he was elected first president of the anti-war league, thereby nearly bringing on himself the ignominy—or honour—of sacking by the university Senate.

It was a time when we were all—men and women—disorientated by the ‘colonial’ type of education which taught us to believe that there was nothing historically worthwhile in our own country and nothing worthwhile from a literary point of view in our own generation anywhere. I don’t know if the story about Henry Lawson being refused entrance to an English course because he was not literate enough is true, but judged from my experience it could be. My university days were remarkable less for what I learned (except from psychology and history with two of the best professors Australian universities have known) than from the fact that in the conflict of reconciling orthodox Catholicism with the facts of history and of modern psychology, I ‘lost the Faith’. Freudianism, which we approached through the lectures of that very good teacher, Professor Tasman Lovell, was to shake many of us to our foundations. I wasn’t aware how far my doubts had taken me till, somewhere at the end of my second year, deputed as secretary of the Catholic Women’s Association to propose the vote of thanks to a doctor who lectured to us on the iniquity of abortion, I brought his wrath down on my head when I thanked him for giving us ‘the Catholic point of view’. I had to resign because of it.

Looking back on it, I think this was in some measure precipitated by the turbulence of my first love affair. What ecstasy elated us! What agony deflated us: two hot-blooded young people reared in the fallacy that chastity was the highest virtue. For women, practically the only one. We were both swept on the wings of rapture. We both suffered. Technically we retained our virginity, but at what a price! It would have been more honest to have slept together instead of enduring this constant frustration of nerves and flesh. But remember this was the time when two students were ‘sent down’ because they published poems in the Arts journal implying that they had slept together. ‘Pierrot, Pierrot, it’s time to go / That clock on the wall is terribly slow,’ cried Pierrette innocently. But ‘down they went’ all the same and I have an idea that the editor went with them, while the rest of us gaped at these pioneers of love we dared not take.

So far as we—my boyfriend and I—were concerned only the bond prevented us from rushing into a marriage that would have been a disaster for both of us. But I still think he was the handsomest and the nicest ‘boy’ I ever met; for even

21 [Henry] Tasman Lovell, of Cambridge then Glasgow, was appointed Associate Professor of Psychology in 1908.
22 The two students were Dora Toll, later Birtles, and Bert Birtles, whose two poems were published in the Lent term edition of *Hermes*, 1923; Dora Toll was rusticated for two years while Bert Birtles was expelled altogether. The lines Cusack quotes are from Toll’s poem ‘Moon-Shadows’; for the full story see Peter Kirkpatrick in *Hermes*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1985, pp. 11–15.
in our forties, when we met and found the magic still intact, he remained a boy. Thank God for that bond!

In the travail of reconciling my own developing literary ideas with the mouldy, rigid scholasticism of academic life, I renounced forever my belief in Academe as the Holy of Holies of literary theorising. Perhaps poet and short story writer, David Rowbotham, put it most clearly in ‘The Mousetrap’, when he wrote of the fate of the creative mind in the university:

Too late. I never realised the lot
Live writers have in the academic plot
Laid out in its own defence of what it lacks
Until I fell among these hooded hacks
Whose colouredhonours seem but coarsened sacks
Assumed because elsewhere they failed to shine,
And, childish, learned a fabric discipline.23

Looking back on it fifty years later, it is incredible that we were told nothing of the great writers who had emerged in the United States as well as England. I got to know H.G. Wells from the horrible little library in the horrible old Teachers’ College. I found Galsworthy in the Women’s Common Room and after a dose of Irene, decided that the women I wrote about would be real. Shaw I met only through the Dramatic Society. I found in no library to which I had access any Australian book. Taboo! We were an outpost of Empire indeed, and education was determined that we should remain one.

In 1925 I returned to the College to complete my year's training for teaching, afflicted—as most of my colleagues—with that baseless snobbery of young graduates whose certainty that they have nothing more to learn grows steadily less with all the years they live.

Looking back on it I can't decide how much of our denigration of the course for the Diploma of Education was due to our graduate snobbism, and how much to our commonsense. This was a time when the theories of the great post-war educationalists were inspiring a new direction. We were never made aware of it, except in our private reading. Later, those of us who tried to apply the new techniques were treated as trouble-makers, a dirty word in any surroundings. Dewey, Makarenko, Fröebel, Neill,¹ might never have lived as far as we were concerned. Our lecturers (while not bad in themselves) were the product of a rigid, inhuman system. We were trained to follow it.

In those days, I and a number of my colleagues were too intolerant to remember that our teachers had been educated before the First World War; and that there was as big a gap between them and us as there was between those born in the thirties and those who came into the post-war world which had survived genocide and the atom bomb. It's wrong to call it a generation gap. There was not merely a generation between the people of those eras and the next, but a millennium.

And now here we were being trained for teaching in a post-war world in the same conditions in which our forerunners were trained, and having inculcated into us the same out-of-date curricula with which they were overfed.

Not that we knew it that first day. We were too young, too innocent, too enthusiastic, too trusting. We were probably the last generation that had faith

in its elders. And they, poor creatures, were turning all the resources of their high intelligence, their impeccable morality, their genuine goodwill, to perpetuating a system that had already ceased to exist.

We were not unique in this. It seems to me that the Establishment must always be out of date. Our university was out of date. Our training college was out of date. In that, they all mirrored the world that was striving to hand on politically, morally, culturally, the situation and the atmosphere in which our elders had grown to maturity.

Fortunately for us we didn't know it, otherwise the years we spent studying for our degrees and the one we spent striving to learn the unlearnable would have been wasted, as indeed they were for those who swallowed them whole. You learn to teach only by teaching, as you learn to write only by writing. Since most of us went into the teaching profession inspired by high ideals, it took a long time to corrupt us. Neither our university course nor our Diploma of Education course did so, but the years we spent as victims of an Education Department that was fifty years out of date did their worst with those fine human qualities with which most of us started.

That was a curiously valueless year though it was directed to a definite end. We studied the history of education with a professor who was entirely tone deaf. One of my happiest memories is that of his emphasis on the importance of the teacher's voice. Imagine this phrase in the same tone set in an unvarying series of monosyllables without any modulation at all: 'If a man falls overboard he doesn't cry help help, he cries "Help, help!"'. Judging by his book he had good ideas and should have been a good teacher, but I suffered so much that I read the Russian classics in his classes.

We did a course in phonetics which was prejudiced from the beginning for me since our professoress started off by listing me as a 'light soprano' in spite of the fact that my contralto has been an obvious vocal equipment since my teens.

We did a course in English with a lecturer who had a genius for picking his students' brains, and the equally pronounced characteristic of picking those of writers and poets and publishing innumerable anthologies. A history course with a man who had little feeling for it, his lack of inspiration made worse by comparison with the history professors at the university who had set on us the seal of great minds. I doubt if he knew that the world had moved into the twentieth century.

The one really useful course was that in the practice of teaching by the head of the college, a nice little Scotsman who deserved to be immortalised by having a training college called after him, even if it was one with all the defects that afflicted most training colleges anywhere at the time. He couldn't be blamed for that.

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2 George Mackaness (1882–1968), head of the English Department at Sydney Teachers' College 1924–46 and a dedicated anthologist.

3 Alexander Mackie, appointed principal in 1906 and head of the Teachers' College for over twenty years.
There was a course in hygiene that never by any chance discussed anything below the navel, though naturally that area troubled us most. I don’t remember anything positive it taught us, except how to deal with a smallpox epidemic (which we didn’t have) and how to treat endemic diseases like schistosomiasis which didn’t affect our continent either. But I’m sure there must have been other useful bits of information, though open lavatories (which were common in many parts of the suburbs and all of the country schools) were never mentioned. I don’t blame the devisors of our studies that there was nothing in them about sex education. They needed it so badly themselves that we would probably have fainted if it had been mentioned. Actually it wasn’t till 1943 that I dared raise the subject publicly in Newcastle and was trounced for my pains not only by the local inspector, but by the doctor in charge of the local hospital who chaired the meeting.

Altogether it was a course that helped us little with the human problems we would meet in our teaching lives. It didn’t help us much with the educational problems we would come up against either. Indeed it was frowned upon to talk of problems of either kind. You weren’t supposed to have them. You did the course. Oh yes, you did!

If I seem unduly harsh on my vocational training, let me say in extenuation that only the students who were doomed to become that type of teacher who took everything for granted, were satisfied with the course. We knew instinctively that we were missing something. We knew from our reading that new methods elsewhere were revolutionising teaching. We wanted to know what they were.

To pad out my constant state of penury, I coached a number of richer students with less capacity for academic work. Then I began to realise how stupid it was to send people to the university simply because there was enough money at home to let them do it for social reasons. And I pitied the victims of their parents’ snobbery.

At the end of our first term, we were offended when we were told that in spite of the direction of our previous training towards secondary work, we were to be sent off to a primary school for practice teaching. This was an offence to the deluded ideas which had been inculcated as to the superiority of secondary teachers, a delusion which I was to disprove over and over again all the years I taught. Any normally intelligent person with a degree should be able to knock enough into the heads of senior students to get them through an exam. Any honours they win will be their own. But to teach the three Rs so that a child progresses to the high school with the tools of learning already bright requires real skill. As I compared the work of primary and high school teachers over the years I became more and more convinced of the inequity of paying us more than them.

In May, together with some twenty other products of the Arts course, I was tossed into Bourke Street Primary School. Such lovely weather. Such horrible
surroundings! A hundred-year-old school in an inadequate playground in the
middle of Sydney’s slums. We’d call it disadvantaged today, with one of those
lying euphemisms that are popular. The arts and crafts had not yet rescued those
inner eastern suburbs from poverty and slumdom.

The headmaster—one of those rare birds who insisted on the use of his
military title in the school—looked at us with the expression of a sergeant-major
who has had a squad of legless rookies entrusted to him. His words were equally
unflattering. At the end of some ten minutes’ commentary on our entire
unsuitability to be imposed on his school, I had a rush of blood to the head
typical of my reactions in those days before I had learned to discipline myself.
My mother called them my ‘gallows speeches’. As class representative I rose to
my full five feet and told the Colonel what I thought of him and his school,
ending with, ‘Since we have been trained to be ladies and gentlemen there is
obviously no place for us in this school. Let us go back to the college and inform
the principal.’

It brought the Colonel to earth. We stayed. For my sins I found myself
with a third year class of boys, and drill in the playground. Here at Bourke Street,
I experienced for the first time what was to become a phenomenon of my
turbulent teaching career: the great kindness of the rest of the staffs who—
though not necessarily sympathetic to my rebel ideas—yet gave me help and
kindness in the many painful situations into which my refusal (or inability) to
hold my tongue got me. This time it was no doubt in some measure inspired by
the deputy head who had been a friend of my family in those long-ago years in
Wyalong and had even nursed me on his knees as a baby! But certainly the
class-teacher of the group on which I was afflicted could not have been kinder.
Memory shows her as a plain, plump woman in her sixties with a heart of gold.
I wish I remembered her name. The troubles from which she saved me! The
excellent (and not quite truthful) reports she gave of me. And that class of nine-
to ten-years-old slum boys let flow over to me some of the affection they had for
her.

In the playground at drill time I was saved by the connivance of the deputy
head and the drill master who arranged that, while I stood opening and shutting
my mouth soundlessly and making a mess of the movements, half my class would
watch one teacher and the other half the other. And they did it manfully, never
in all that three weeks in a minor hell betraying me to the Colonel-head. In return
I decided to liven things up by producing a class magazine. I had to pay to have
it typed myself since the class couldn’t afford it. Neither could I! But the really
stirring adventure into which I launched them was a play we wrote together with
the intention of producing it for our wind-up lesson. It was a really exciting play
based on the Fall of Acre in the First Crusade. The dialogue was thrilling, if
inclined at moments to lapse into boyish profanity which had to be curbed. In
those days it was not a substitute for literature.
Everything went well. Crusader swords were made. Mothers made surcoats out of ancient curtains and fathers painted red crosses on them. Saracens were clad in suits of armour made of sugar bags. Various kinds of helmets were made out of cardboard or tin cans. Ned Kelly would have liked it. The intention was to make shields out of cardboard too, but here the enthusiasm of the class ran amok. The first indication I had of it was when the local sergeant came to see the headmaster and complain that there was a raid on garbage-bin lids in the area. Of course it was tracked down to me and I was hauled up to get a grilling from the head and a rather more sympathetic warning from the sergeant who realised it was all in the best interests of modern education, but...

My cast was furious at having to return lids painted with red crosses and defend themselves with cardboard. "Gee, Miss, doesn't he know I could run him through with me wooden sword?" was the indignant protest.

The day came for the great production. The Colonel-head was away at a meeting. The deputy gave me permission to have forms hauled round under our windows to form the walls of Acre. Our Crusaders and Saracens were dressed in bright array. It's wonderful what a spot of paint and a dash of imagination will do. The deputy head paid me the honour of letting his class of older boys march out to make an audience.

It was a battle that outdid history. The shouts of the assailants and the defenders were heard half a mile away. Swords flashed, shields clanged—that day I overlooked the reappearance of garbage-bin lids—language flew. The only trouble was that the wrong side won. The Saracens found that from their point of vantage on the forms they could easily wallop the Crusaders. I appealed, I screamed. Useless. Soon the infuriated Christians were on the ground and the victorious Saracens fell on them, working out not only history but contemporary grudges. It took the class of senior boys to pull the warriors apart. We spent the last half hour putting iodine on bruises (a garbage-bin lid is a dangerous weapon), patches on cuts and gravel rash, and soothing the angry Crusaders who considered that they had been unfairly defeated since history ran the other way.

Fortunately I left Bourke Street that weekend so I never had to explain to the Colonel-head nor the police sergeant. My class-teacher gave me a diary, a hug and a kiss, saying 'God bless you, my dear. You're going to need it.' How right she was!

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In the second term we were sent off for our three weeks' practice teaching at Fort Street Girls' High School. This assignment soothed our touchy souls but was a lesson in sheer physical endurance. The main building—soon to be converted
CHAPTER TWO

into a historical museum—dated from 1814. It had been a military hospital. While perhaps suited for that in its time, it was certainly unsuited to a school. A number of minor buildings were scattered round the appalling asphalt playground.

I enjoyed myself. As well I inspired a class of fourth-year girls with a passion for Australian history and made two friends who remained my friends till one, Kay, died in 1948. The other, Pip (now a professor), visited me only two years ago and the friendship was as warm and deep as ever.

I tried my apprentice-hand on a number of classes and if I taught them little they tell me I left them with a love of poetry and literature that has stayed with them all their lives. I observed a number of lessons which showed me how not to teach. Such good conscientious women! Such dull routine work!

I also developed a crush on the English mistress, something very common since she positively invited it. She wooed me with her honey-tongue, flattered me and gave me a quite undeserved opinion of my capacities. Then—the sting in the tail—the professor at the college refused me the A+ which I coveted as she had told him that she thought I taught better under observation than when alone. How did she know? It was in fact not true. I always showed my worst side under inspection, feeling that the relationship between a teacher and class is a strictly private and personal one. Anyway it taught me to beware of the honey-tongue beneath which lurks too often the poison-fang. Still, all was not lost. Twenty years later she provided part of the character of Miss Kingsbury in *Morning Sacrifice* (all characters are composite).

The next term I risked trouble by taking a job that Professor Wood brought to my notice: history teacher in a large, private denominational college in the western suburbs. It destroyed my belief in private and religious schools forever. I went to meet the head—the Revd Pans—thinking what that extra money would do. He agreed to employ me and seeing that I was young and probably half-witted, asked me to nominate my own salary. I said, ‘Two pounds.’ It should have been twice the amount. ‘Done,’ he exclaimed, having never hoped for such luck. I signed the contract. When I told Professor Wood, this kindly gentleman leaped from his chair in fury. He rang up. All he succeeded in getting was my fares!

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4 The military hospital on Observatory Hill was built in 1815. In 1849 the building was converted into the National School House. In 1974 the Girls’ School merged with the already existing Boys’ School in Petersham (they had separated in 1916), and the building is now a museum and art gallery—headquarters of the National Trust of Australia.

5 Kay Hanlon (later Keane), whose death from tuberculosis inspired *Say No to Death* (1951); and Phyllis Kaberry (1910-82), author of *Aboriginal Woman, Sacred and Profane* (1939) and for many years Reader in Anthropology at London University.

6 *Morning Sacrifice*, winner of the Western Australian Drama Festival Prize in 1942, was first performed in that year and published in 1943.

7 Methodist Ladies’ College, Burwood.
So I went off each afternoon—dodging my college lectures—to find that the whole of each year’s classes had been gathered together for my amateur efforts. Sixty in a second year! Thirty in a fourth year! An uncountable number of firsts. Then I discovered that the teacher in the private school has no protection from the parent who is on the board. I threw out of the second year two girls who were not only rude to me but trouble-makers all round. At my school when we were thrown out we stayed out till we apologised. The same at Fort Street. But here the influence of money made itself felt. At some time or another in the weeks I was being overworked and underpaid, every teacher of influence from the head down, even the Revd Pans who had wangled my contract, appealed to me to let those little monsters back unconditionally. Even the arrogant father of one of the girls came to see me. I was adamant. A public apology or nothing. That’s what I got.

I don’t know how much I was strengthened by the insult of two miserable pounds, but I never yielded. I would have died rather than yield. And they obviously thought better intractable me than some other professional who would demand a proper salary. When the teacher returned from hospital, she whispered to me, ‘Thank you for making up what I’ve suffered at their hands.’

That year I gained my Diploma of Education. I was on the threshold of my career.

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8 Presumably the teacher she was temporarily replacing.
In February 1926 I was sent to my first assignment which was to teach English and history at Neutral Bay High School. A first year high school had just been tacked on to the primary school and two other women, mistresses of mathematics and languages, were appointed at the same time.

If Mary Tudor had Calais engraved on her heart, Neutral Bay is on mine. I shall never forget that first morning as the three of us stood before the headmistress. The other two were big women and I probably looked my smallest beside them. 'Oh,' she said, 'you two are evidently competent teachers. But what have I done to deserve this?' This was me, quaking at the knees as she looked up and down my five feet, from the two thick brown plaits wound round my ears to my flat-heeled shoes.

My first experience with the first years confirmed the love of teaching I had first known when my headmaster at Guyra Primary (what a man! what a teacher!) used to let me take over lower classes when their teachers were away. A spontaneous sympathy leaped up between us, which was to be balm to me in what I suffered under that headmistress.

There should be a vocational test for two professions in particular: nursing and teaching. If there had been, the head at Neutral Bay would never have got into the race. Bad-tempered, arrogant (fifteen teachers had asked to be removed in the previous two years and been granted their wish). But I couldn't ask to be moved. I had used political influence to stay in Sydney\(^1\) when by tradition and custom I should have been somewhere outback beginning my compulsory country service. My mother's health had made it essential for me to stay at home, not that I was much use in the house. Mother believed that any member of the family—male or female—who brought money into the home should be absolved from domestic duties as men (only) customarily were in those days. But the

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\(^1\) Presumably Cusack is referring to the influence of her uncle, Jack Cusack, then between seats, but soon to enter federal politics.
money I put in was essential to run the house and educate my younger brother and sister. Mother was the type of Catholic (she was also the best Christian I have known) who worked herself to the bone to send them to RC schools when she could have sent them to better state ones free.

So I gritted my teeth and stayed, upheld by the affection that flowed over me from the children. Nearly fifty years later I can still see them: Pat and Marion and Betty, and Nancy, who became my secretary when I was president of the FAW in 1967 and is still my friend.

There I began to experience for the second time in my brief teaching life the great kindness of older colleagues who weren’t necessarily sympathetic to my attitudes and ideas which were becoming increasingly non comme il faut in the Department of Education. If I was thought more than a bit odd they never let me see it. One of them, a war widow, even gave me a tweed knicker-bocker suit she had outgrown. In consequence I was one of the first women to walk through the city in trousers, in company with Marie Byles who had the courage to do it before me. The donor of my ‘hiking’ costume was a temporary teacher. That is, though fully qualified, she was employed only on a temporary basis, having none of the perks which normally went with employment in the department. She received no holiday pay and had no superannuation rights; it was an iniquitous situation which survived for a long time, making this unfortunate group the particular victims of an outdated system.

Ours was an authoritarian system in which women teachers were second-class citizens, though this did not worry me till I was sent to a co-educational school. In the meantime I was fighting for my very existence as a teacher. Miss B, the headmistress, ‘had a set on me’ as we expressed it in those days. She made my life a hell that was mitigated only by the affection of my pupils and the consideration of the staff, secondary as well as primary. We shared a staffroom with them and they were kindness itself, which says much for them since officially we were their superiors in departmental parlance. Why, I never understood. In those rare relatively free hours when we took morning tea and lunch together we heard the hair-raising history of our headmistress’s rampage among her staffs. For the ‘free’ periods when we prepared lessons or more probably corrected exercise books, we were obliged to sit in the large draughty hall outside her office where she could keep an eye on us and sally forth at her will to find trouble, or make it. Maybe it was unspoken protest that started me off writing in the myriad autograph books, ‘Every cook must learn to rule the state’, which I firmly believed.

It was at Neutral Bay that one of the joys of my life began. With another teacher, also a lover of drama, I began to go to the Playbox, a little theatre in

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2 Fellowship of Australian Writers; she joined in 1935 and served as president from 1967 to 1968.
 Rowe Street, where Duncan McDougall brought the great modern plays to Sydney. For the first time I saw *Juno and the Paycock* and began to read perhaps the greatest of modern playwrights in English. It set me off not only reading and watching plays but trying to write them. I also became the producer of school plays, which gave us all enormous pleasure. A new richness was added to my life.

I also began to realise how delicate was the link between information and understanding. What make of the child who wrote, 'in the day plants breathe in oxygen and at night they breathe out lactogen'?

It took me a long time to find that as far as the Department of Education was composed, I was odd. I loved the children I taught. I was an impassioned teacher. Always I felt that my job was opening a window in the dark for the minds entrusted to me. I choose that word carefully. In my perhaps foolish idealism I did feel that they were entrusted to me. In those days the role of the teacher was far more influential than it is today. Our children weren’t already corrupted by television when they came to us. They were much more innocent and ignorant than their coevals today. A major depression and three wars (World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnamese War) had not yet sharpened their sense of living. They took survival for granted. The shadow of a nuclear war did not hang over them from the cradle onwards. They were in consequence far less politically aware. A pity; it might have saved them much suffering if they had been more so.

In these first years I began to realise the importance of the two major subjects I was trained to teach. Actually, in the muddled organisation of our schools, sometime or another I taught a variety of subjects of which I knew next to nothing; Latin, French (of which I had at least to university standard), geography, even mathematics on one horrifying occasion (no-one could have been worse at them), and hygiene of which I knew at least the basic rules.

But I soon came to realise that English and history teachers have in their hands the tools with which a genuine education is forged. In all the countries in which I have since lived, I have realised the particular and vital importance of the teaching of the native language. This is not only the vocal instrument by which one learns to express one’s thoughts; it is the key to the thoughts of others. It opens up the whole world of literature, in one’s own language and in translation. Indeed, so far as general culture is concerned, I am convinced it is the most important key of all. No-one I knew as a student or a teacher read in Latin, though I had studied it to the end of first year Arts. The only person I knew for whom Latin was a living language was the Doctor of Divinity who brought religion to Guyra in my schooldays, and a teacher at Sydney High

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3 The Playbox Theatre, advertised as 'the only art theatre in Australia', was established in 1923 by Duncan McDougall.

4 *Juno and the Paycock* by Sean O’Casey (1880–1964), first performed in 1924 and published in *Two Plays* (1925).
School many years later, whose tragic death was the climax of my play *Morning Sacrifice*.

Culturally, at high school standard, neither Latin nor Greek had any value. They contributed nothing to the skill of learning one’s own language. Indeed even when I was learning Italian in Italy thirty years later, I found my knowledge of Latin of practically no value. Only the manner in which I had learned my Latin verbs was useful in that I imposed a similar discipline on my study of their Italian equivalents. The ancient Greek and Latin classics which enriched me, I studied in translation. When I first lived in France, the French I had studied to Leaving Certificate standard was useful to me in reading the papers and doing the shopping. I could explain what I wanted but couldn’t understand a word of what came back. It was six months before I reached that stage conversationally. In the meantime I had read most of Balzac (my favourite author) and Zola in the original so that I was much better educated in a literary sense than in a speaking one. It took me another five years to be able to manage a press conference without a translator when *Heatwave in Berlin* was published in Paris in 1961.

But back to the importance of the native tongue, whatever it may be. The times when Latin and Greek were the signs of a cultured person are long since past. Everything is available in one’s own language. Scientifically I am an ignoramus. But that doesn’t prevent me from reading of the great scientists and their discoveries; of great mathematicians; of endeavouring to understand the scientific view of the world which is essential if one is to take an intelligent interest in the physical, sociological and cultural aspects of our society today.

The writer writes to communicate. It does not matter what the vehicle is. I didn’t yet know that at Neutral Bay in 1926. But I did know and feel instinctively that I had in my hands the key to all culture—individual and social. At the university I already knew of the vast uncultured wastes that lay behind the courses of those doing engineering and medicine and most of the scientific disciplines. I was also painfully aware of what I lacked through having no scientific training at all. But translations gave me an insight into those worlds to which I had no practical access. My own language gave it to me.

It was a long time before the intellectual world was shaken by C.P. Snow’s *Two Cultures* and the consequent controversy, but in my own minor way I was aware that I was living it; it was one of the many valuable things my first romance with a man from a different faculty taught me. If I was aware of it at the university, I was more so in my teaching days, for, to paraphrase Kipling, ‘Arts is Arts and Science is Science and never the twain will meet’. We ran on parallel lines with a similar end in view, but never did we understand what the others were trying to do.

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5 C.P. Snow (1905–80) *Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (1959), the Cambridge University Rede Lectures of 1959.
The only two people I have known in my long life who have an encyclopaedic knowledge and a comprehensive culture, were William Blake, Christina Stead’s husband,6 and the remarkable man who has been my tax-agent and friend for over forty years, ‘Sammy’. Interestingly enough, they are both Jewish, unorthodox in their views, the one German in origin, the other Russian.

But I will wander. In those first teaching years I taught English, history and geography, of which I knew next to nothing. My last experience of it had been when I sat for the Qualifying Certificate ten years before, and methods and material had changed since then. It was as much as I could do to keep one step ahead of the class where some bright one could always put me right.

The first quarter of history was a delight, when we had to run through a resumé of the great civilisations. It fascinated me (and educated me) as well as the children. I even bought two volumes of Wells’s History of Civilisation 7 (which I couldn’t afford) and that fascinating though all too brief resumé of how civilisation has grown on our planet stirred our imagination and widened our knowledge. It should be compulsory for all schoolchildren; no doubt today it is. History should give us—even if only in outline—the magnificent story of man’s emergence from his primeval beginnings to inspire us with our potentialities. It should be a part of our essential training so that we know, however briefly, the long and arduous task that has brought man from the caves. It must be a positive picture, a constructive picture. But for us, alas too soon, ‘shades of the prison-house began to close’ upon the growing girl! Soon we were bogged down once more in the history of Britain. Taught, of course, from the Teutonic point of view. We learned of little but woad8 about the ancient Britons, nothing but their names about the Celts. Nothing about the Romans except Julius Caesar and Boadicea. The four centuries of Roman occupation were utterly ignored. Its roads, its cities, its building of forts and temples and centrally-heated houses might never have been. History began with the Teutonic invasions. It was the same at the university. The only reason I can give for this was the dominance of Germanic culture through English history since 1715 and the added pressure of Queen Victoria’s love for her German consort during her long reign. It was much later that I learned that during her reign German was the court language and that Edward VII spoke English with a German accent.

What little Australian history was on the syllabus, dealt with the records of our time and place as though they were a world away. Here we were living in an area that was linked with some of the most fascinating stories of our early settlement, and we taught—and learned—nothing about them. In those days few Australians (not even the council) were interested in their origins. What did

6 Bill Blake (1895–1968), a Jewish American banker.
7 H.G. Wells (1866–1946); she probably means his Outline of History (1920), rewritten as The History of the World (1927).
8 A blue dye extracted from plants, with which the Picts painted themselves.
it matter Neutral Bay was Wurru-birri to its first inhabitants? Nor that Neutral Harbour was surveyed to make a port for the careening of foreign ships, and the name of the bay still survives? Nor that when the Duke of Edinburgh visited New South Wales in 1868 the Aboriginals performed a large corroboree on the spot where St John’s church now stands on the southern heights of Careening Cove?

We knew nothing about it. Nor did we know that the region from which our girls were gathered once contained numerous rock-carvings, indicating that the Aboriginal tribes—the Cameragals, from which Cammeray comes, and others—had exuberant vitality from the richness with which sea and bush provided them, and plenty of leisure to devote much attention to the arts and crafts.

Nowhere in our history or geography did we learn anything of the township of North Sydney for which a site was fixed in 1838. Milson's Point meant nothing to us but the end of our ferry ride from the Quay. The founder of a settlement on the north shore in the 1820s and of the Royal Sydney Yacht Squadron in 1862, James Milson, had passed into oblivion as far as we were concerned.

It was partly the colonial atmosphere in which we still moved in spite of our ceasing to be a colony a quarter of a century before. Indeed there was far more interest in the Sydney Harbour Bridge which was being built in our day than in our exciting past which few people yet considered as our native background. We had not yet realised that the deeper the knowledge and emotional involvement with our past, the deeper our sense of identification with our land.

Geography was my undoing. I was giving a lesson on rainfall and clouds somewhere towards the end of the first term when the head came bursting into my classroom like a tornado and with much the same effect. She demanded to know what I was doing. I told her. She snorted and went to sit in the back of the room, announcing that she was going to stay there to see if I was as bad at my job as she suspected. I was worse. In one terror-stricken moment I wrote 'cumulous' on the board instead of 'cumulus'. She leaped from her seat and began to harangue the class which sat paralysed unable to give a sensible answer. She sneered at my spelling. She corrected the misspelt word on the board. She commiserated with the unfortunate pupils who were unlucky enough to have an incompetent like me inflicted on them. The period-bell rang. We all heaved a sigh of relief.

But no deliverance was at hand. She examined the timetable and saw that I was to continue with composition. She gave her most frightening smile as she walked to the back of the classroom. ‘Now,’ she said, ‘we'll see one of your wonderful composition classes.’ (Her method was to put a list of words on the board and get the child to write down their meaning from the dictionary. One delightful howler came when a small, utterly innocent girl gave the meaning of ‘continent’ as ‘refraining from sexual intercourse’. When we giggled to her about it, she said, ‘I hope you are not giving them that nasty sex education.’)
Top: Publicity photograph of Dymphna Cusack, 1945. (Dymphna Cusack Papers, National Library of Australia, MS 4621, box 20)

Below: A page from the original manuscript of A Window in the Dark showing some of Cusack's many revisions and corrections. (Dymphna Cusack Papers, National Library of Australia, MS 4621, box 17)
Top: 'The Alma Mater': St Ursula's College, Armidale, where Dymphna Cusack attended school from 1917 to 1920. (Dymphna Cusack Papers, National Library of Australia, MS 4621, series 10)

Below: 'Uncle's House At Guyra, "Ellenville"': Dymphna Cusack (seated) and her Aunt Nell on the verandah of the Leahy's home in Guyra. (Dymphna Cusack Papers, National Library of Australia, MS 4621, series 10)
Top: 'University Days': Arts students at the University of Sydney, 1924. Cusack is in the second row, first from the left.  
(Dymphna Cusack Papers, National Library of Australia, MS 4621, series 10)

Below: 'Graduation Day': Dymphna Cusack (right, with an unidentified companion) after graduating as a teacher in 1926 at the University of Sydney.  
(Dymphna Cusack Papers, National Library of Australia, MS 4621, series 20)
Top: Dymphna Cusack surrounded by her fifth year pupils at Broken Hill High School in 1928. (Dymphna Cusack Papers, National Library of Australia, MS 4621, series 10)

Left: The Palace Hotel, and sometime Returned Soldiers’ Hostel (and now Mario’s Palace Hotel) where Cusack stayed during her first year in Broken Hill. (National Library of Australia, Pictorial collection)

Below: The place Dymphna Cusack claimed was of ‘enormous value’ to her in almost every way: Broken Hill in the 1920s, facing north along the railway towards the line of lode, the slag heaps and the mines. (National Library of Australia, Pictorial collection)
Top: Bushwalking on Mt King George, 1927. Right and below: Camping in the country with Marie Byles, 1931. Photographs from Dymphna Cusack's personal album.

(Dymphna Cusack Papers, National Library of Australia, MS 4621, series 10)
Top: Dymphna Cusack in the grounds of Parramatta High School, 1933; her fourth posting, she taught here from 1932 to 1934. (Dymphna Cusack Papers, National Library of Australia, MS 4621, series 10)

Below: The grounds of Sydney Girls' High School at Moore Park, 1946. Cusack taught here for five years until 1939; after this, amid some controversy, she was sent to Bathurst. (Government Printing Office Collection, State Library of New South Wales, no. 41903)
An aerial view of Canberra, early 1930s, showing Telopea Park School, 'the high school at Manskta' (foreground), where Cusack taught briefly in 1936.

(National Library of Australia, Pictorial collection)
Newcastle Girls' High School (top) and Newcastle Boys' High School (below). Dymphna Cusack spent some of her happiest teaching days in Newcastle, at the end of her career with the Department of Education.

(Photographs courtesy of the Newcastle Local History Library)
I taught composition well. How could I avoid it? The written word was my craft and my hobby. I burned to inspire my pupils with its sacredness. I had devised a method of my own. Set a subject. Give the class ten minutes to write down the verbs and adjectives that would illustrate it. Have the words read out and written on the board thus building up a vocabulary. Twenty minutes writing. Ten minutes for correction by your neighbours. Then the reading of the best essays. I found it had improved the writing of the whole class in a few months.

Now, with my stomach fluttering like a beehive, I wrote the title on the board. The class set to work. Silence for ten minutes. I collected the words and wrote them down. Then the class began to write, this time for thirty minutes. She sat in the back row and tapped on the desk impatiently. She literally gnashed her teeth, the only person I've known to do it. She bore it for some time then demanded in an awe-inspiring voice, 'What do you intend to do with these compositions, Miss Cusaick (sic)?' In a barely audible voice I said, 'Take them home and correct them.' She stamped out of the room, pausing at the door to say ominously, 'You will see me tomorrow morning.'

The class burst into tears.

That night the boyfriend—now beginning his career as an engineer—came to see me. I was correcting those essay books with fury (I'm not a weeping type). He put his arms around me and said angrily, 'I'll drive you to work in the morning and you can tell the old hag what you think of her.' Mother pleaded with me not to be so foolish. She knew all too well that once launched nothing but the gallows could stop me.

Next morning I still simmered with rage. The boyfriend drove me to work saying through what we then called gritted teeth, 'If it weren't for that damned bond!' (Only the bond saved us from a marriage that couldn't have failed to be worse than the headmistress for both of us.) I went into the school at white heat. It was scripture morning and the three secondary teachers were supposed to sit in the hall under Miss B's surveillance. We did so till I announced that since she hadn't sent for me, I was going to see her. My colleagues begged me not to. I stood at her always open door and coughed. She did not look up and said nothing. I walked in. She announced in that parade-ground voice, 'Go away. I don't want to see you.'

I retorted equally loudly, 'I want to see you!'

Astonished she put down her pen and looked up. 'How dare you intrude?'

I sat down because my trembling legs wouldn't hold me and said, 'Because you don't know how to treat your staff.'

She gasped, 'I'll report you to the department.'

'Good,' I said, 'and I'll report you for what you do to the women who have to work for you and the girls for whom you're supposed to set an example.'

It was on. We were well matched; she because of a long experience of attacking defenceless teachers; I because when roused I was unstoppable.
Through the open windows of the classrooms, the voices of the ministers giving scripture lessons faltered. The classes were listening to us, not them. My two friends sat outside with their ears glued to the partition, expecting every minute to pick up my shattered corpse. It didn’t emerge. This was the first time in my life I had told a theoretical superior with the rights, more or less, of life and death over me, exactly what I thought of her. I literally boiled. I flung in her face her behaviour to teachers, primary and secondary. I flung in her face what she had done to the girls.

At the top of my not inconsiderable voice I told the world, ‘You’re not fit to work with ladies. You’re not fit to teach ladies because you’re not one yourself’ (in those days it was a mortal insult to imply that you weren’t a lady).

She took it as one. Gasped. Poured herself a glass of water, drank it, then advanced on me round the desk. I thought my end had come. It hadn’t. Never have I despised anyone so completely as when she put an arm round my shoulders and said with a sugary smile, ‘Now dear, shall we forget all this? I’m proud to have a young teacher of such courage on my staff.’

I staggered out. My companions took me firmly by the arms and led me upstairs to that reviving cup of tea.

It taught me a lesson. A bully is also a coward. I learned not to put up with injustice at any time. Anywhere.

To everyone’s amazement—and mine—the effects of that lesson lasted. Miss B was a changed woman. For the rest of my time I had only to cough when she launched into one of her tirades at the assembly and she would pull herself up as though she had been shot. It was a dangerous victory for the beginning of my career. When I transferred at the end of two years, she gave me an expensive present!
The morning I woke in insufferable heat and found the outline of my head in red dust on the pillow marked the beginning of a new life for me in many ways. I looked out the window to see the bare dusty desert plains stretching away to the horizon. It was the end of a seven years’ drought and there was little vegetation for the rusty brown sheep, nuzzling the earth itself for seeds and roots, a scene I was to grow accustomed to but never accepted in my two years in the desert country. It seemed—and still seems—appalling to me that country Captain Charles Sturt had described less than a hundred years before as ‘fit to carry a race of yeomen’ should have been reduced to this by overstocking and overgrazing. The rape of the earth, indeed!

A red sun leaped over the horizon, leaving a dark blue streak against the pale sky which I learned later was a sign there would be no rain. Scanty mulgas and mallee cast dancing shadows. Crows hung in the dusty air waiting to pounce on the sheep that was too weak to stay on its feet.

The train stopped with a grinding of brakes. The conductor explained that it was for a camel resting on the line. It took the whole train crew to move it. We rattled over the bridge across the Darling River, a sluggish brown stream at the bottom of steep banks. Half an hour later another stop. This time it was due to a ‘hot-box’; a common phenomenon in the sandy country. We waited for it to cool. The black silhouettes of a string of camels made its way into the distance. When the dark poppet heads came up against the western sky, we knew Broken Hill was not far away.

No-one who knows the Silver City today—an oasis in the desert with its ring of native vegetation, its plantations of trees, its swimming pools and its

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1 Charles Sturt (1795–1869); see Cusack’s article ‘Centenary of a Search, Sturt’s Last Journeys’, Sydney Morning Herald, 12 August 1944, p. 9.

2 ‘hot [axle] boxes’ frequently caused delays (anything from fifteen minutes to an hour-and-a-half) on trans-continental runs.
gardens—can imagine how stark and bare it was on that midsummer morning in 1928. The broken-backed line of lode rose sharply from the surrounding dusty barrenness, topped by poppet heads inky black in the brilliant light. Giant dumps of whitish silver glittered in the sun; sulphur dumps were brilliant yellow against a sky that looked as though it needed dipping in Tintex. All around was bare as far as the eye could see. Not a tree, not a flower. In the early days of mining for silver-lead, the native trees had been cut down for furnaces. Only scattered saltbush and bluebush remained, where it had not been eaten to the roots by sheep or goats.

I have forgotten how I got to the high school, an unusually large and comfortable stone and timber building for those days, but I remember the headmaster greeting me as a human being as he swung along the corridor in his black gown. 'I like my staff to wear their academic gowns,' he said, 'it gives the school dignity.' Good old Mearnsie, as we called him; a fine headmaster. I remember also the tremor with which I faced the fifth year (then the Leaving Certificate year) he told me I was to take for English. Girls and boys looking so large and mature. Many of them would have left only that the Depression had already hit Broken Hill with the closure of the Broken Hill Proprietary mine, and there were already many unemployed and no jobs for school-leavers.

The city had an unbelievable number of hotels and while six o'clock was the official closing hour, you could get a drink till midnight. Once, coming home from the pictures about eleven o'clock, I had a shandy at the bar with the local sergeant whose daughter I taught. The pub-keepers were warned when there was going to be a raid.

My new school was happy in spite of these unpromising conditions, but oh, the heat and the dust! I once registered forty-two days on which the temperature went over the hundred. Officially it never went over 105 degrees: public servants had to be paid extra when it did so. The recordings were obviously taken in the basement at the post office since they never agreed with those in private places. In all those weeks it was over eighty at night.

It rained only twice in the two years I was in the Hill. A few weeks after my arrival a heavy shower of rain fell in the city on St Patrick’s Day, the seventeenth of March. It was Friday night, late shopping night, and the streets were crowded. Men and women ran off the footpaths and turned their faces up to the blessed rain. They took hands and danced in the streets. A group of Yugoslavs whirled and twined in a hora to the accompaniment of some unfamiliar song from their homeland. Till late in the night the bacchanalia went on, fortified by the bottles of beer carried from the hotels and drunk in the street.

The second shower fell nineteen months later. I put on my bathing costume and joined the rest of the girls at the teachers’ hostel where I was then staying, and danced in the rain singing our own appropriate songs. Next door to us and separated by a six-foot high corrugated iron fence, lived the Brothers who taught at the Catholic school.
Next day our headmaster greeted us with a mock severe face and asked, 'What were you girls doing dancing naked in the rain yesterday?'

We indignantly denied it and he laughed. 'Never mind. You caused as much trouble to the Brothers as if you were.'

'But how could they see us?' I demanded.

'That's what I asked them when they rang up to complain,' he said with a twinkle. A fine man, Norman Mearnes, who made a happy staff in spite of the discomforts of weather and general living conditions.

On those two occasions I saw the desert literally blossom after rain. In three days a thin green veil spread over the dry red earth. Within six weeks innumerable and unnameable flowers: Sturt desert pea, wild hops, everlasting daisies, spread in a brilliant carpet, flowering and seeding within the brief time Nature had ordained in these waterless wastes.

Water was the cause of one of the most embarrassing situations in my life. A few days after our arrival at the Hill, another woman teacher—also a newcomer—and I were complaining about the heat as we sat fanning ourselves on the hotel balcony after dinner.

'Why don't you go for a swim?' drawled a fat old engineer famous in the city.

'Where?' we demanded.

'To the baths. Just across the park.'

We leaped to our feet, rushed to get our bathing costumes, and set off through the dusty wilting park, the only green space: the water from the baths kept the grass alive.

From the baths we could hear the yelling and laughing of a multitude enjoying the first cool moment of the day. We were ecstatic. Oh for that wonderful first cooling moment! While my companion paused to pay for our tickets at the gate, I rushed past the stuttering man and through the door. A solid wall of pink flesh with dark spots on it lining the sides fell as with one mind into the water. It was men's night! Hardly daring to face the hotel again we sat in a sweets shop to drink the local drink, a 'spider' which in 'foreign' parts like Sydney was an ice-cream soda.

We never again visited the baths. Neither, I'm afraid, did a lot of the boys we taught, considering the 'bouquet d'enfant' they exuded. In those days before washable materials it was worse from boys. The girls at least could wash the cotton bloomers they wore and even the summer tunics, but boys, poor kids, were encased in tweed and flannel without, I fear, underpants, and the effluvia that rose from a stifling classroom was asphyxiating.

In 1928 life in Broken Hill was hard. The secret of its transformation today is the pipeline that brought water from the River Darling at Menindee as late as 1964. The silver-lead mines had been discovered in 1882. By 1928, 38,426,989 tons of ore worth £84,232,582 had been extracted. But little of that wealth went into water for the city which suffered from a rainfall of only two-and-a-half
inches a year, with long periods of drought when little rain fell for years, as in my time. Then the city depended on the water that came from Stephens Creek and Umberumberka dams. The latter reminds me of the delightful weekend I spent there with the engineer and his wife whose children I taught. Of the huge reservoir with innumerable birds skating on its surface, and the gums round the banks blossoming with innumerable cockatoos, like enormous white flowers. Of the night the drought broke and we listened for hours for the calls coming in from all over the catchment area to tell that the creeks were running.

Forty years later my former hosts rang me up when I was in Adelaide for the Festival. Nearly fifty years later the ‘children’ (now at the top of their professions) came to visit me.

The use of what rainwater was caught in tanks was forbidden if you lived near the line of lode because the water was leaded. I’ve seen fowls drinking at the trickle that ran down from the Broken Hill Proprietary through the yard of the hotel where I stayed, and then running round frantically in crazy circles and dropping dead from ‘leading’.

I can still smell the bath water that ran brownish and stinking with water from Stephens Creek. That from Umberumberka fifteen miles away was better and used for drinking. Still, the general opinion was that it was unfit to drink. Beer was a preferable substitute. I had my first beer at the end of my second year in the Silver City. There I had my first cigarette.

Conditions were far from perfect, and we lived either in relatively comfortable boarding houses insulated with sawdust and seaweed between the walls; or else in the Returned Soldiers’ Hostel, a hotel where we could afford the cheaper tariff made possible by the fact the Mine Managers Association let it to the RSL for a rental of 1/- a year, largely to provide cheap and fairly good boarding conditions for bachelor men staff on the mines. £2.12.6 a week was more than I could afford, since I sent most of my money home. The alternative, sharing a room at the teachers’ hostel with a girl who, in those days before ‘disposables’ was careless with her hygiene, was impossible. So I lived with about half-a-dozen high school teachers above my station and made friends outside the teaching service, who brought me many experiences I might have missed.

For the greater number of people in Broken Hill living conditions were appalling. Most of the miners lived in small, unlined corrugated iron houses, unsewered and without bathrooms. They were ovens in summer, ice-boxes in winter. Remember this was the day before air-conditioning, which they couldn’t have afforded anyway. In summer they dragged their beds out onto the verandah overlooking non-existent gardens. Since all the cooking was done on fuel stoves, the discomfort of poor housewives in temperatures over a hundred can be imagined.

Though it was the best part of a score of years since water was delivered (at a price) in watercarts, it remained a perpetual problem. What it was like in the
days before the Big Strike I dared not imagine though two interesting publications give one a good idea: Bobbie Hardy’s *Water Carts to Pipelines* (published by the Broken Hill Waterboard in 1968) and *The Industrial History of Broken Hill* (to 1918), reprinted by the Libraries Board of South Australia in 1965. If there was ever a hell on earth, it was there.

Not that the citizens thought so. Indeed, students going to Sydney for their teaching college scholarships always demanded to go back. It was something to do with the community spirit that outweighed its climatic disadvantages for them, but not for us. Teachers as a group were very much on the outer, whether for our undeserved reputation as conservatives or not, I don’t know.

I was particularly sensitive to heat, since, as in my childhood at Wyalong, the heat caused me to haemorrhage heavily, nasal and otherwise. It was the beginning of my lifelong disease.

Not that that matters here. What matters is my involvement with my pupils. I liked their independence, their refusal to put up with conditions children elsewhere would have suffered with nothing more than a grumble. I shall always remember seeing my second year class standing in the corridor.

‘Shouldn’t you be inside waiting for Miss X?’ I enquired a little officiously.

‘No, Miss,’ said Bob, a gaunt, freckled boy with bad teeth. ‘We’re on strike.’

I hastened on. Not my business. Later I heard it from three sides, Miss X’s, the head’s and the class’s. She said she had reproved the class in the normal manner for some misdemeanour. The class said she had insulted them and their fathers. They refused to be taught by her. The head settled the enquiry by saying that he agreed with them. That’s where I came in. I agreed with them too. So then he said, ‘Since you have no trouble with them for English, will you take them over for history? Miss X will take over your fourth year.’ Reluctantly I accepted what was practically an order, and never had a spot of trouble from that day on. Three years later I read in the press that a strike of senior pupils at Broken Hill had climaxed with Bob’s running up the red flag on the school flagpole.

My great fault in life as in teaching was that I wanted to do too much too quickly. It was a long time before I learned that the human mind is like the seed we watched in a jar in my primary school days, shooting, sprouting, budding at its own pace, aided in the process by water and sun. It was for me the teacher to provide the sun and water. A window in the dark; a seed in a jar. It doesn’t matter what metaphor you use. The process of illumination and growth is the same. Though sometimes in my moments of weariness and dejection, I wondered if...

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3 The Big Strike, for increased wages, shorter working hours and other claims, continued for eighteen months from May 1919 to November 1920.
4 *The Industrial History of Broken Hill* by George Dale (1918) reprinted in 1965 by the Libraries Board of South Australia.
5 In Broken Hill, Cusack first developed pernicious anaemia, although it is supposedly a disease of middle-age. Its symptoms range from mild pins-and-needles and weakness to total paralysis of the lower limbs. In its severest form it can be quite debilitating, and is exacerbated by hot climates.
D.H. Lawrence wasn’t remembering his years as a teacher when he said, ‘When you say “boo” to a goose, God only knows what the goose hears.’

Nowhere I’ve taught have I been so aware of the need for window-opening. These were really ‘disadvantaged’ children, except for the minority who came from the richer professional families. Except for music, Broken Hill was culturally a desert. And the music generally from the miners—Welsh, Cornish, Yugoslav. The only thing I heard constantly was the pipe band which practised near the hotel on Sunday morning, and the band which played in the park, where a monument to the bandsmen of the Titanic stood 600 miles from the sea.

Our sole entertainment was the picture-show where we sat on garden seats (sixpence extra for a cushion) and watched a strange world ten thousand miles away, in the manner typical of cultural imperialism everywhere. Sometimes our pleasure was interrupted by a dust storm which drove us home. Dust storms were the worst thing about Broken Hill. I remember one blowing out of the north on a hot Friday morning. By midday it was too dark to see in the unlighted school, so we staggered home (I was then at the hostel) through the blinding red dust, street lights on, the headlights of motor cars looming out of obscurity. Saturday and Sunday it continued, blowing in through the closed windows, covering the floor and the bath with a thick scum, penetrating the safe so that the butter floated in an oily red sauce.

By midday Sunday impenetrable red clouds rolled above us in a tumult of high winds. Lightning flashed in purple streaks across the sky. A few drops of rain fell, leaving ineradicable marks wherever they landed. The wind had swung around to the south and suddenly dropped. It was bitterly cold. And out of that tumultuous whirling maelstrom above us, soft red snowflakes began to whirl in the air like a dance of rusty butterflies. Only a few, but it snowed!

Dry electric storms would blow up, filling the thirsty sky with enormous black clouds. The lightning would flash with a blinding purplish light, running along the poppet heads like a demented dancer. The thunder crashed with head-splitting reverberations. But no rain. We would come out of the ‘storm’ with aching heads and shattered nerves.

Living at the Returned Soldiers’ Hostel brought me into the kind of world I knew nothing about. I must have seemed insufferably proper and prim to the quite nice men who frequented it. Every Friday night there was a RS social there and the men sang and drank till they tottered home to bed. Late one night I was returning from dinner with friends, and on my way to the bathroom came round the corner too late to retreat when I found a very groggy boarder standing outside his door urinating into a chamber pot. He lifted his hand in solemn salute as I passed, blushing to my ears, waved to his door and muttered, ‘Too many people in there to pee in front of them.’

Since the hostel was immediately below the BHP mine, we began to feel the effect of its closing. At night giant rats in search of food ran along the iron
balcony roof, ate the bulbs from our window boxes and anything else they could find. One night I woke at a bump beside me, switched on my bedside lamp, and saw the largest rat in the world carrying off a Granny Smith apple. He dropped it and dashed out the door. Hair-raising screams rose as he met the hostel’s fox terrier doing his rounds. We all rushed out to the landing to watch the fight which was fought down three flights of stairs. At the bottom the owner finished the rat with a blow of a golf club and rescued the bleeding and breathless foxie from an all too even battle.

It was on a mixed staff at the co-educational school that I was to confirm what second-class citizens women were, though our headmaster never made any difference between the men and women. Yet even here, in a happy school, women members who had the same training and achievements and were often better teachers than the men, received only four-fifths of the male salary. Never were women appointed as subject heads in co-educational high schools. They had to either resign on marriage or be compulsorily retired.6

The Hill was the only place I taught where religious conversion was a problem to be watched. Once the children were enrolled under their various denominations they went off to the weekly scripture sessions—generally dull and riotous because the poor ministers were flung into teaching for which they had no training. Soon we discovered there was a curious ‘leakage’ of converts to the Salvation Army. Who dared question so ticklish a matter as spiritual enlightenment? The Captain who conducted the classes brought along his harmonium and the enthusiastic choir bellowed out, ‘Hold the knives, the forks are coming’ instead of ‘Hold the fort, the night is coming’, and similar distortions of the many hymns they sang.

In spite of the bad effect the excessive heat of Broken Hill had on my health I can never be grateful enough for the insight my years there gave me into the world we live in. I had never before lived in an industrial community, and one dependent on a single industry at that. Never before come in intimate contact with children who bore its mark on them, physically and mentally. Ten years before, my pupils had been small children in the days of the terrible Big Strike in 1919 which was fought for improved conditions in the mines. Their fathers were frequently ‘leaded’ or suffered from miners’ phthisis or pneumoconiosis, both contracted in the dusty stopes in which they worked. They had ‘dry’ workings so the lead-filled dust with its gritty particles was carried into their lungs. There were no showers in the dressing rooms and they rode home from their shift through the blistering heat to houses without showers or baths, and the sweat carried the lead in the dust with which they were covered into their pores. They fought for eighteen months and at the end of an agonising period of poverty, hunger and humiliation, they won what they had asked for in the

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6 The Married Women Lecturers’ and Teachers’ Act, which prohibited most married women from teaching, was introduced in 1932, although previously ‘bonded’ or scholarship teachers were also prevented from marrying.
beginning, after which there was no major dispute of any magnitude for many 
years. What a commentary on industrial relations, particularly when given the 
figures for the mineralogical production of Broken Hill. There was certainly 
money to improve living conditions if they wanted!

If I were given to writing novels on the industrial scene this is the story I 
would choose for my theme. I hope some coming writer will see its attraction. 7
Our history is too little treated in literature. The introduction of the lead bonus 
in 1925 would make a story in itself. 8

This was the atmosphere into which I was thrust at a most sensitive period 
of my life. My university romance had ended, more by his commonsense than 
mine. He saw those abstinent years of the bond stretching out interminably. I 
was conscious of an aching vacuum inside which was filled by real interest in 
human beings at odds with their community. Here was the perfect example.

My main job, naturally, was learning to be a teacher of senior classes in 
English. Here, too, I began to realise that the ability to live comfortably with a 
class without problems of general discipline, depended neither on sex nor size. 
Being rigidly controlled by the syllabus for the Leaving Certificate which carried 
with it matriculation for the university, I imagine my classes were as dull as could 
be with a teacher who was crazy about the subject. I shudder when I think what 
we did to Shakespeare, our main text for study. No thought at all was given to 
approaching the play in the only way a play should be approached: i.e. by playing 
it, however badly. The text was studied in the same way one treated a Latin text: 
line for line explanation with much emphasis on archaic phrases and words. 
Exercises in paraphrasing passages. Quotations that threw light on character; but 
never character studied in the round. Altogether a method designed to prevent 
anyone from appreciating the power and wonder of the play, to hide from him 
or her the subtlety and force of characterisation. And to kill forever the beauty 
of the poetry. Poor Shakespeare! The number of plays, tragedy and comedy, I 
have helped to bury.

The method of treating the prose text was as bad. These were chosen 
generally because they represented examples of respected essay writers in eighteenth 
and nineteenth-century England. Since they were entirely divorced from the 
history of the period, their significance was lost on pupils who often had no 
historical background at all. Pope, Addison, Swift, Lamb: they were presented 
in a vacuum. If the students happened to be studying for English honours there 
was some hope of their being able to set the essayist in time and place. For it is 
my strong opinion that writers must be studied in this way. How understand

7 Donald Maclean's *No Man is an Island* (1955) and Ruth Trant Fischer's *The Hog's Back* (1970) are both based on 
the history of Broken Hill; Fischer, like Cusack, also taught there, in the 1930s.
8 After the miners made a claim for a share in the industry's prosperity, a lead bonus from twopence to fourpence 
per shift was introduced.
Nevinson's superb essay on the spavined horse that dies in the street if you do not know the social and political conditions of the time and place? What do Dickens's superb novels, and those of Thackeray, mean without their backgrounds? How illustrate for your pupils that literature is the imagination working on fact if you don’t know the facts?

This applied not only to senior classes but right through the school. The role of books was not—as literature should be—an experience that exhilarates and opens the mind, but a stodgy textual examination of frequently stodgy books. The study of a book in class inflicts on the fast reader the irritation of being always ahead of the slow, on the slow the humiliating awareness of being always behind. Reading should be taken at your own pace, savoured in your own way, discussed only for the working out of plot and the development of character. I—and the children I taught—have enjoyed Dickens's *David Copperfield* and *A Tale of Two Cities*, Scott's *Ivanhoe*, R.L. Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped* and Kenneth Grahame's *Wind in the Willows* (only this year I had a letter from a girl I taught telling me how much she had enjoyed it in my class; her children in turn had enjoyed it and now their children were enjoying it!). That book and Conrad's superb *Youth* were the only books I can remember which could be said to belong to the best of modern literature. Frequently the books set were without interest or relevance for the reader. What did Ernest Raymond’s *The Hill* mean to Australian children who knew nothing about such an educational oasis for the upper crust and occasionally the rising rich (always cads, these) as the Great Public School, Harrow? And cared less? If there was ever an example of utter stupidity in the setting of books, it was this. *Stalky and Son*, though it dealt with a similar, though less snobbish, school, was delightful for everybody because Kipling's genius transfigured characters and background. At this moment I have a sudden doubt. Did the Department of Education set *Stalky* for study or was it one of the frequent discoveries of my own, for the delight of my pupils and myself?

Frankly, at this stage of my life I don’t think you can really teach literature or poetry in a fashion which enables it to be examined. It was a failure in my university days. In my teaching days the most I did was to teach the art and craft of writing as well as I could, and inspire—with my own enthusiasm—a love for good reading and poetry.

I remember with joy a boy I had in a lower class at Broken Hill, Stirling, with no educational background but an inborn love of literature. I can still see him as he looked up with shining eyes from a reading of 'High Tide on the Coast of Lincolnshire' and hear him as he said, 'Gee, Miss, I love the way it goes tumpty,

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10 Ernest Raymond, British novelist, published about fifty books but there is no novel of this name by him.
tumpty tum.' Stirling reminds me of one of the neatest excuses I've ever had. I was angry because he hadn't done his grammar homework (why should he? it would teach him nothing valuable, but you could examine it!). I said he must stay in; he said he had a good excuse. I snapped, 'Unless it's one I've never heard before, in you stay.' Stirling rose and took on the stance of a speaker on a soap-box.

'Well it was like this, Miss. Yesterday arvo when I got 'ome me mother said, "Stirling, take yer baby brother for a walk in the park." So there I was Miss, wheeling the pram along and reading me 'omework at the same time. We went to see the monkeys, 'cos the kid likes 'em. And while we're standing there chuckin' 'im some peanuts I got in me 'and, the little fellow makes a grab at them and gets the papers with me 'omework on it. In it goes and the monkeys tore it ter bits.'

I looked at him, beaten. 'Go on,' I said, 'home you go.'

It was at Broken Hill that I first began to be aware of the complete uselessness of much of the curriculum the pupils were obliged to study without any regard for the future they were likely to have. An infinitely small proportion of children who entered the high school went on to the university for which their studies were intended to prepare them. Latin for instance: necessary for matriculation for Arts and Medicine (why it was never clear, since all a doctor needed to know was some dog-Latin which kept his profession and that of the pharmacist in a state of pseudo-witchcraft).

Since, judging from that classic, Tom Brown's Schooldays, even Rugby College under the revered Dr Arnold got no further than is described in Chapter III about the 'Vulgus'; a short composition in Latin or Greek compulsory on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday mornings. 'The traditionary method of vulgus doing' was to take from vulgus-books which had illegally descended down the school, a line here a line there, an ending there 'till he had gotten all that he thought he could make fit. He then proceeded to patch his tags together with the help of his Gradus, producing an incongruous and feeble result of eight elegiac lines, the minimum quantity for his form ... The vicarious method, obtained amongst big boys of lazy bullying habits ... consisted simply in making clever boys whom they could thrash do their whole vulgus for them, and construe it to them afterwards'.

Later when the boys are in the fifth form and consequently have had more than the whole of our high school years in the sanctified atmosphere of Rugby, we find George Arthur (probably the only bearable 'good' boy in literature designed for young people) begging Tom to give up the common habit of using pirated vulgus-books and cribs; he asks, in answer to Tom's remonstrances, 'Does the Dr think you use cribs and vulgus?' And Tom replies, 'He was at Winchester himself. He knows all about it.' Then cries, 'I can only just make head or tail of it [the Greek and Latin texts] with the crib!'

11 Thomas Hughes, Tom Brown's Schooldays (1857), part II, chapter III, pp. 260 and 262.
CHAPTER FOUR

How many of our pupils were in the same situation, except for the very rare lover of the classics? And what good did they do them, mentally or morally, when a good part of the ancient languages course was a fake made possible by cribs? Where was the acclaimed mind or character building? The author of the book makes no attempt to justify either the custom or the habit in a school designed to produce ‘gentlemen’ rulers of the greatest Empire in the world. Why then were similar stupidities perpetrated in our schools when gentlemen were out of fashion and the Empire had started on its decline? It is not strange that so few of our pupils left our schools with any feeling but repulsion for the utterly incongruous information entirely unrelated to their society we strove to cram into their heads.

An incident that occurred one day when the Latin teacher was away, in my mind is linked with the uselessness of ancient languages for the average bright (or dull) child. As I went into the room where the senior class was and prepared to sit on the dais, the prefect rushed forward calling, ‘Wait Miss!’ Surprised, I waited and watched him draw the chair from where it was perched perilously on the edge. ‘Gosh!’ he exclaimed, ‘that was meant for Mr P.’ Poor Mr Payne. Fine person, brilliant scholar, but one of those unfortunate people who just could not keep order. His classes ‘gave him hell’ as another man on the staff said when we discussed his illness. When, some dozen years later, I read his name in the casualty list among the missing, I uttered a wish that he would never be found. The life of such a teacher is indeed a minor hell.

Another day the extreme quietness of my third year class, all sitting with arms folded in utter silence as I entered, warned me that something was cooking. When I opened my desk I found it was crawling with the large repulsive caterpillars of the Emperor moth. To have shown signs of nerves or repulsion would have been fatal. So I said, ‘Please bring me that jardiniere, Mary. And now, beginning from the back row, you boys come out and put each a caterpillar in it.’ It was their turn to protest, ‘Gee, Miss, you can’t ask us to pick those monsters up.’ But pick them up they did, writhing, shuddering, closing their eyes, till the last creepy-crawly was safely out of my desk. It was generally conceded my victory.

These stories give a lead into the type of children we had at the school. Independent, witty, full of fun, hard-working, for school work was the only hope they had of not following their fathers into the mines. The mines dominated everything: the city, the council, the school. When an accident occurred and a miner was killed the whole town stopped work not only as a tribute to him but to show their power. But now with the Broken Hill Proprietary closed, thousands of men were thrown out of work at the time when the Depression was just around the corner. The population dropped from 42,000 to 28,000 in a few months, most of the families going to Adelaide, which was the city’s real metropolis. Sydney-siders were called ‘foreigners’ and indeed, before the days of an air service, with a twenty-five-hour journey by train, the capital was little known.
Broken Hill was unique in situation, industry and people. Its population was mixed and this was reflected in the schools. Frequently children of migrants would bring notes of excuse written by themselves and signed by their parents. This was our fault as a country. We made no effort whatever to teach the newcomers English. I have been told of teams of miners working in the various mines for years of whom only the ‘Boss’ knew English. He dealt with everything: work, wages, social relations in the city. Though I met Italians, Greeks and Yugoslavs, I found that only a minimal number knew the language of their adopted country. The women rarely spoke anything but the native tongue. And in general, the children, anxious to adapt as quickly as possible to the new country, despised the ‘old’ language. A tragic situation. The only ceremony I heard of in my two years, directed to other language groups, was the monthly mass in Italian given in the Catholic cathedral.

I have never lived in such an independent city, due to the power of the Barrier Miner’s Union in industrial and political affairs. Yet for all that, there was nothing in the curriculum we followed in the school that was linked with their own background—geographical or historical. Here we were in fascinating, near-desert country, where were the oldest rocks in the world, the oldest records of an ancient people. The children were taught nothing about them, and to learn anything I had to take a geology course at the technical college. For the extraordinary flora of the region we had to rely on a very good naturalists’ association which Crystal Harris, a teacher at the high school, organised in her spare time. One of the few other amusements was going out to the Afghan camp on the outskirts of the town where we were invited to ‘enjoy’ camel rides because one of the teachers taught children of these families.

So bored and lonely was I that I went home for my first Easter holidays, spending a terrific amount of money and fifty hours travelling. I learned to make better use of them later. My trip to Sydney that Easter was well worth the time and money. It was then I met Norman, who many years later was to become my husband. A family friend had arranged the meeting saying that he might be able to help me with my writing as he was then financial editor of the Bulletin and president of the Press Club. He did, in many ways. He read all my manuscripts from then on, poor man, introduced me to that group of American writers who were producing the best literature in English, and by his intelligence, knowledge and charm, ruined my taste for other men.

Something of his influence can be traced by the way I threw myself into learning about the area from then on. Historically West Darling, it recorded some of the earliest explorations into the interior. Sixty miles away at Menindee you could trace the footsteps of Surveyor-General Mitchell’s pioneer journey down the Darling in 1835. Here, in this very district, Captain Sturt’s party had rested on its way to find the ‘Inland Sea’ in 1845. It was entirely due to our own initiative that a party of us followed his journey in our next Easter break, learning
the reality of harsh desert country in drought in our journey north to Milparinka and Tibooburra, across the border into Queensland where the sand bogs repulsed us, across country to White Cliffs and back through Menindee.

Somewhere in the middle of the desert, in a little corrugated iron pub unmarked on the map but called Bottle Creek from the upended bottles which fringed the edge of the chicken wire marking the crossing which elsewhere was like dry quicksand, I came in contact with the correspondence method of teaching. The Correspondence School had been established in 1914; with the coming of wireless new possibilities were added to it and here I met for the first time the Radio Correspondence School in action. It had been started only in 1928 in conjunction with the famous Flying Doctor service inaugurated by the Revd John Flynn. They both use the same radio network, the school 'borrowing' the doctor's for four hours a day during the week to educate children who otherwise would have no primary education at all. At this isolated pub, the sweet-faced woman told us she 'teaches' her children by switching in by the pedal radio (worked by a bicycle) at 9.45 every week day. Far off, a teacher in Broken Hill, who has pupils in a 400-mile area, opens the day by singing together, microphone and transmitters linking them all. With one hand on a switch and the other on the volume control, she conducts the 'school of the air', calls the roll, enquires about anyone missing. The voices come back, replying, asking questions as though they were actually seeing each other.

The classes extend through the first to the eighth grade. Books carrying the lessons come by mail and go back by mail to the special Correspondence School in Sydney. Teachers there have told me that they build up a real friendship with the children whose books they correct. Later I was to have children in my classes who had done their primary course by correspondence and found them well up to standard. This day in 1929 I had one of the experiences which teaches you that you don't really know what the world is about. The sweet-faced mother (her husband looked like a brigand, but that must have been misleading) told us that she had been born not far from there in an even more isolated spot. I asked her, with something like horror in my voice, 'Have you never been away from here?'

'Oh yes,' she replied, smiling vivaciously, 'I went to Broken Hill for my honeymoon and it was wonderful!' I have reminded myself of that, however unpleasant the place I live.

Many years later when I was in the Soviet Union, I heard that the Ambassador in Australia had been so impressed by a film made on the 'School through the mail-box' that he took it back with him when he returned home. Educationalists dealing with the same problems of isolation in that enormous country have told me they found it of the greatest interest and help. Later it was shown at an educational gathering at UNESCO. Labrador and Patagonia were

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12 The Correspondence School was established in 1916 in New South Wales and Victoria (later in other states). See Jean Ashton, Out of the Silence (1971) for the history of the school of the air.
both most impressed and Rhodesia borrowed a correspondence teacher for a year. So pioneering goes on!

But of the pioneering of which our country had been the initiator, our pupils—and their teachers—learned nothing. I learned much of it from the driver we had on our long trip through the desert, a man overflowing with fascinating stories culled from the three generations of his family who had lived there. Later he taught me to drive, easy enough in a landscape where the only hazards were stray camels! When I came to sit for my licence, I did well enough till ordered to reverse round a corner. I went into that reverse at such speed that it carried us over the footpath where we stopped on the edge of a six-foot drop. The young policeman with me leaped out before we reached it, wiped his brow, and said, 'That'll do. You'll get your licence. I might have to go out with you again.'

That long trip brought me in touch with isolated people to whom I sent magazines for years: the woman at Bottle Creek; the artesian bore keeper who gave us tea late one night and explained the names of his dogs, 'Bottle' and 'Flask' with a significant wink; the 'gouger' at White Cliffs who lived in a two-roomed underground house gouged out in the search for opals. He made us a delicious tea cake for morning tea and gave us slivers of opal. Isolated places, lonely people. Homesteads of stations on which Kidman\textsuperscript{13} had foreclosed now that the Depression had come to add its horror to the drought.

Here again I crossed the tracks of Ernest Giles who had brought an exploring party there in 1861. There was even 'Giles' carved in the face of a cliff eighty miles away at Mootwingee, where we camped, but I was never able to authenticate the inscription.\textsuperscript{14} Here was the most interesting record of Aboriginal settlement I have ever seen, with rock-carvings and paintings whose age no-one could guess in those days before radio-carbon. (In my latest novel, 'Nurse No Long Grief',\textsuperscript{15} I use it as a setting for my ninety-seven-year-old 'heroine's' youth.) Yet with all this anthropological richness at our door, there was nothing—absolutely nothing—in history or local legend about the great Aboriginal tribes who had created such cultural wonders.

Our history books skimmed over the amazing circumstances of our settlement, generally elevating to heroes and patriots many people who, in the act of introducing necessary changes to English traditions, elevated themselves to the moneyed classes that ruled the colony. Of the real achievement that brought us in little more than half a century from a convict dump to one of the most democratic countries in the world, we learned practically nothing. Of the fight

\textsuperscript{13} Sir Sidney Kidman (1857–1935), the 'Cattle King', whose vast pastoral empire extended through four states and over a hundred properties.

\textsuperscript{14} Ernest Giles carved his name on a rock at Mootwingee (now a national park).

\textsuperscript{15} Her last novel, based on her family's pioneering past, which remains unpublished.
of the ordinary settler against the squattocracy; of the struggle that brought us to self-government in the 1850s much about Wentworth but nothing about the first eight-hour procession in 1856, the first in the world. We learned much about the fight for the franchise in England but little of it here, the first country in the world to introduce manhood suffrage, the second (after New Zealand) to allow women to vote. The only country which in the nineteenth century put into legislation the welfare ideals for which Chartists, the rebels of 1848 and all the other Progressives of the time, fought and died. But it was only on that long trip in 1929 following Sturt’s footsteps that I realised that pioneering still goes on, and that many women brought up their families in conditions not much easier than my grandmother’s over half a century before.

I learned the mystery and wonder of the outback on trips to Adelaide and Mildura; the astonishing fauna—kangaroos, wallabies, emus, strange birds. Here in the Hill were stories to thrill students: the discovery of silver-lead by Charles Rasp in 1883; the growth of the city itself. It was all around us: geology and botany, history and social studies; all waiting to illuminate the city we lived in. But it did not appear in the curriculum. What we learned was by our own enterprise, in geographical excursions, in botanical excursions, in the trip to follow Sturt’s track to the Stony Desert. The details of its social and political history were illuminated for us by material the remarkable old librarian, Morry Bannister, provided from the library. I used him in Picnic Races. He it was who brought to my notice two remarkable teachers, Clarice I and Donald Maclean, who later became renowned for their pioneering work in education, something extremely unpopular at the time.

Here was a city that had pulled itself up by its own bootstraps to get decent working conditions, even a lead bonus that gave them some small share in the enormous profits; a lesson in industrial relations that every small child should have known. But instead we ploughed through that dullest of dull textbooks, Warner and Marten’s History of England that probably gave more Australian children a hatred of history than anything else in their whole backward course. Here we were with living history around us. We ignored it to learn about the kings and queens of England from a purely imperialistic point of view. There

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16 The first eight-hour rally was held in Melbourne on 11 April 1856, attended by 700 members of the mechanical trades. The meeting was addressed by Thomas Enbling, creator of the slogan ‘Eight hours labour, eight hours recreation, eight hours rest’.

17 South Australia was the first in the world to introduce manhood suffrage, in 1856; Victoria followed in 1857, then New South Wales in 1858, Queensland in 1859, Western Australia in 1893 and Tasmania in 1896. South Australia was the first Australian state to introduce female suffrage, in 1894, and was also the first in the British Commonwealth; the other states only followed after the formation of the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901.

18 Charles Rasp discovered silver-lead in the area in September 1883; the Broken Hill Proprietary was formed in 1885.

19 Donald James Maclean (b. 1905), teacher and author; an advocate of progressive education, he was president of the New Education Fellowship in Australia and, in the 1960s, a chief lecturer for the NSW Department of Child Welfare. His novels include No Man Is an Island, set in Broken Hill; he also wrote many school textbooks.

was the centre of civilisation which it graciously extended to the ‘lesser breeds without the Law’, killing and destroying in the process. The valuable study which lay behind it—that of the social development of the English system—was ignored. Dates of kings and queens and great battles was the stuff on which these eager young minds were fed. There was no attempt in any way to link Living and Study; the two aspects of life were divorced.

Robinson’s excellent *History of Western Europe* 21 (it was American)—quite the best history book our secondary schools ever had to study—at least gave an interesting and dramatic insight into our development from ancient times. But it didn’t go far enough. The forces that were moulding our times were never mentioned. Even as late as 1958, when I came back after eighteen months in new China, my nephew, a lover of history, had studied China only till 1919! Indeed it was some years later—after I had made a bitter criticism of our backwardness—that a textbook on Asia appeared. I don’t know if I had anything to do with it!

Anything in the line of preparing our pupils for Life was carefully ignored. Though all the children we taught were in difficult stages of adolescence, the functions of growth so far as the human body were concerned did not even exist. If physiology was taught it stopped at the navel. In biology, reproduction was not mentioned. I presume that the fertilising role of birds and bees in botany got a glance but in general we lived and taught in a sexless world where Nature reproduced itself by mirrors. What this meant among the older pupils I never dared ask. But we watched an example of it when our best fourth-year student fell in love with the awful suddenness and intensity of Romeo and Juliet. The affair went on through fifth year and continued at the university. Years later I was told by one of the men I taught with (the best teacher I have known) that the lad came to him at the beginning of his graduate career and asked him how to break it off as he felt he should marry a virgin! Poor Juliet. One of the nicest of our fifth-year girls disappeared from school in the last term and returned after a fortnight in which (so rumour said) she had had an abortion. The rest of the class put on an exhibition of ostracising her that could not have been outdone in Puritan days of *The Scarlet Letter*. Pale and silent, she finished her course with dogged courage under the eyes of her censorious coevals and passed, I’m glad to say. Later she brought her husband to see me.

I see no way of solving the problem of sex when girls and boys are still at school long after they reach marriageable ages than by admitting it’s there. The Pill may have something to cope with the dilemma. And in indiscriminate promiscuity the girl is always the victim.

The second year I went to live at the Teachers’ Hostel because of a strike of hotel staff which ruled out cooking of meals or looking after boarders. There I met another facet of the educational life the miners, or the more intelligent ones, provided

21 James Harvey Robinson, *Introduction to the History of Western Europe* (1903).
for their children. A fine housekeeper we had told me she had been a pupil at the socialist Sunday school and her view of the city was beyond price. I learned from her more about its political manoeuvrings than from anyone else.

It was a relatively comfortable house with the wide verandahs typical of the large bungalows of mine managers or professional people. We all slept out, protected from the passing public by lattice and creepers. There we slept under mosquito nets (they were undeterred by the general aridity). There I taught myself to type on a typewriter bought on time-payment. There I battered out my first novel, alas, now lost.

A tennis court gave us a means of entertaining ourselves. Only four of us, largely because of our sojourn in the wider world, had swains who paid mild court with weekend visits and occasional bottles of beer scorned by the other vestals. Whether this was the cause of nocturnal excitement as they suspected, I don't know. We had all retired to bed one Saturday night and most of us were sleeping when one of the girls came home daringly late. She quietly undressed in the bedroom outside the window of which slept a very blonde girl not ten feet from me. She woke to find a man leaning over her bed, looking through a crack in the blind. Suddenly the most appalling scream I've ever heard rent the air. I leaped from my bed and went sprawling as a male figure knocked me off my feet in his panic-stricken flight down the hill. The blonde was still screaming and the rest of the occupants joined her in the general hysteria. I'm unfortunate. In general I don't weep and I don't have hysterics, that great reliever of overstrung nerves. When I had rung the police and explained the cause of the excitement to the rather sceptical sergeant, I went into the kitchen and made a cup of tea all round. We chattered excitedly as we drank, the blonde repeating again and again how she had wakened to find a man leaning over with his eye to the blind. Privately the less kind later said they thought it was the frustrated boyfriend of the girl undressing in the room. When we had all calmed down slightly, I gathered the teacups and took them into the kitchen. As I came through the door the linen blind ran up with a resounding clatter. Tray and teacups went into the air and I collapsed in as good an attack of hysterics as anyone. When all the fun was over!

As the year went on I began increasingly to suffer from prostrating headaches. So bad that one Friday I stayed home in bed when everyone else went off to enjoy Friday night's late shopping. I was wakened from a half doze by the sound of footsteps on the verandah. Then someone lit a match at the door of the dining-room. I sat up and peeped through the window and to my horror

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22 Called 'This Nettle Danger' (earlier, 'Sounding Brass'), it was never published and was eventually lost. Details can be found in Freehill's Dymphna Cusack (1975), pp. 34–5.

23 'Prostrating headaches' were symptomatic of trigeminal neuralgia, which Cusack developed while at Broken Hill. This was one of the three diseases with which she was boarded out from teaching in 1944. Like migraine, it could be treated with morphine, but Cusack was allergic to morphine and consequently suffered bouts of the 'worst pain known to human beings.'
saw a man with a black handkerchief across his face looking in. What to do? The house was too far for anyone to hear me if I screamed. I watched the intruder as he moved to the sideboard and opened a drawer. He was obviously well informed for this was the only time in the fortnight that the house was full of the cash from our pay-checks. I froze at the thought of those crisp notes I’d got from the bank the day before, lying under my handkerchiefs and scarves in the top drawer. I thought of everyone else’s, equally accessible throughout the house. The Hill was renowned for being a crime-free city. I crept out of bed, through the verandah door of the room behind me, shouting as loudly as I could, ‘It’s time to get up, Vera. The boys will soon be here.’ The non-existent Vera ‘answered’ in a tone considerably higher.

I rushed into the bathroom and turned on the bath water. ‘You can have the first bath if you like. I’ll make us a cup of tea.’ Vera thanked me and splashed the water. I went into the kitchen and put on the kettle. Then I rushed back to the bathroom, splashed the water again, carrying on a dialogue in a light soprano and deeper contralto as I did so. Deathly silence from the front of the house. I thought of creeping out the back gate to our only neighbours the Brothers, and decided against it. They’d probably have hysterics at the sight of a female in a dressing-gown.

Into our bedroom where I rattled drawers and carefully put my money in my pocket. Then back to the kitchen where I made the tea and drank it, chatting brightly with the equally chatty Vera. When at last I could keep up the farce no longer I went out and sat on the front verandah steps since by now passers-by were beginning to come up the hill from the town. When the others returned they listened with doubt all over their faces. Not even the open drawer in the dining-room and the matches on the floor convinced them. They never said that I was a fabricator but no-one ever thanked me for saving their cash from the burglar they didn’t believe in. The police did. They’d had a number of such reports.

The great benefit of living on the top of Sulphide Street was that from it one looked away to the hills of the Barrier Range to the west of the city. Their changing colours during the day compensated for the harshness of the landscape. The mirages that covered the plain as you drove over the rusty red dust brought back the longing for the sea that had lured so many explorers on the better part of a century ago. It was not until 1964 that the pipeline was brought from Menindee, alleviating the water famine and making possible a green city with a lake on its outskirts. A hydro-electric scheme sixty miles away created a chain of lakes like a necklace along the Darling where the native vegetation, birds and animals have a new lease of life.

When I was transferred from Broken Hill at the end of 1929 I could not resist the opportunity to drive overland with a group of teachers. I was warned that the department would not pay my fare unless I got the number of someone

24 Water was first pumped from the Darling River at Menindee in 1952, but further pipelines were extended and improved later. See Bobbie Hardy’s Water Carts to Pipelines (1968).
else’s train ticket. I disdained such falsehood. Surely the department ...? But they were right, those cynics. As well as nearly losing our lives in the desert on the way, when I applied for my refund explaining (such foolish honesty!) that I had come by car which had cost less, they said brutally, ‘No refund.’ And no refund it was. One wonders why bureaucrats who constantly force people into dishonesty are surprised at the result.

Deleterious though they were to my health, the two years I spent at Broken Hill were of enormous value to me in every other way. I really grew up. I learned the realities of the society I lived in. I realised too that the middle-class values in which I had been reared were not enough. At Broken Hill away from my mother’s eye, I finally broke with the Church—something that was on the Catholic grapevine within a month and brought me an interview with an understanding young priest, himself a local boy. Later it inflicted on me a visitation from a mission priest who was preaching hellfire and damnation to people who had more immediate and material terrors to contend with in their everyday lives. I was so angry that I argued back with all the force of my new unbelief and sent him off consigning me to the hell for which, in his view, I was inevitably bound.

There in the biggest silver-lead deposit in the world I began to understand the ruthlessness of the industrial world. I began to realise that strike was the only weapon the worker had against it. Crawling through the stopes of mines to which engineer friends took me, I was convinced in that satanic (to me) atmosphere that no wages paid could adequately compensate men for spending their lives cut off from the sun and air of the world to which they should belong. Waiting there with thudding heart for the explosions to go off, I visualised the horror of the mine disaster for which their only riposte was a day’s lost pay. Forever after the essentially appalling conditions of work of even good mines has seemed to me to sacrifice miners for the good of us all, too often not only without our gratitude but without even our awareness.

I remember standing in the cemetery after the funeral of one of our pupils, looking up at the huge monument erected to the one time Labor member, Percy Brookfield, who had sacrificed his life in a struggle with a madman on the railway station.25 His mates had paid for it in tribute to an honest man, ‘a bloody good bloke who never let us down’. I can still see the great concrete globe against the inscription running round it, ‘Workers of the world, unite’. It was Broken Hill’s symbol.

25 Percival Brookfield (1875–1921), MLA for the Broken Hill electorate of Sturt. Formerly a miner and ALP parliamentarian, he was expelled from the ALP for his extreme left-wing views but was returned to parliament as the Industrial Labor Party member. While travelling to Adelaide he was killed in an attempt to disarm a Russian gunman. See W. and A. Scarfe and G.G. Roper (eds), Labor’s Titan, the Story of Percy Brookfield 1875–1921 (1983).
I arrived at my new appointment to Goulburn High School with a face like a dying moon; one side enormously inflated, the other normal, flat. The headmaster was so shocked that he sent me off to the doctor. He diagnosed cellulitis from a tooth extraction, and the first week was spent putting on half-hourly hot fomentations with the aid of my very kind landlady in the hope of avoiding the operation the doctor said was necessary, if... It went down of its own accord and I went back to school a week later to find that in my absence I had been selected to go as resident-mistress to the girls' hostel. No use arguing. I was the youngest and latest-comer.

So began two years of really hard slogging. The head was the kind who stood with his thumbs in the armholes of his vest, releasing a strong smell of male sweat as he did so, and said to Marie S and me, 'Not many heads would let you have the Leaving English and history classes, but there they are. Do your best with them.' We realised as soon as we started that his 'generosity' was based on the fact that he'd taught them little in fourth year. Poor Marie, poor me!

No two cities could have been more unlike than Broken Hill and Goulburn. Here was one of the old colonial cities established early in the nineteenth century, with a solid background of wealthy squatters whose ancestors had taken up land there. Set in a gently undulating landscape, it was rimmed by a circle of mountains that varied from azure to purple according to the time and the season. English trees mingled with the native eucalyptus; in spring the new foliage of oaks and crabapples, poplars, willows and maples was a solace to the heart. In the autumn their fiery leaves made one forget they had presaged a bitter winter.

Like all similar towns in New South Wales, Goulburn had a fascinating history that should have been taught to its schoolchildren. It was not. All I could discover was told to me by the historian of the Anglican church who, years later, published a book on the district.¹

¹ Ransome Wyatt, historian; he published articles in the Royal Australian Historical Society Journal (1938–48) and wrote The History of Goulburn (1941).
CHAPTER FIVE

School pupils would have rejoiced in the detailed stories of its discovery early in the first decade of settlement. But we skated over the journeys of James Meehan and Hamilton Hume and after them, Governor Macquarie in 1820.²

There were still remnants of the convict days in the Towrang Stockade, probably the chief penal settlement in the southern districts. Thrilling—and terrible—stories came from those days. The history of one of the first settlers to receive land grants, F.N. Rossi, was told in Helen Simpson’s novel, *Boomerang*, published in 1932 with few repercussions in the district.³

Though from the 1830s Goulburn was the centre for police parties operating between Lake Bathurst and Oberon (except at Collector) in search of bushrangers, the town’s oral history carried little of those dramatic days. Good and bad, it all seemed to have sunk into that mindless background to which so much of the early records of our country were lost.

Miles Franklin had written her first sensational novel in the district,⁴ Mary Gilmore had lived there.⁵ But they were never mentioned. Indeed I don’t think anyone knew anything about them except their names.

Of the massacres of Aborigines that inevitably accompanied the taking of their tribal land by white settlers, here we learned nothing as we learned nothing of the extermination of the West Darling tribes in Broken Hill. It was the same everywhere. Where I grew up in Guyra on the New England highlands and where I went to boarding school at Armidale it had been the same. Only Judith Wright has written of it nearly half a century later.⁶ It was the same in every country town I lived in. An essential part of our history was ignored, whether massacres of whites by blacks or blacks by whites, while we got bogged down in the Hundred Years’ War or the Thirty Years’ War or the Seven Years’ War—all taught with no reference whatever to the basic economic causes underlying them. Education did nothing about any of them.

Even then I was sufficiently aware of the importance of our historical background to learn what I could about it, but in general I ran into a complete lack of interest or comprehension. It was not till a generation later that, as a visitor, I met and learned much about its history from Stewart Hume, a descendant of the explorer, though in my youth I had known his younger brother. Today Goulburn, like many other towns, is striving to restore its records and to delve into its past—an excellent thing. The more we know about our background, the deeper our sense of identity. Many years after my time, the family of the remarkable man who started pasture improvement, C.E. Prell, ²Hamilton Hume explored the region earlier in the year. In October 1820, Governor Macquarie, along with Deputy Surveyor-General Meehan, travelled out to inspect the ‘new country’. ³Helen Simpson’s family, the Rossis, were fictionalised as the Boissy family. ⁴*My Brilliant Career* (1901). ⁵Mary Gilmore, poet, was born and raised near Goulburn. ⁶She is probably referring to *The Generations of Men* (1959), which tells Wright’s family history.
published a monograph on the history of their property. But exploration, discovery and development meant nothing to Goulburn in my day, except for rare examples like Ransome Wyatt. And as educators we did nothing to stimulate any interest, largely because descendants of English and Scottish founders thought Australian history had neither interest nor importance.

Goulburn had the same snobberies as similar cities I have known with a carefully graded hierarchy. First the squatters. Then the professions, which included the banks in their coterie largely because of the belief that only through good relationships with them could you get that badly-needed mortgage or loan. Then the tradespeople, this including large shop-owners, butchers, etc., though the main difference seemed to be that the first sold wool on the sheep’s back, the second sold it in materials and the third sold sheep in an edible form. Goulburn wasn’t quite as bad as Armidale which was reported back in 1922 to have put a blue cord across the ballroom floor at the Picnic Races ball to keep the sheep (pure merinos) from the ‘lower orders’, who merely paid for their tickets.

It was not for over a decade later that as a writer I met and became friendly with the most generally admirable squatting family I know, whose father had inaugurated the Closer Settlement Movement on the Southern Highlands. For his work in pasture improvement which attracted nationwide attention, he was awarded that piddling award, the OBE, when he should have had a statue to him and a national award in his name. His daughters, highly-cultured women unlike most of their kind, carry on his work and show their father’s sense of social responsibility. I used the family as models for my squatting family in Picnic Races.

Teachers of any grade, primary or high school, had no status whatever though they might be honours graduates of Sydney University entrusted with the most important role in the city, the education of their young.

Goulburn was partially a sheep-growing district, partially industrial as an important railway junction. Nothing taught in the high school had any relevance whatever to the work that would, in normal times, offer itself when the students left school.

The girls' hostel was in an old colonial house that had belonged to one of the squatting families. Half hidden by giant pines, the lawns and gardens made it a delight to the eye. But it was unheated except for a fire in the study (and matron’s sitting room) and the frost made a fairyland of my western window when I got up in the mornings at half past six. All right in the summer months when I used to take the girls for prayers and drill. I was the first female in the

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[7] Charles Ernest Prell (1865–1946) experimented on pasture improvement on his property, ‘Gundowringa’, and became a pioneer of the ‘closer settlement scheme’, a local council-administered system of community farm management; many articles and pamphlets on his work were published in agricultural journals by the NSW Department of Agriculture. See William A. Bayley, *Gundowringa, the Life and Work of Charles Ernest Prell* (1951).

[8] See the footnote on page 78.

town to appear in shorts, and my drill class in the gardens attracted a group of voyeurs, admiring or otherwise.

I earned my food in the sweat of my brow. After breakfast I supervised the bed-making and cleaning of dormitories, and went off to begin school at nine o’clock. At midday we went home for lunch. The food on the whole, thanks to a competent matron, was quite good. My only free time was from four to six, when I took over study till nine o’clock, saw the girls to bed, put out the lights and fell flat on my face with exhaustion. I had my weekends free. It was a wearing programme for room and board only. As the Depression had caught up with my family and a younger brother and sister were out of work, I was glad to have the extra money to send home.

As matron, poor woman, was frequently ill with asthma, my life would have been intolerable but for her daughter who also lived there. We made a friendship with similar tastes in music and dogs, and a similar sense of humour. Thanks to her (her family was of ‘old merino’ stock come down in the world financially) I was introduced to the ranks of the upper crust, and because a ‘pure merino’ (very hard up) took a fancy to me, I was able to go to their picnics and dances, something to which my status as a mere high school teacher did not entitle me. Such kind, generous people, my mentors were. When we met forty-five years later (she had married another old colonial) our affection was unchanged.

My male escort was of the kind who drove me here and there in a pre-war Sunbeam, the back seat taken out so he could transport sheep (and smelling very strongly of them!), with his arm across my shoulders and no other signs of baser instincts. Young people today would not believe he existed. But he did and I learned a lot from him, mainly about sheep. He even took me to see his very ‘old colonial’ aunts, though he knew less than nothing about his own ancestry. They let me examine and read in part letters from Governor Brisbane’s day back in the 1820s. They were impervious to my appeals that they should be deposited in the Mitchell Library, lest some of the descendants of people mentioned might be offended! In 1940 I met the same trouble from similar people over a play I had written about that remarkable woman Mary Reiby, who came here in 1792 as a convict, and her similarly convicted neighbour Simeon Lord. In those days our early settlers descended from heaven in chariots of fire: no broad arrows about there! These exact sentiments were also expressed in Cusack and Miles Franklin’s satirical novel Pioneers on Parade (1939), p. 68.

My years in Goulburn taught me about the problems of a country-based city in the Depression, which was now well set in—if ‘well’ can be used about anything concerning it. Here we had once more the top classes filled with boys and girls who in normal times would be out in jobs. Great, galumphing young men who overflowed the uncomfortable desks designed for children much

10 The play ‘Mary Reiby’, although never published, was broadcast on ABC radio in March 1947. Mary Reiby was convicted of horse theft in 1790, and arrived in New South Wales in 1792.

11 These exact sentiments were also expressed in Cusack and Miles Franklin’s satirical novel Pioneers on Parade (1939), p. 68.
younger. Most of them were determined to take their unwanted extra year at school as a means of getting into the school team—cricket at that time of the year. Mature young women who were equally as uncomfortable. Only a few in the class were there in the normal process of graduating from class to class to take the Leaving Certificate.

Problems there were enough in the school, rising from the system of putting children indiscriminately into academic-type high schools, where they groaned their way through subjects that had no relevance to the life they would live nor the community they would live in. From my Leaving classes, one boy became a bookie’s penciller—I had coffee with him when I ran into him in Sydney in 1949—two others high school teachers, another a bartender in New Guinea. Two others from well-off families went on the land and made a success of it. Another one became a hobo and one a jail governor. The girls who were studious went into teaching, the less successful into nursing, and the majority married young. Some of them already had steady boyfriends they wrote to regularly. Lovely Ethel, the school’s best actress, brought hers to visit me in Sydney the year she left school.

Oh, the problems of the adolescent who is still at school when Nature has made them ready for marriage—or sex. All its normal problems were aggravated by the fact that we had a poor headmaster, lazy, careless and a delegator of his work to any member of the staff who couldn’t escape. His main activity was as choirmaster of a church choir. When he left it was commonly said that the school would not notice the difference but the twenty-seven choral organisations to which he belonged would miss him very much. An exaggeration, I’m sure.

Of course no woman, whatever their qualifications, had any administrative role. Sport was God.

It was through cricket that I had my first battle. For the best part of the first month, those who had no interest in the end of year exam and no intention of working for it, consistently refused to do their homework—essential if they were to know their texts well enough to go to the exam with a slight hope of passing. I tried all the tricks of the trade on them. I wheedled them. I cajoled them. I slashed them. I released on them the resources of my sarcasm, known to make the toughest cringe. No effect. None whatever. No use sending them to the head. He would harangue them in a way with which they were only too familiar; give them a few cuts of the cane. And I was utterly opposed to corporal punishment. I still am. I think the retention of it in our schools reflects on the whole of the Australian community. If the Russians and Chinese can manage without it, what’s wrong with us?

I cornered the cricket coach, Tommy H, a brilliant mathematician who was the only person I know to break through the fog that clouded the mathematical lobes of my brain.
‘Tommy,’ I said on the morning of the day there was to be cricket practice, ‘I’m going to keep your cricket team in this afternoon.’

Tommy looked at me over the top of his teacup; we’d been in Broken Hill together.

‘Well, Ellen,’ he said, ‘if that’s what you think should be done, I’m with you. Keep them as long as you like.’

I had the class for the last period that day, the only hope I had of corralling them. Half past three came. I didn’t move. They didn’t move, waiting like leashed tigers for the moment I would go out the door.

‘Please hand in your homework before you leave the room,’ I said in my best voice which I fear had a quiver in. This was gang warfare and there was only one in my gang. The virtuous rose and handed in their books—all the girls and a number of the boys, the studious ones. The others sat glaring at me not believing that a five-foot, seven-stone female could really be tough enough to withstand the claims of the real school subject: sport. When Tommy H came in and innocently asked where his cricketers were, I explained.

He said, ‘That’s all right with me, Miss C. When they’ve finished it you might let them come to me.’

‘Of course,’ I agreed. We exchanged smiles.

The detainees looked after him with uncomprehending horror on their faces. Betrayed! I sat correcting exercise books. They sat staring at me with looks that would have killed. No-one attempted to do the work for which they were kept in. It was half past four before the first to yield took up his pen and began to write furiously. It was half past six before the last of them handed in his work and fled to the cricket field from which tantalising noises had drifted in to us for two-and-a-half hours. I never again had any problems—of that kind at least.

A number of bigger senior boys later went into the police force and I had an amusing experience with two of them I met on a Railway tram years afterwards.

‘I’m going to Goulburn,’ I said hastily, ‘and I’m afraid I’m going to miss the train.’

‘Don’t worry,’ No. 1 replied, ‘just give him the money for your ticket and I’ll see the train doesn’t go.’

Holding my arm he raced with me to the departure platform, made a sign to the man on the gate and assured him, ‘Ticket’s coming.’

We sat down in an empty carriage while the clock ticked over. Five minutes later No. 2 came rushing up, gave me my ticket and sat down on the other side of me. The conductor carefully put a reserved sign on the window.

We had an hilarious trip to Strathfield, the first stop. There they bade me goodbye and got out. Nearing Liverpool the conductor came along and stared at me, alone! He flung open the door and demanded, ‘Where are the policemen who brought you on?’
I fixed him with what I hoped was a steely eye and whispered, 'I murdered them!'

He fled and I was left in peace under my reserved sign for the rest of the trip.

* * *

If all this sounds prehistoric, what we taught and our methods of teaching weren't far from it. Our curriculum and the methods we were expected to use were equally antediluvian and we were kept on the tracks by inspectors who came round annually to observe and make comments upon us after the briefest of examinations. I remember only one of the inspectorial staff with affection and admiration—Mr Davies. He was actually inspector of French but as the haphazard methods of the day prescribed, sometimes had to examine the English and history teachers, something about which he was diffident and apologetic. But he had that all-too-rare quality of liking children and loving teaching. I cite him as an admirable representative of a class too many of which I came to despise.

Marie S and I were the type of serious-minded history students who thought that because an event had happened it was therefore our duty to teach it. She was teaching fifth year the history of the nineteenth century, the century of revolution and reaction, both of them stemming from the French Revolution. Central to it all was 1848, the year in which Europe was shaken from one end to the other with Karl Marx's *The Communist Manifesto* theoretically inspiring them all. Now in 1928 I had bought in Broken Hill second-hand copies of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and John Stuart Mill's *On the Subjection of Women* in the one volume, all for 1/6. At the same time I bought a thin paperback of *The Communist Manifesto* for sixpence, not realising that I had a bomb in my bag. I took them with me to Goulburn in 1930. Though the federal Labor government, elected in 1929 (with my uncle as a member) amended much of the nonsensical censorship of the previous government which had prohibited over 200 political books; in Goulburn's Lower Depths the old superstitions still thrived. When I lent Marie my copy of *The Communist Manifesto* inscribed with my name, all hell broke loose. We were hauled up before the head and the local inspector and fought a losing battle insisting, as Professors Wood and Bruce had insisted, that you cannot teach a period of history without its most important document.

What innocents we were! No-one cared two hoots for historical objectivity so long as we didn't upset the status quo. To emphasise the point, when the

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12 Her uncle was John Joseph (Jack) Cusack (1868–1956), born in Yass. He worked as a blacksmith before he became the Labor member of the New South Wales Legislative Assembly for Queanbeyan 1910–13; and Albury 1913–17; then he became the first Labor member for Eden–Monaro in the federal parliament 1929–31. In 1953 he unsuccessfully contested the seat of Burrinjuck as an Independent.
Lyons government came back in 1932, they really started political censorship. There was an amusing sequel: When I came back from China to Goulburn thirty years later I found my informer of the thirties (now in her late seventies) my most enthusiastic admirer and completely sold on China. Such is life!

Goulburn gave me two experiences that brought me in touch with the Great Wide World. One was going to a ball given in the local showground to welcome the aviatrix, Amy Johnson. Poor girl, I can see her tired, pale face forcing smiles as she was dragged round the floor. That night the light in the Pavilion went out and true Australian initiative showed itself. All the cars were drawn up to the many wide doors and their lights poured in. Male hearts rejoiced at the vision of female legs stripped by the searching beams of their skirts, so that we danced on spindle shanks with diaphanous mists whirling round us.

Secondly, I paid a whole ten shillings to go flying round the district with that master airman, Kingsford Smith. I always had a yen for him; in profile Norman was his double and often mistaken for him. He was without question the world’s greatest airman, forced by our national parsimoniousness to make barnstorming visits to country towns to try to raise the funds for the great adventures of which he dreamed. Our treatment of ‘Smithy’ remains one of our national shames. Never in all the long flights I have made in various parts of the globe, have I flown with the sense of awe and wonder with which we circled Goulburn. I couldn’t afford the trip to the coast. When I mumbled something of my admiration as we disembarked, the great aviator’s face split in that engaging smile photos have made familiar and he put a hand on my shoulder saying, ‘Thanks, lass. Wish there were more who thought that way.’

I have never ceased to regret that there were not.

* * *

The one unique thing Goulburn High had was an annual Shakespearean Drama competition, for a shield given by a local brewery. I enjoyed it. My classes loved it. The first year I carried off the prize with an excellent series of scenes from Henry IV in which I had as good a Falstaff as you could find anywhere. I’m always surprised that he did not make a name in the theatre.

One of the most enthusiastic was Johnny, but he couldn’t have a part because he lisped.

‘Please Mith,’ he begged, ‘gimme juth a thmall part.’

Recklessly I said, ‘Well you can be the first traveller,’ and found too late his one line was ‘Jethuth, bleth uth’ and he wouldn’t give it up.

Joe Lyons’ UAP was elected in December 1931, in fact.
Years ago when I went to speak at a gathering for the parents of one of the really uppity north shore Great Public Schools, the chairman greeted me with lines from this play in which he had a part!

The next year I could have carried off the prize again except for a rare mishap. I was producing scenes from *A Winter’s Tale*: no ordinary school texts for me. It began with a scene in which a shepherd is playing a pipe and singing. I should have been warned, for Johnny was famous for his off-beat ideas. Wouldn’t it be more life-like if we had a real lamb? He had a real lamb he’d bring along. I said no, but the class shouted me down. A lamb was just the thing they wanted. Knowing that children and animals on stage are the greatest hazards a performance can run, I was doubtful all the rehearsal time. But the play went so well, the characters were so full of enthusiasm, I repressed my fears. The day for the school performances came. The winners of the heat would play in the Town Hall later.

The opening scene went off well with Dudley singing ‘When daffodils begin to peep’, to the accompaniment of a mock guitar, a gramophone (no pipe available). Then in came another leading the lamb which, in the months since it first became a member of the cast, had grown to sheep-like dimensions. Its neat hooves clattered across the bare stage. The audience laughed. The pseudo-lamb, affronted, looked at them and baaed. The audience laughed again. Baa again. Dudley made a heroic attempt to go on with his dialogue. The shepherd responded. The audience laughed; the lamb baaed. So it went on with mounting hysteria.

‘Bring it off!’ I hissed from the prompt spot in the wings. The second shepherd pulled. But the lamb having known glory was not to be outdone. At each hysterical outburst from the audience it baaed in a crescendo.

‘Pull! Pull!’ I shouted. At last its hooves skidded on the boards and it shot off with the shepherd, both on top of me and the gramophone.

Of course we didn’t win. Next day when I went in to the class they fixed me with reproachful eyes.

‘For goodness’ sake don’t sulk because you lost,’ I snapped.

‘It’s not that,’ mourned the class captain. ‘We would have won if you hadn’t insisted on having the beastly lamb.’

I was speechless.

Though the non-English sections of the staff complained that the play competition wasted a great amount of time, I have never been in a school anywhere that really enjoyed Shakespeare as Goulburn did.

As in most other things, the architects of the department were colonially-minded. In a cold climate like Goulburn, the windows faced south, like their English models, and frost flowers decorated them till midday in winter. No provision was made for heating except corner fireplaces and the pupils saw no sense in bringing wood and making fires that kept only the teacher warm.
We had a pleasant staff on the whole, with the profound professional sense that makes such a group work together harmoniously irrespective of whether they like each other. There again I met the tragedy of the brilliant man who cannot keep order. It mattered enormously in my day. I think it must matter today though so much more laxity is allowed. Still I’m sure that the teacher who has no problems is a better and certainly a happier one than the poor creature whose pupils riot on sight. This man was brilliant enough to end up a professor, a much better job for that type where discipline is not a sine qua non of the classroom. With all his high degrees he came to us with the reputation of having been locked in the cupboard by the boys of his previous school, and the rest of us toughs watched with eagle eyes to see that no such incident repeated itself.

Not that we didn’t all have individual problems. But they weren’t mass problems where a whole class gangs up against you. Here once again I made the mistake of tipping out two huge boys, the notorious clothes-stripping B one of them, and refusing them re-entry to the class till they apologised. In such cases the head cooperated by giving a few lackadaisical cuts and regrets that women couldn’t keep order. I was strong enough to tip them out but not strong enough to extract that apology, so they just sunned themselves on the one sunny balcony while the rest of the class froze in an unheated room.

Incidents in the classroom were as varied as the classes themselves. There was the overgrown youth in a second year on the precociousness of whose composition I foolishly commented.

‘Ah, Miss,’ he retorted, ‘what I lack in years I make up for in experience.’
I asked no more.

Another time I equally foolishly offered advice to a similar boy large beyond his years when he broke out in very bad acne.

‘I suggest your mother takes you to the doctor,’ I advised. ‘It’s a pity to have good skin like yours spoiled.’

‘It’s quite all right, Miss,’ he replied. ‘Mum says its only change of life.’

Then there was the brash boy whose classmates presented him with an expensive book when he left because of his father’s removal. Months later, library stocktaking showed that it had come from the school library!

As in Broken Hill, we had other problems as you may guess in a school that lumped adolescent girls and boys together at their most sensitive time. Sex, as instruction, never reared its ugly head, though, from my experience twenty years before, no country child could be ignorant of the mechanics of sex. Of its deeper significance, our dirty minds had no inkling. So it wasn’t surprising (but embarrassing) when the head summoned the teachers of a girl who had mysteriously disappeared from classes and harangued us with our poor supervision of the school dance, because she had become pregnant as a result of a ‘meeting’ with the captain of the private boarding school under the building. We wondered
what the Brothers had to say to him. Probably nothing since he continued as their pupil, though the poor girl was rushed off to have an abortion elsewhere.

Since we often felt like advising the head to ring the local brothel as well as the billiard-rooms when our seniors were missing from class, we felt his disapproval was unwarranted. We were dealing with men and women. I always remember the day Marie rushed into the staffroom red in the face, threw down her books and burst out: 'I refuse to stay in that fifth year class while B sits in the front and undresses me with his eyes!'

Still, as her husband Bill, risen to a headmaster (and a very good one) of a big co-educational city school, said to me some years ago, 'We knew nothing then. Wait till you have five of your best girls doing their Leaving at home because they are pregnant.'

I had double problems as resident at the girls' hostel. Problems of girls creeping out at night to meet boys under the pine trees. Problems of bursting into a dormitory where there was much noise, switching on the light and finding one girl preparing to masturbate with another. What did you do? The wrong thing, no doubt, but we weren't trained for such emergencies and were forced by training and social attitudes to consider them wicked.

The housemaid fell pregnant and the girls watched her swelling till matron decided at seven months that it was not a good example for the other young ladies. She would have gone sooner if a replacement could have been found.

Our really shattering crisis came one night when the matron's daughter rushed out of her room on the ground floor, calling, 'There's a man outside looking in at me in my shilling shirt!' (we'd both bought them at a bargain sale). General hysteria. It gave the girls the chance to let off some of their inhibitions.

That was only the beginning. The police we called in found footsteps in the flower bed under Marge's window. Her dog was left in the hall to protect us, though, by his nature, he needed protection himself. Two nights later a terrific banging on the front door wakened us all about one o'clock. By the time I reached the landing the house was in pandemonium. The knocking continued, the dog was barking frantically, the matron trembling beside a huddle of terrified girls, Marge calling unnecessarily from downstairs that there was a man at the door. I crept timorously down the stairs with matron and girls, all armed with hockey sticks, behind me. Why do I always have to pretend to be brave? At the door I shouted in a voice that shook, 'Who's there?' The answer came, 'The police.' I boilled: 'Come round to the window till I see.' I switched the light on in the study and, by heaven, it was a policeman. I flung open the front door and told him what I thought of him in no uncertain language. The girls cheered me. After that I rang the sergeant and said we'd be better without their protection. The next day a worried woman came to ask us if we really were under police protection because she, living on a corner half a mile away, had been wakened at midnight the night before to know if her house was the girls' hostel.
CHAPTER FIVE

Temporarily, all was quiet. Then one night I woke at the sound of what I thought were footsteps outside my door. I switched on my light and swore that if any girl wakened me instead of matron, I'd, I'd ... Slowly the handle of my door turned while I lay and fumed. Right round, then as slowly back again. Whoever it was had thought better of it. I listened. Silence.

Next morning the maid who brought my half-past-six cup of tea said in an awed voice, 'Oh miss, there's a terrible lot of muck outside the toilet.' I decided to wait. One of the girls knocked softly, 'Oh Miss Cusack, the toilet's in a terrible state.' Nothing to do but get up and look. The fact exceeded the report. The tiled walls of the water-closet were smeared with excrement. The floor was splashed with it. It was trodden right to my door. Furious I called the girls out and inspected their pyjamas. Nothing! Without any evidence whatever, I told the masturbators to clean it up. Protesting loudly and rightfully, they did so. I reported to matron.

That night I was visiting the only real friends I made in Goulburn, Rene and Sid Laws, who remained my friends for many years. On the way home I confided my problem to Sid. He, an old soldier, said, 'There's a pervert about. I'll get in touch with my friend the police inspector.' The inspector took it seriously. Inspection showed that a man had climbed the plum tree to the roof of the verandah, climbed in through the window of our bathroom and thence to the toilet, and my door. How grateful I was for the unpleasant side of my nature which had prevented me from rushing out to bring comfort to the unknown!

Then the thefts started. First the pretty Shelley cup (but not the saucer) my class had given me. Then a vase from Margery's room. Then Leila's watch, cotton reels, trinkets and so on from my bedroom. Panic in the place! The girls refused to leave their windows open. They would go anywhere only in pairs. They screamed at the slightest untoward sound. The inspector decided he would put a man on guard each night to watch from the grounds. The girls cooperated enthusiastically in setting out a supper tray for him.

Then the supper disappeared. The policeman took to sitting in the woodshed smoking furiously so that any intruders would be warned. Minor disappearances but no Peeping Toms. No climbers to our floor. Nothing!

After a quiet fortnight like this, the policeman was withdrawn. Our nerves calmed. Then the cook left without notice. After a few days matron asked me to accompany her to her room with the intention of clearing it for the new one. The room was in a shambles. The stinking chamber pot was full to the brim with blood which matron, as a nurse, declared to be from a miscarriage. We cleaned it up. We opened a suitcase to pack her clothes. And here was the solution of the mystery: it was full of all the missing articles, my cup among them. Only Leila's watch was missing. The cook was a kleptomaniac. We eventually recovered Leila's watch when we sent the police after her in her village.
An extraordinary coincidence. But, as the inspector said, who was it had climbed into the bathroom, left his filthy traces in the toilet and stealthily turned the handle of my door? We never found out. For a long time I woke shivering when I heard an unusual noise in the night. I never went to investigate.

* * *

As I was still very keen about bushwalking, the Southern Tablelands provided some delightful excursions. Down the Bungonia Caves where the lights gave out and we had to crawl back in the darkness with the bats swarming round us as panic-stricken as we were. Easter down on the Shoalhaven River. Another trip over the Jamberoo to Kiama. Then an accident to my knees finished that, and tennis and dancing. I took up the study of French and German, and began writing again. Odd how a career can be influenced!

 Foolishly honest, I decided I would not go into hospital in term time for the operation Australia’s best orthopaedic surgeon said was necessary. As usual I had the Leaving class, a good one this time since I had taught them in fourth year and we knew each others’ idiosyncrasies. The headmaster, appreciative of anyone as silly as me, agreed that I should take off the week before the end of term. I went. But the operation was worse than I anticipated. I was not ready to return to school at the end of the vacation. Another three weeks in hospital learning to walk again. And what was the department’s repayment for my consideration for my class? They docked my pay for the whole time I had been away, since regulations said a teacher must be on duty either at the beginning of the vacation or at the end of it. It took a lot to teach me sense. Five weeks pay lost by my own stupid honesty, during the Depression when every penny I could spare was sent home. Even the intervention of my uncle, J.J. Cusack, who was then federal member for the region, brought no result. I learned to be as sensibly dishonest as everyone else.

We learned to cope with many embarrassments due to the age of our pupils. What did you do when a boy you taught offered you a drink and a cigarette at the Golf Ball? How did you react when a senior boy held you too close and wanted to dance cheek to cheek? What did you do after the break-up school party when one of the seniors insisted on walking home with you, undeterred by your mass chaperonage of hostel girls, held you at the gate while they went on unwillingly, and said, ‘Since I’ve done the Leaving I’m no longer a pupil am I?’ You agreed. ‘Then may I kiss you goodnight?’ You escaped. That was not in the curriculum. Poor boy! He didn’t pass the Leaving and his horror—and yours—returned to school next year. He never looked you in the face again!

The sum total of my years of teaching in Broken Hill and Goulburn was the conviction that the high school curriculum was insane. In order to cram in
everything required for the exam we had no time to teach the proper use of their own language, the most important thing in any culture. We wasted their time on ancient languages which, in the main, had no use educationally and culturally. If I had drawn up a scheme, it would have given more time to spoken and written English; modern history combined with social studies; geography, including the study of their own district; biology and zoology with reference to their own growth; mathematics with some effort to show its cultural significance; science in a broader course than I—totally ignorant of it—can devise; modern languages for those with a linguistic bias; appreciation of music and art, and training in one or both for those with special talents. And an attempt in everything to instil the awareness of their own community.
CHAPTER SIX

My country service (supposedly five years) was evidently considered complete after Broken Hill and Goulburn and at the beginning of 1932 I found myself at Parramatta High, then the only co-educational school within the metropolitan area. The typical brick building faced, by some happy miracle, north and south (the lie of the road, rather than any architectural commonsense, decided that) and I looked over a declining sweep of parkland to the railway a quarter of a mile away.

Here the Depression was in full swing and the school showed its mournful effect in the size and age of the senior pupils. They were recruited from a region that was partially agricultural—citrus and other orchards and flower farms—and partially industrial from Lidcombe and other factory towns in their radius. But the factory wheels were still and the fruit rotted unpicked on the trees. The children told me that it didn’t pay their parents to send them to market. Sometimes they got a bill for cartage when they were sold; while in the poorer parts of the city children never saw an orange. I was learning my politics practically in these towns where I taught and saw poverty and starvation while sheep and crops could not be sold. ‘A mad world, my masters’, as Shakespeare said. I was to watch it grow madder.

As to what was taught in the school, the fact that it was situated in one of the most historically interesting regions in the state was entirely ignored. Who cared that this was the second settlement in New South Wales, made only nine months after Sydney Cove was established? What did it matter that it was the centre of the district from which it was thought the colony could be made self-sufficient in food? That we could have walked where the first land grant had been made to an ex-convict, James Ruse, who was so successful that it was extended by another grant and became Experiment Farm?1 That the governor’s

1 James Ruse (1760–1837) was granted land in 1789. After one year his farming methods proved so successful that he was able to maintain his household self-sufficiently. Governor Phillip rewarded his efforts with a further grant of thirty acres.
house still stood on Rose Hill (now part of King’s School)? That many of the early notables lived there, especially John Macarthur, and during his ten years’ exile in England, his wife Elizabeth carried on the experiments which resulted in the development of the merino sheep industry in Australia? There we could have visited the oldest existing house in Australia built in 1793.\(^2\) I did, but in a purely private capacity. Daily, on our way from the station, we passed a walled cemetery, now closed, where lay some of the oldest and most interesting graves of our early settlers. We never visited it, but my stepdaughter\(^3\) has spent weeks browsing in these places today trying to find the graves of her ancestors. So many fascinating memorials to the earliest days of the country: the military barracks, the Female Factory built in Governor Macquarie’s days as a home for delinquent women. And still today in supposedly more enlightened days serving the same purpose for girls unfortunate enough to get into the grip of the law. There is the old bath-house. The Court-house. The twin towers of St John’s dating from 1820.

But so busy were we tracing the unedifying procession of English kings, the unending bloody wars of Europe, the expanding British Empire where trade followed the flag and native races were corrupted and exterminated before them both. But here in Parramatta there was nothing to remind us of the long-gone tribes except the name they had given it.

Since we had an excellent English master there was no need to entrust me with Leaving classes. He was the best English teacher I ever knew, a gentle, sympathetic man, always willing to help with assistance or advice. I found myself back in the role of youngest on the staff and got the tit-bits nobody wanted. One was first year Latin with a brilliant class. Another third year geography which terrified me as they had the Intermediate exam at the end of the year. A bright lot, who liked a subject that had practical application in their own lives (‘What’s the weather going to be like for the football (or cricket), Miss?’). I had no more success at forecasting than the TV meteorology which has far more resources at its command than I. I generally managed to keep a lesson ahead of them, and they were very helpful when we came up against something they had learned the year before but which I didn’t know. It was a good education for me.

Yet another was a fourth year that embodied all the conditions that made these years such a tragedy for them. Most of them should have left school at the Intermediate and gone into jobs. Others were much better suited for technical college and indeed I persuaded the head to have one particular boy transferred, to his infinite gratitude. A dropout in high school, he did brilliantly in the technical college. One girl I particularly remember; if she had been properly taught at her country intermediate high, she would have been in a higher class,

\(^2\) Elizabeth Farm, built in 1793, although greatly renovated and extended at later dates, still contains part of the original structure, hence qualifying as the oldest existing house in Australia.

\(^3\) Peggy McGrath, Norman Freehill’s daughter, who died shortly after Cusack in 1981.
destined for the Leaving Certificate. A lovely, intelligent girl, she has remained my friend till today, for a long time married to a professor; we have stayed with them in Melbourne, in London and in their flat in Paris. Such are the riches a teacher’s life brings.

It wasn’t an easy class to teach but we got along happily. As they had to follow no curriculum, I was able to introduce them to books they enjoyed and plays which had more meaning for them than Shakespeare, something you dared do only with non-exam classes and subject masters as enterprising as our ‘Scotty’. At the end of the year they showed their appreciation by presenting me with two green pottery vases that remained my treasures till they crumbled to pieces.

My first year Latin was a test for someone whose Latin honours was ten years old. It was particularly interesting for the presence of a blind boy, George Best, who sat in the front row with his silent typewriter in front of him, and who never missed a word. Then I learned that the lack of one sense is compensated for by the acuity of the others. George’s hearing was like that of a cat. He could even distinguish his teachers by their footsteps. ‘I know when you’re coming, Miss,’ he said, ‘you walk little and light.’

As I also had this class for English I could judge them in the round. George and his bosom friend Bill were both brilliant. It was a joy to teach them; to see their reaction to poetry and literature; their handling of English as a written language. In those early years of my teaching career I had carried on the scheme I devised the first year at Neutral Bay: the class magazine, which gave the literary-minded the chance to express themselves creatively and encouraged the others to make a similar effort. It is amazing to see what comes from quite young classes and how willing they are to pay a small sum to have their efforts typed, even at a time when money was at an all time low.

The experience I had with George taught me how, with intelligent parents, the blind child need miss little except his major deprivation of light and colour. His elder brother who was quite wrongly in my ‘no-hoper’ fourth year (the next year I fought for his admission to a higher fifth year) taught his blind junior to ride a bike, and they progressed with a bamboo cane from one handlebar to the other. He taught him to swim and dive. And lest he should be a victim of the brutality and violence of small boys, had him taught ju-jitsu so any aggressor tried it on only once. I taught him an appreciation of colours by the sounds on the piano. And when I played cards with the family at their holiday home at Katoomba, he could beat us all by the marks on the cards. George was an education for me. The day he and Bill (both then at Sydney Boys’ High School) visited me at the Girls’ High was a delight for us all.

Even with our excellent headmaster, who was known as ‘Tommy’ Atkins, Parramatta was a difficult school physically. Because of the time the mountain train arrived and left we had to cram in the day’s work with as few breaks as possible. The school had long since outgrown its original enrolment so ‘temporary’
classes were scattered round the hilly grounds (they are still there!). This meant that the whole day teachers travelled at the double with hardly time to swallow a cup of tea. For me it was agony. The pernicious anaemia which was Broken Hill's lifelong gift to me was well advanced. I was being treated by incompetent doctors, eating raw liver sandwiches (I could get them down by strength of will, but weakness of stomach threw them up again); I was swallowing obnoxious powdered liver and grated hog's stomach which stuck in my throat like sawdust.

I found the ordinary everyday work increasingly difficult particularly when it was aggravated by the incessant rushing to and fro. Still it was a moderately good staff with the usual number of men who considered that their genital equipment gave them the actual superiority their higher salaries implied. But good subject masters and a splendid head. Little Tommy Atkins was one of those people who are born without sex prejudice—something rare in our day—and had a genius for handling pupils as well as staff. He had unusually strong cultural tastes and spent much of the money left over in buying excellent prints of famous Australian paintings—something very rare in the early thirties. We were all sad, staff and pupils alike, when he retired at the end of my second year.

There was the inevitable man who couldn't keep discipline and who complained that women were a danger to the school. The only too-common mature woman who had lost her chance of marriage with the death of her fiancé in the war and who endeavoured to ingratiate herself with the men's staffroom by bringing them delicious home-made cakes. The rest of us were intolerant of her and the cakes. We had not yet learned what the fear of a lonely old age can do to people.

One woman I shall never forget. A brilliant, large, gypsy-like, great-hearted creature of Irish origin, a practising Catholic to the irritation of a pair of bigoted Protestants on the women's staff—the only occasion I had of bigotry in my teaching years. Political differences, yes, but not religious. To make it more difficult, Kath D had become engaged to a fascist officer on an Italian ship on which she travelled back from a European trip. Becoming engaged in your late thirties was offensive enough, but to have accepted holus-bolus his politics was more offensive to those of us who were becoming aware of the unfolding world situation, though our government accepted fascism and even Nazism when it came calmly enough.

When his ship was due in, Kath bought half-a-dozen ensembles, complete from dress and hat to shoes and handbag. She was usually extremely careless about her clothes so we were all astonished when she wore each elegant ensemble once and showed up our general dowdiness. But never again. After that one exhibition of fashion, she relapsed and came along with this and that all hastily thrown on. I remember meeting her in the train in a long floral organdi dress with the hat from a black suit and the bag from a brown one and the shoes from a green. That might have passed muster, but, she had omitted to put on any kind
of slip and here she was on a bright sunny day in a completely transparent dress (see-through was not then in fashion). I insisted that she go and buy herself a petticoat before she dared put foot in the school. She went and returned late with a bright blue slip to her knees, her legs twinkling through the long organdi skirt in flesh-coloured stockings! The boys loved it.

Her romance was shattered when I told her that fascism made no provision for a woman to control her own money. She had plenty of it for her mother, as eccentric as she, made a fortune out of trading in gold.

I met Kath twelve years later in Kings Cross and she dragged me into a cool drink shop to tell me at the top of her voice all her troubles. She was then at Hornsby Girls’ High where the professional charmer who had bewitched me in my practice-teacher days at Fort Street, was now headmistress.

With her typical disregard for public opinion, Kath had taken into her flat a brilliant classical scholar, now an alcoholic in his old age. Sheer kindness of heart. There was never any doubt of that in anything she did. But the headmistress summoned her and said sweetly, ‘Miss D, I am informed that you have a ... er ... er ... gentleman living in your flat.’

‘I have,’ riposted Kath. ‘What about it?’

‘Don’t think I mind, Miss D,’ the head had hastened to say, ‘but some of the other ladies on the staff find it, er ... er ... ’

‘I said, “Let them,”’ Kath commented at the top of her voice, ‘“and tell them to keep their filthy tongues out of my life. Personally I don’t care if they all have twins to a crocodile, but leave me alone.”’

The whole café sat listening open-mouthed. I blushed furiously but Kath was unworried. A brilliant woman, a loyal friend, a good history teacher: Vale Kath!

In general we had a good staff; some of the women became my friends. I once went riding through the Burragorang Valley with the teacher of botany and stayed with her in a holiday cottage at Jervis Bay. We went on the first cruise to Noumea together, which strengthened my ingrained hatred of colonialism. I learned much from her botanically. To add to my pleasure, she had a sweet, pure voice and sang delightful songs. It is amazing how much kindness and decency survived in days when frustration, professionally and sexually, was the lot of women teachers.

I saw a lot of my country in those days. Before her marriage, my sister and I spent a riding holiday at Robertson. In a rickety weatherboard, we stayed with a family famous for their horses. Indeed, the stables were the only luxurious part of the establishment. There my sister went forth with the grace and skill of a show rider; I bumbled along behind her on the quietest cob they could produce. As the local policeman was also a boarder, he offered to take us riding on Sunday to see a famous, or infamous, illicit still which had made the district notorious a year or so before.
After a trek through thick bush we came to a steep cliff overlooking Kangaroo Valley 2,000 feet below. The policeman unwound a length of rope from his saddle-bow and only then did it dawn on us that, to see the still, we had to be lowered over that cliff. Our adventurous reputation had done us in! Being the smallest, I was chosen to make the first descent. I can still feel myself dangling like a spider, slowly circling while the bed of the river below held my terror-stricken eyes. Then my feet struck a ledge not visible from the top. ‘Undo the rope,’ the policeman shouted. I undid it with shaking fingers and with thudding heart crept into the deep cave which ran along the cliff face for fifty yards or so. Margie came dangling down, as relieved as I to have found a footing. Then the vast bulk of Constable C. He undid the rope and said, ‘Follow me and I’ll show you where the still was.’ Some thirty yards along was the old copper in which a brew had been concocted which, coloured with boot polish, was potent enough to turn a neighbouring dam-site into a riot of drunkenness. Two old brothers had run it for many years, camouflaging the smoke that rose from it by running a pipe up through the adjacent waterfall. But they were caught at last and their nonagenarian mother cried, ‘Ah, the shame of it! Their father did it for fifty years and they’ve done it for as long and now to be caught at last.’ Shame indeed!

The high school was the centre for examinations for the district which meant that we had pupils from the various private schools. One of these was the Great Public School whose presence sanctified Parramatta.\(^4\) Came the morning of the first exam. I had to hand out papers in one of the large rooms. All went well till I was coming down the last aisle between the desks. Unable to believe my eyes, I saw sprawled across the space where I must walk a pair of long, grey-clad legs. I looked at the youth who grinned up at me insolently. I said nothing. Usually such a look was enough. He spread his legs wider. I stood motionless. The precious minutes ticked by. One of our boys, as big or bigger, stood up and asked hoarsely, ‘Will I chuck him out Miss?’ At that moment Tommy Atkins came in and blew him out! As though that wasn’t enough, they had scarcely begun to write when another boy of the same ilk stood up, slowly took off his coat, and hung it over one of our best Gruner prints. I walked up the aisle and said icily, ‘If you don’t know the difference between a coathanger and a famous print, it’s time you learned.’ I threw the coat on the floor.

I listened with pleasure while Tommy rang their headmaster. I sat in on the conversation when he came up to talk to us. A fine man, a gentleman. As he told me of his difficulties I realised how lucky we were to teach in schools that were free of the awful domination of wealth and class. And I remembered my days teaching history at the girls’ college at Burwood.

I enjoyed teaching at Parramatta. I remained grateful for the rest of my teaching life for what I had learned from ‘Scotty’. It was a good school which

\(^4\) King’s School, which she mentions earlier.
the head ran with a minimum of obvious discipline. We respected him. The pupils respected him. And remember this was in Depression days when every possible pressure was upon him.

What I had learned about geography practically in my rambles and travels should have served to delight my class. But the curriculum was not interested in delighting classes. We were concerned with far more technical matters. During a lesson on the ocean currents (how 3C educated me!) the pungent smell of an orange drifted to me at the board. I turned and demanded, 'Who is eating an orange?' Up went a hand. I confiscated what was left with the remark, 'You can eat oranges in class only when you have one for everyone and two for me.' Next day I went in and saw to my horror every desk with a mandarin on it and mine with two.

Caught! There was nothing I could do but begin solemnly to peel mine after telling them to go ahead with theirs. I swallowed that mandarin without noticing its flavour, my ear stretched to listen for Tommy's footsteps. He would understand, I knew. But how was I to explain?

Tommy Atkins retired at the end of 1933, and to our sorrow, died six months later. He was succeeded by a man who was the complete opposite in character and habits. Within a term, the official discipline was much better and the behaviour worse. We speculated on what Prussian ancestors had handed down the genes which determined his dictatorial habits. He would summon the whole school into the playground and harangue them in the manner of the born bully. I remember one particularly hot day when we stood suffering in the intense heat, all standing stiffly at attention, and one after the other the row of senior boys fell into a dead faint. It should have taught him something. It didn't.

There was only one phone in the school—his—and if we were summoned to it he sat stiffly in place breathing cigar smoke down our necks. The phone reeked of stale smoke. Everything in his office stank of it. We were delighted when we were told he smoked so much at school because his wife would not allow him to smoke at home. It was some slight consolation for what we suffered.

Whether it was the added pressure of an unpleasant headmaster, the emotional strain of my unhappiest love affair, or merely the normal development of a disease, I can't say, but I was so ill that by the middle of the year a Macquarie Street doctor insisted that I should take six months off for treatment. I was particularly lucky that he was advanced enough to have imported ampoules of liver which he injected twice weekly, and also found particular iron tablets from Germany which I could assimilate. A kind man, a good doctor; I can never be grateful enough to him.

Towards the end of my sick leave, he suggested that I should take a sea trip. I had no money but a friend lent it to me, and off I went to Ceylon, which taught me more about the world and colonialism than I had ever learned. On the way back I got to know missionaries evacuated from Abyssinia in fear of the Italian
invasion, and one of the first refugees from Nazi Germany. I arrived back fully aware of the dangers of growing fascism in Italy and Germany, and horrified at our government’s covert acceptance of it. The conferences at the WEA\(^5\) I had begun three years before taught me the roots of the system.

An incident during my convalescence reminds me how one can be blackmailed by kindness. I went to visit Pip at her parents’ beautiful home on the edge of Manly Cove. Since Pip was still at the university, her overwhelmingly kindhearted mother said I must lie in the lounge on the balcony overlooking the harbour and have the special lunch she had cooked me, knowing it was a favourite of mine.

There, while I was reclining in state, she brought and placed on the table beside me a bubbling dish of cauliflower au gratin, just fresh from the stove. She turned to bring the accompanying dishes and as she did so, their retriever, intrigued by the delicious smell, sloshed his tongue across the dish! What could I do? I ate it, watched incredulously by the dog who sat with his tongue hanging out to cool it after his one rash lick.

My passion for drama led me to one of the most thrilling experiences of my life. I was allowed to take the Leaving Certificate classes (or those who could afford it) to see a matinee with Sybil Thorndike and Lewis Casson in *Macbeth*. I wrote to her beforehand and asked if I could come to see her after the play. I went to her dressing-room trembling with delight and awe. She greeted me like an old friend. How did I like the play? ‘Indescribable.’ What did I think of the sleep-walking scene? ‘Beyond words.’

‘I’m glad,’ she said, ‘I worked a long time to get the voice right and it wasn’t till I rehearsed it with my teeth out that it came right.’

I spent the time between the matinee and the evening performance in that dressing-room sitting (in great discomfort) on the top of a huge basket for costumes. The warmth, the vitality, the humanity of that astonishing woman remain with me yet. We talked about her role in Ibsen’s *Ghosts*, in *Captain Brassbound’s Conversion*.\(^6\) I hadn’t the courage to tell her I didn’t like her Saint Joan. She was probably big enough to take it, since she had Shaw and greater critics on her side.

As was inevitable (since by now I had plays on the air and reviewed in the press) I was given the job of producing the school play. Good old *Quality Street* came forth again. A delightful play; a specially good play for a high school. The cast was enthusiastic and I was given time for rehearsals over several months. All went well till a week before the school function my Phoebe developed scarlet fever. The hall was booked, the tickets printed, and no leading lady! We had no understudy. I called for volunteers. No-one could do it—we were short on dramatic talent. Even those who might have tried said they could not learn the

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5. Workers’ Educational Association, established in Australia in 1914.

6. Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906). *Ghosts* was first published in English in 1890; George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950), *Captain Brassbound’s Conversion* was written in 1899 and first published in *Three Plays for Puritans* (1901).
part in a week. Nothing to do but to play the role myself! I knew the whole play by heart. All were sworn to secrecy.

A rush to buy curls to supplement my own plaits. A rush to the 'Buttonhole'\(^7\) which supplied all our costumes. Rehearsal after rehearsal. An embarrassed hero who embarrassed me by saying he couldn't kiss me. The boys would never let him live it down. We devised an unsatisfactory bunt.

The day came. Only the women helping me with the make-up and dressing knew what was happening. And when I ran on in the first scene, no-one recognised me. It wasn't till nearly the end of the scene that there was a great gasp and voices cried, 'It's Miss Cusack,' and a storm of clapping greeted my not very good acting. At the end my hero, carried away, kissed me properly to tremendous applause. The play was a success. The most artistic—and the most unpleasant—man on the staff wrote me a letter to tell me so. The head was ecstatic. The production was not only praised by the press, but made money for more pictures.

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Though officially the three schools I had taught in were co-educational, actually girls, like women teachers, were second-class citizens. It was taken for granted that a boy lost face if he was seen talking to a girl (a girl lost her reputation!). The worst punishment in the classroom was to send an intransigent boy to sit near a girl. Forty years later I was horrified to learn from a friend that the same attitude held today in a primary school in a north-side suburb. When shall we ever learn? In high schools girls studied none of the subjects which would eventually qualify them for any of the higher professions at the university. They were not really considered eligible for them.

It was not strange that in my convent boarding-school girls were considered to have only the careers of mothers or saints (aspirant) open to them. But this was in 1934. Marie Curie had won the Nobel Prize; Amy Johnson had flown from England to Australia; women solicitors like Marie Byles and barristers like Christian Jollie-Smith\(^8\) and many doctors were no longer uncommon (even if paid less than the men in the public service). If one child in the family had to be sacrificed it was always the girl. And in Depression days, she was often sacrificed.

Sex raised its head in a way I was to have elucidated for me only many years later by a girl from 4B who became my friend. In my fourth year I taught (or endeavoured to teach) a large sullen girl of migrant parents. In spite of my efforts

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\(^7\) The Buttonhole Fancy Costume Co., located at 199 Liverpool Street, Sydney.

\(^8\) Marie Beuzeville Byles (1900–79), also a travel writer, and a friend of Cusack's from university days, was the first woman to practise law in New South Wales, in 1924. Christian Jollie-Smith (1885–1963) came from Melbourne to set up a legal practice in Sydney in the 1920s, concentrating upon trade union and industrial disputes. A foundation member of the Communist Party of Australia, she was in fact a solicitor, not a barrister, and appeared in many famous or controversial cases.
to make her feel at home, she would do nothing but sit glaring at me during the whole lesson which followed a history lesson given by a man who had much the same political views as I had. We would stop at the door in passing and exchange the latest news on rising Nazism. Then I went on to the fruitless attempt to woo the sulky brunette.

Not till I had left Parramatta did my friend tell me that she frequently announced that she hated me and would willingly drive a knife into me. She was madly in love with the history teacher (fifty, if a day, and widowed) and spent the weekends with him in his small isolated cottage where—he announced—he was writing a real history of Parramatta. It would have been sensational if ever finished but apparently his leisure time was too busily occupied in other than historical research for that to happen.

Rarely did a woman teacher get involved in such a way, though I did know of one such incident regarding which, however, I shall be silent. The nearest I came to it was when I said despairingly to a lad who was a man in size, 'Really, G, I don't think I could teach you anything.' He looked at me appraisingly with his large grown eyes and said with a smile, 'I'm not too sure, Miss. Would you like to try?'

After that I gave up trying to teach him anything. When I met him much later he made an impressive policeman.

Kay and Pip and I went one Saturday to see the background from which so many of my pupils came. It was to be a picnic at Richmond and we drove through the orchards and farmlands shocked at the low prices on the gates for the fruit that could be bought. After exploring the fascinating district we stopped at an isolated cottage surrounded by trees, and being the prettiest, Kay got out with the billy to ask for water. Within minutes she came tearing back with half-a-dozen enormous dogs at her heels, and fell into the car where we sat frozen, expecting them to smash through the windows. At last a grey-haired man came out, called them off and called menacingly, 'I'm going to report ye for disturbing my dogs.' We drove off in hysteric.

Not daring to repeat such an incident I offered to crawl down the high steep river-bank and get water from the river. It was a hair-raising experience, so slippery that I could have shot into the muddy water at any minute. Panting and exhausted I crawled back, the billy was put on the blazing fire, cups set out and we watched it come to the boil. Only then was it discovered that the tea had been forgotten!

* * * *

All the defects of the educational system were prominent at Parramatta, because our pupils were recruited without regard for anything but the fact they had passed what was still called the Qualifying Certificate. It was not clear what it qualified.
them for, certainly not preparation for an academic-type education. And not for life. Years later a specialist in education said we were the most over-examined schools in the world. Tests, tests, tests. Weekly, monthly, quarterly, yearly! Parents wrote us letters begging us to relieve Mary or Johnny from the necessity of undergoing them. 'They work hard and know their work but they are so nervous when the examination comes ...' But Johnny or Mary did the tests and what good it did them or us was never clear to me. We were constantly overworked; they were overtested.

In these fortunate days of ancillary officials, young teachers will find it hard to believe the variety of duties it was taken for granted we should perform. Not only did we teach over-large classes. It was not unusual to have forty to forty-five in first year and thirty in third. As the process of time removed those who had wasted these years in unsuitable learning, we were left with twenty or so in fourth year, and large, unmanageably large, fifth years. I remember a teacher in Moscow complaining that her senior class was very large. 'How many?' I asked, always sympathetic with the overworked in the pedagogical game. 'Fifteen,' she replied, and wondered why I burst out laughing.

On top of this there were the corrections and large sheets of comparative examinations at the end of the year. In addition to homework and many tests, we had to keep the roll, working out such unnecessary details as average ages, etc. To that was added playground duty, sports duty, scripture supervision, when the unhappy minister failed to arrive, or non-scripture supervision when the atheists were gathered together. I remember the indignation of a boy one day when he was caught scaling scripture. Someone looked up his roll and said, 'He's OD.' 'I'm nothing of the kind,' he retorted, not realising that everything other than Anglican, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian or Methodist, was lumped together in OD—Other Denominations.

On top of these came special duties: minding the library (if you were lucky enough to have one), looking after the distribution of textbooks, etc., etc.

In co-educational or boys' schools, caning was taken as a matter of course. A hideous habit; a barbarous habit. But even if you disapproved of it you had to conform or the boys thought you were weak. It shocks me that still, today, Australian schools take caning for granted. In 1974 a survey conducted by the New South Wales Teachers' Federation was overwhelmingly in favour of it, only a few schools voting for a ban on corporal punishment. Certainly pedagogical history, in the past, considered inflicting pain an essential way to encourage learning, as well as to punish military trainees and prisoners. But it's gone out in those circles and wife beating is no longer a respected marital habit. Why then should it survive, particularly in countries with an Anglo-Saxon flavour?

The history of its banning is significant. The Poles forbade it in 1783. The Dutch did the same in the 1850s, the French in the 1880s, the Finns in the 1890s, Norway in 1935, Sweden in 1958 and Denmark in 1968, while Japan
and Israel brought themselves into line after World War II. It has been banned in Russia, China and the other socialist countries since their inception.

I'm not sure whether it is not a hangover from the Prussian ideas of discipline, but certainly today only small parts of West Germany and Switzerland still have it. I'm afraid we must take it for granted that its survival today is an unhappy hangover from the days of the British Raj. Whether its use in mediaeval times sanctioned its use in England's Great Public Schools as the literature on them would have you believe, or it is a natural descendant of colonialism and the class system, or whether the British have a streak of sadism which the civilising effects of modern democracy have not eradicated, the fact remains that caning today survives only in the United Kingdom, Eire, Canada, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia and the United States—all former members of the British Empire.

I find it horrifying that a large number of Australian teachers and parents think there is something valuable in caning children. Psychologists I have spoken to think that caning can have an adverse effect on children: I have never seen it have a positive one. You will hear it advocated as a 'last resort' by those who favour the 'old order' everywhere. 'Spare the rod and spoil the child' is also quoted though the gentler message of the New Testament has long ago taken the place of the tough Jehovah of the Old.

From the early thirties, research on the learning process concurs that punishment has no good effects. Quite the contrary. Antagonism and counter-aggression are created in the punished; fear and withdrawal from his neighbours. Today most educational theorists see no value in caning, insisting that its very existence in schools impresses children with the idea that violence works and is a legitimate way of controlling the individual or the community.

From my experience, the more frequently a law-breaker in the school is caned, the more arrogant and swaggering he becomes. It is his proud boast that no teacher can make him cry. I hate to mention the effect on the teacher as he stands with cane high, lips set, eyes glistening, and brings the cane down with a fearful swish onto the fingertips. What deeply hidden sadism is satisfied? The old saying, 'This does me more good than you' was—is—never so justified. Beating children is completely out of date, and how are children to learn self-discipline if the only force they see for enforcing it is the brutal, outmoded one of corporal punishment? This was recognised in South Australia in 1971, but in 1975, alas, it was brought back 'in special circumstances'. Surely if seven European countries, and another two, middle Asian and Asian, as well as Russia, China and the other twelve socialist countries can dispense with it, we should think of revising our ways.

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My years at Parramatta convinced me of the stupidity of our educational system, as my years at Broken Hill convinced me of the wickedness of our economic system. I saw the children I taught as its victims, caught up in an educational round that in no way prepared them for the world they were living in. I wrote some articles for the Teachers' Federation magazine, *Education*, which made me very unpopular with the department, and endeared me to teachers who shared my point of view. My experience there impressed me, if I needed impressing, with the utter unsuitability of cramming boys and girls into an educational system designed for those who wanted and had the particular talents for a university career. Here it was, geared from beginning to end towards the matriculation exam, when an infinitely small percentage went on to the university. The aims of the system were wrong, the methods were wrong, the whole muddled administration was wrong.

When I hear complaints about brainwashing in various countries, I demand to know what our education system did but brainwash the children in its hands? They were conditioned to accept without question our colonial position in an imperial world that was already dying. They were fashioned to fit into a social and economic system that had already failed, as the Depression and the methods of fascism and Nazism in coping with it, showed. Neither their minds, their souls, nor their bodies were developed to make the Whole Man or the Whole Woman—especially the latter. For girls were encouraged to regard their place as German girls once did: Kinder, Küche, Kirche—Children, Kitchen and Church. If Hitler added to it ‘the recreation of the tired warrior’, it only foreshadowed what was to be the role of our women in a war some of us were beginning to see as inevitable, considering the head-in-the-sand policy we were following not only in Australia, but in England and all Western Europe.
On my return from sick leave in 1935, I found myself elevated to Sydney Girls' High School, regarded as one of the best girls' schools in the state, the other being Fort Street Girls'. I gave up flatting to live with my mother at Bondi and came in with some trepidation the first day. Once again I was the youngest and therefore the most despised on the staff which consisted of the elite of the teaching profession, topped by Honey-Pot, of my practice teaching days, as deputy head.

After my experience of co-educational schools I found it conventual and narrow. Perhaps it was just that my experience in the country and outer city, living in areas where the Depression had struck hard, made me uncomfortable in a school whose pupils were drawn from the middle-class eastern suburbs, still (with some few exceptions) relatively well-off in an economically stricken world. Few of the staff had experience of that world. Once you were promoted to SGHS, on the whole you stayed for life. Indeed it was very much the Mecca of ex-pupils, so we had teachers who had been there as girls and achieved their life's ambition when they came there as staff.

The school had been built in what had been the grounds of the old zoo, so it stood in delightful park-like grounds with magnificent trees and shrubs. There was even the old bear-pit, symbol of another type of zoological garden before zoo keepers became civilised. A wonderful situation opposite the showground with a Golf Club and other playing fields on each side. But, it was at the end of a 'V' where the trams from the Quay and the Railway met, so if you were unfortunate enough to be in a classroom facing either of the lines, it was impossible to make yourself heard when they thundered by. Head-splitting, ear-racking for the whole day. As the building was a large 'U' it could have been possible to put the classrooms on the inside of the curve and the corridors on the outside. Such an error in architectural design was unbelievable. Unforgivable at a time when the errors of the older schools should have been obvious to everyone who had anything to do with educational buildings.
Here I was struck again by the incongruities I had come against in country schools. In principle, these were all specially chosen girls who were destined to go on to university. This was the theory. The fact was quite different. A depressingly small number of the pupils even went on to fourth year. And a still smaller number to any type of tertiary education. Yet, the course was entirely oriented towards the matriculation. Two ancient languages, with two teachers who must have made languages fascinating. One I remember had an exact model made of an ancient Greek house, so that the girls knew what she was talking about. Yet in spite of her excellence at her own subject she was later forced to take a poor English class and suffer under the deputy head who succeeded Honey-Pot.

The majority of the staff were highly trained, highly qualified, dedicated women who had no links with the world outside at all. It was part of the reason that I was very much on the outer. I had no contacts from school. I had no friends from university or training college. Besides, the fact that my name had appeared in the newspaper as an incipient writer made me suspect. As well, I had twice been out of the country, even if only to Noumea and Ceylon, but this added to my reputation for eccentricity. It was not yet the day of compulsive travel. To add to all these oddities I was obviously a keen Federation member, which was considered not quite nice. Nice teachers considered that fighting for your rights was definitely non-U.

I was given the lowest classes and, whether because of my dicky health or not, no exam classes. I didn’t mind. I was singularly unambitious in a professional sense. I had only one overwhelming ambition—to be a writer. If this parade of my deficiencies makes it seem that I was in any way discriminated against, it is an entirely erroneous impression. No-one on that staff would have been guilty of such unprofessional conduct. Indeed, when on the first Anzac Day I won a prize for a play based on the story the *Bulletin* published in 1930,1 the head developed a rather embarrassing passion for me (all quite respectable) while the deputy head, after seeing the play, told me in her honey-voice that I should be a poet—that was my talent. As I had suffered from her honey-tongue during my practice teaching at Fort Street, I knew it was not a compliment.

The school was authoritarian in every respect. It was taken for granted that teachers were autocrats; benevolent despot generally. There was no self-government though theoretically the head had dabbled with it some years before. A story told by one of the school’s most brilliant pupils, then a teacher of French, illustrates it. The head summoned the prefects to her office, told them she was going to introduce self-government in a particular method; she explained it to them then said, 'If any girl does not agree with my plan, will she please leave the room.'

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1 The story, 'The Gateway', appeared in the *Bulletin*, 23 April 1930, pp. 49-50; the play, 'Anniversary', won the Anzac Fellowship of Women Play Competition in 1935 and was first performed on Anzac Day in that year. It has never been published.
Our school had already reached the stage of being more like a giant machine churning out products who had little chance to exercise their real abilities, with the result that all but the brightest began to find it a bore. Rules were rigid: school uniforms, panama hats, gloves and lisle stockings in the hottest weather. Anyone who questioned anything was labelled a ‘trouble-maker’, whether pupil or teacher. I was obviously marked very early on. Only the best teachers ever got to Sydney Girls’ High. I always felt my appointment was an accident. So did most of the staff!

As usual I was successful with the classes I had; no great effort as they were all more than usually bright even in the lower scale. We were an elite school; only a few admitted on residential qualifications rather than achievement kept one from being convinced that the human race had suddenly become highly intelligent. I particularly remember some of these. Merlene, for instance, who was the devil incarnate in class. One day when I asked her despairingly why she behaved like that for me and not for other teachers, she retorted, ‘Because I don’t like you.’ I clung to that flying temper and asked in what I hoped was a reasonable voice, ‘Do I treat you worse than anyone else?’ No. ‘Then do you think that’s because I like you?’ ‘No-o-o.’ A reasonable discussion on how you behaved to people irrespective of liking them began a new era. Henceforth Merlene and I treated each other with exaggerated courtesy. We all appreciated it. She even gave me a present at the end of the year.

Then there was Josie, an unhappy product of a broken home. She gave us all hell. Then I discovered her Achille’s heel—she bit her nails down to the quick. Picking up her hand one day I said, ‘What a pity. You have a pretty hand otherwise.’ She snatched her hand away. I thought she was going to hit me. ‘Look,’ I said with maddening reasonableness, ‘if you can stop biting your nails by the end of this term I’ll take you to the pictures in the holidays.’ What a struggle that was! Josie was so busy controlling the urge to bite her nails that she had no time to think up devilry. It was a major conquest. By the holidays she had stopped biting her nails and we went to the pictures together! She was a changed girl.

Inevitably I inherited the school drama, a pleasurable activity as usual. Only recently, forty years later, a woman (Iris) came up to me at a luncheon and said how much she had learned from those rather haphazard classes. More and more I’m convinced of the role that drama has to play in education, though we touched only the fringe of what it is possible to do. Somewhere about that time the remarkable headmistress of Frensham, the equally remarkable school at Mittagong, asked me to come there and take over drama only. A temptation, but I did not yield to it. I knew too well my utter unsuitability for teaching in schools for the privileged only.

1  Winifred West (1881–1971) who founded Frensham School for Girls in 1913; see the biography Portrait of Winifred West by Priscilla Kennedy (1976).
I arrived in Canberra at the beginning of spring, surely its loveliest season. It is the only city in Australia where you enjoy what is taken for granted in the northern hemisphere. Oh, the incredibly lovely deciduous trees in their fine veil of green. The flowering cherries in their clouds of white and pink. The tulips! All in that magnificent rim of indigo hills, olive green under a variety of eucalypts and wattles. The city that Burley Griffin had designed then carried out much on the lines of his original plans, however much they were altered later, was beautiful.

I had the room of my predecessor at Brassey House, where the department paid half of the board which was otherwise too high for one of my station. My enchantment with Canberra disappeared when I went to the Manuka High School, then the high school. The head, a considerate man, was in a state bordering on frenzy which he communicated to me. Here he was with an English honours class with the six children of top public servants (who could ruin the school's reputation) in it, and he had just discovered that they did not even know their fourth year work! Their teacher (so I heard from other sources) had been having a torrid, unhappy love affair, and when the Leaving Certificate exam approached had decided to have a nervous breakdown. When I found what the situation was, I could have had one myself.

'It's an impossible task,' the head cried, 'but you can have the class whenever you want it. They can cut the classes in which their teachers say they are already at a high standard. I don't know how you're going to do it, I only beg you, do it.'

I chose to take my six problem students in the library. I examined them carefully on what they knew of the material set for fourth and fifth year. Nothing!
If they had not been highly intelligent with a love of literature and a flair for writing it would have been impossible. I explained to them that it was impossible to do a two years’ Leaving honours course in six weeks. We’d just have to pick our subjects and hope. They agreed with me so I set my great-great-grandmother, who was a witch, to work. She can never get her spells right for her relations but this was different. I borrowed all the previous English honours papers from the head and started on my predictions much as my mother studied horse racing, only she used a pin.

At the end of two days, after intensive poring over the questions set during the past ten years, I selected six questions, the number required for the exam. When I met my class that afternoon I let each one pick the theme she/he liked best. They were to research it and write an essay on it. These would in turn be read to the group and then circulated so that at the end of six weeks they would each have covered the equivalent of two years’ work. Cramming in its most objectional form. Not teaching. Not even tutoring. Plain, vulgar cramming. I was ashamed of myself, but what else could I do? They plunged into the work enthusiastically. What a class to have for a genuine English honours class! Their teacher must have been bogged down in the morass of unsatisfactory love. I’d missed my own first class philosophy honours because of my dog’s death. But I would never have let the most disruptive love affair (which I suffered) affect the children I taught.

It wasn’t all drudgery. We had fascinating discussions when they came to talk over their essay themes with me. When in turn these were read to the group they led to further stimulating debates. Besides which, to keep them from going stale, I read them my favourite poems, ancient and modern, and that was a joy. Indeed there is no greater joy for a teacher than to share her own literary favourites with a good class, and this was good. I never had better. It was a disgrace that they had been sacrificed to some silly woman’s glands. A doctor has the Hippocratic Oath. Teachers should have a Socratean one.

My time in Canberra wasn’t all cramming. I had just received newspaper publicity about my first novel, *Jungfrau*, which was runner-up to Kylie Tennant’s *Tiburon* in the first Prior Prize competition established by the *Bulletin*, the literary mentor of those days. As a result I had far more invitations than the majority of teachers who had been in the city much longer. Indeed, I found Canberra a snob-ridden place, something friends living there assure me it no longer is. But they are in the upper crust, so perhaps they don’t experience it.

It was illuminating to me to find people at my guest-house (mine by the grace of a departmental subsidy) who would ask me at the weekend, ‘And where are you going today?’ When I said, ‘To Red Hill,’ they practically genuflected. The people I visited there were charming, unaffected people who would have

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3 *Jungfrau* was runner-up to the prize in September 1935 and was published by the *Bulletin* in the following year.
been astonished to find the reactions they caused. If I replied, 'To the hostel at Reid,' my stocks dropped a few points. A foolish kind of snobbery (is snobbery ever anything else?), based largely on income since everyone knew from the public service book on the hierarchy what everyone else earned, and they were graded accordingly.

Canberra was one of the loveliest places I have lived in and still is, its beauty enhanced by a picturesque lake. Today spreading suburbs have taken the place of the green undulating hills over which we wandered. One of my treasured memories is of sitting on the grass on a hillside looking right across the city to the smoky blue hills surrounding it. Suddenly I became aware that crouching in the grass beside me was a baby hare. I put my hand gently on its palpitating side and felt its heart racing with fear. I took it away. We sat there side by side for several minutes then, encouraged by my stillness, it loped away, no doubt to tell its mother some hair-raising tale of an encounter with a giant.

When the day of the honours English exam came, my six pupils raised their eyes from their paper and gave me a conspiratorial smile. Five of the questions set had been set for their special essays! We had read the poem! The one question we had not done was of such a general type that anyone with literary taste could have done it. When eventually the exam results came out, we produced two first class honours and four second class. They sent me a telegram: 'Our thanks for your inspired guessing.'

As for me, any belief I might have retained about the value of examinations was gone forever. They have little to do for the careers for which they are required as entry. They don't indicate whether pupils will do well in the studies for which they supposedly prepare them. They disrupt the lives, physically and mentally, of the children who must undergo them, even sometimes to the extremity of suicide (and today, drugs).

So far as I can judge, if by the time the students sit for the examination that will give them access to tertiary education, if they can read, write and comprehend their own language properly, they have a beginning that will enable them to take on whatever academic disciplines they prefer.

My astonishing results as a 'crammer' caused me to be summoned to the department, partly to be congratulated on the exam success and partly to be looked over for the position of a lecturer in English at the Teachers' Training College, for which I was well suited. My deplorable honesty when Part I was under discussion and my assertion that it only convinced me that the whole examination system was wrong, was so shocking to the group of inspectors looking me over that it destroyed any hope of my being seriously considered for Part II.

They were obviously impressed that I had been runner-up in a national novel competition. They were less impressed when Jungfrau was published the
CHAPTER SEVEN

next year. But, on the whole, my growing literary reputation did me more good than harm.

Months later I learned that they never believed that I really guessed when one of my ex-pupils from that class took me to dinner in Sydney to ask my opinion on whether it was fair for him to become the lover of a girl he didn’t intend to marry. I could only remind him—as Bernard Shaw told a man who asked him the same question—to remember that if anything ‘goes wrong’ (our euphemism for pregnancy), the woman always pays. In a permissive age today I would say the same. You don’t see TV shows of boys in homes waiting for their illegitimate babies to be born. As Norman said forty years later in London when we looked at the poster of a pretty girl with a rose in her hand (it wasn’t clear why) and the caption beneath, ‘Have you had your pregnancy test?’, there should be an accompanying poster of a handsome male with the caption, ‘Have you had your sterility test?’

Possibly because the principal character is a discontented schoolteacher, but the book also confronts the then taboo subjects of illegitimate pregnancy, abortion and suicide.
I went back to Sydney when there was nothing more for me to do at Canberra, and produced the school play: *Quality Street* again, since I had no time to find something else. It was a success. Indeed the drama group I had there was excellent. I have frequently run against mature women with grown-up families who tell me of the pleasure they had in such-or-such play. I consider dramatic art the best method of giving adolescents an entry into the world of the imagination and a foretaste of the joy it will give them throughout their lives. Thirty years later a woman who was then a happily married headmistress told me how valuable her experiences in the school plays had been to her. And one of my best actresses has become one of the best-known women in the world as president of the Women's International Democratic Federation.

The next year, 1936, brought a cataclysmic change in my life. I was asked (solely because I had studied psychology at the university) if I would like to take on a new job that had been created: Counsellor or Vocational Guidance expert. There were no rules how it should be run. I would have to work it out for myself. I decided to try it. I don't think I did it well but I did it passionately. Here was the chance to investigate the why and the wherefore of the defects in our system of which I was critical yet lacked adequate material.

The amount of teaching I did was reduced to a minimum and I chose to take the two classes in the school where the unsuitability of our methods of selection and of the courses given them showed most blatantly. These were the lowest first year and the lowest fourth year.

Very nice girls. I grew to love them and appreciated the opportunity of trying methods with them that would have been frowned upon with any groups with higher IQs who were on the examination treadmill.

This was the time when the IQ dominated all. For those who may fortunately have escaped the backwash of this pseudo-scientific scheme, it must be explained that this Intelligence Quotient was assessed by a series of tests which,
as all such tests, played into the hands of the children with good backgrounds and home-educational facilities. I'd always been suspicious of them since, in my third year Arts, through my performance in an old test, I failed to get into the American Army except as a dishwasher. Now here were these children at the age of ten or thereabouts, tested, analysed, and pigeon-holed by a series of tests that arranged them irrevocably under labels from which they could never escape. At least not in their school lives. In the primary schools they were put into so-called Opportunity Classes for their final year if they showed IQs ranging them in the upper intelligence or near-genius brackets. As a result they came on to the high school insufferably blown-up with conceit while those in the lower grades were marked forever with the stigma of a low IQ and treated as such.

Now in my new job I had to estimate the correctness of the original test figures by assessing them in relation to their results in high school. I had to discover their domestic backgrounds and try to discover if they had good or bad effects on their school performance. It required no training and percipience to know this but it had to be investigated down to the last cubic foot in the house the family occupied. The one thing it impressed on me was the sensitiveness of human beings to any apparent delving into their lives, even for the best of reasons. I developed antennae more sensitive than those of a moth. My own experience as a poverty-stricken student gave me the basis for it and my own temperament prepared me to be responsive to the problems of the children I dealt with.

In my work I became aware of the irresistible tendency of the system to make the child conform. This had never been so obvious as at Sydney Girls' High School, probably because in all the other schools I was in there was a greater variety of human types from a greater variety of backgrounds. It made me realise the truth of that Victorian educationalist whose watchword was 'Cherish your exceptions'. To my mind—and not mine alone—these large 'elite' schools with children carefully selected for their intelligence and their scholastic achievements alone, taught by teachers of the highest qualifications and excessive virtue, constantly directed to exams of a limited kind that will give them qualifications for an academic career to which they rarely proceed, are utterly out of date in a modern world.

I'm not sure that they were ever in keeping with their time; not for the last century when education came to be extended to the lower classes as a result of the French Revolution, a process as slow and as painful as the extension of the franchise. In the main during those years, teachers were trained in the dominant social prejudices embodied in the rhyme, 'God bless the Squire and his relations, and keep us in our proper stations'. Only a few progressives in my day dared to advocate a different approach to learning and its extension to the lower strata of society and the less favoured sex, women. It is worth recording their names for the struggle they began is still going on. It is easier to develop nuclear power than brain power in its real humanitarian sense. Less difficult to evolve the machines
that take men to the moon than to break down the mental, social and political
superstitions which keep us mentally and materially in the Middle Ages.

Imagine the reactions of those great thinkers if they returned to visit us. As
far back as 1792 Thomas Paine’s *The Rights of Man* directly challenged the
assumptions on which the social order was based: monarchy, aristocracy, hierarchy,
private property, the inferiority of women. William Godwin in 1793 reflected an
extremely radical standpoint. His wife, Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the
Rights of Woman* pioneered the emancipation of women in her life as well as her
work. Thirty years later Richard Carlile’s views paralleled the first two, while in 1814
Robert Owen began his life’s work in promoting cooperation (or socialism) as the
alternative to capitalism. William Thompson, an Irish landowner, and the Chartist
leader William Lovett saw education as central to social change. In the 1880s
William Morris stands out among the democrats, rationalists, cooperators,
Chartists, Socialists, or, as Morris preferred to call himself, communists. ¹ All held a
basically similar outlook as to the role and importance of education. But it is not
enough to change education. To produce the free, rational man and open the way
to human betterment, society itself must be changed. During the whole of the
century many others—women as well as men—followed the radical tradition and
the implementation of their principles found its place in part at least in the
establishment of the system of state education.

Yet the concept of education for an elite dominated the whole system. Even
in a country like ours where more of the radical principles of Chartists and
Socialists and various other progressives of the time were realised in legislation—
universal franchise, votes for women, a basic wage, etc.—long before any other
country, the elite concept in education remained unchanged. In primary schools
the three Rs were taught because it was becoming necessary for the working man
to know them to carry out his work in industry and even in agriculture. The idea
that secondary education should cater to those who wanted and would inevitably
go to something other than a university education whether they wanted it or
not, was anathema to those who had themselves been trained in the academic
mould. They believed with a depressing uniformity that adolescents should be
moulded with equal uniformity into a similar shape. There was no room for
those varieties that make humanity so fascinatingly unlike. But our system
demands uniformity. It needs it, to fit the individual into the pattern that is

¹ Thomas Paine (1737–1809), anti-slavery campaigner, supporter of the French Revolution and female
emancipation, was a great influence on the Radicals. William Godwin (1756–1836), novelist, economist,
philosopher, husband of Mary Wollstonecraft, published *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, and Its Influence
on General Virtue and Happiness* (1793). Richard Carlile (1790–1843), journalist and publisher of the
Republican newspaper, was imprisoned in 1819 for publishing the works of Thomas Paine and Elihu Palmer. Robert Owen
(1771–1858), socialist and philanthropist, established a model community at the New Lanark mills, Scotland; his
most important book was *A New View of Society* (1813). William Lovett (1800–77), Chartist leader, wrote
*Chartism: A New Organisation of the People* (1840) while in jail. William Morris (1834–96), artist, poet and
craftsman, turned to Socialism in the 1880s; see E.P. Thompson, *William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary*
(1955).
necessary for the continuance of our principles of profit and loss. That is the
world for which we train children.

I became increasingly aware of it as I muddled through work as a counsellor,
with occasional pragmatic discussions with my colleague at the boys’ high who
was much better than I at devising what the head of the psychology section at
the Department of Education wanted. They generally found what they were
looking for. I was not even sure of what I was looking for at all. The one thing
of which I was certain was that the IQ was an unsatisfactory measure for
intellectual achievement. All kinds of other things came in to modify or negate
it. A child might have a near-genius IQ but unless she has qualities of character
such as application and tenacity her genius will fizzle out like a sputtering candle.
If it had real originality, it was doomed to extinction under our system.
Originality wanted something other than what we provided.

The more deeply I studied cause and effect, the more I became aware that
the qualities demanded by our educational system had no place among them for
originality. To do well in exams you required a good memory above all.
Remember here I am speaking only of the humanities. What was required in
science and mathematics I don’t know, being abysmally ignorant of them both.
I wish I knew why students in the seventies (and not only in Australia) are turning
away from these disciplines as failing to give what they want.

At the beginning of 1975 the Australian National Union of Students
blamed universities and other tertiary educational institutions for the ‘archaic’
examination system of final year secondary students. Their vice-president said:
‘Because of their inertia in the face of an obviously inefficient climax to secondary
schooling, irrelevant to the aspirations of most students, a totally irrational ritual
is being perpetrated ... Those who fail in the exams should realise that the fault
probably lay in the system, not in their abilities.’

Since the Victorian Government is setting up a committee which will
suggest alternatives to the Higher School Certificate, something may come of it
which will give parents and children some hope for the future. In New South
Wales, the Wyndham System under which pupils have suffered for most of the
years since I left the department, is being discarded, but whether its substitute is
better or worse, no-one yet knows.

What hopes and despairs have I seen in the half-century since I was first
flung into what should be the most satisfying and stimulating job in the world!

Moving from a co-educational to a girls’ school I became more and more
aware of the sexist nature of our education. Forty years later an Australian Schools
Commission study\(^2\) called for a national agency to monitor and co-ordinate sex
equality programs, legislation outlawing sex discrimination in education, and
development of schemes that offer extra opportunities to females. The report

\(^2\) She is almost certainly referring to *Girls, School and Society: Report by a Study Group [of the Committee on Social
Change and the Education of Women] to the Schools Commission (1975).*

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says that schools are still teaching traditional ideas about the sex and family; mother is the housewife, father the breadwinner, though today this has altered for a large number of families. Yet women continue to be kept in the lower-paid jobs which in themselves are less interesting. It is more difficult for women to be trained for and progress to administrative jobs.

In spite of this I became increasingly aware that there were few differences in the capacity of boys and girls. What there was was largely learned by the emphasis on limitations of activities for even clever girls.

In International Women's Year, 1975, women's organisations are still making the same complaint: lack of awareness in girls' schools that today the horizon has widened for women in work, in sport and in the social sphere. A large proportion of women work in the kinds of jobs to which they would not have been admitted in my day. Trade unions admit them to what have been traditionally considered men's jobs. Professions admit them more readily. Though they rarely reach the administrative top in medicine, several women have been appointed, under the Labor Government, to judgeships. The Civil Code has widened their family responsibilities. Equal wage has been accepted in a number of fields. Women's liberation and the Women's Electoral Lobby have broken down a lot of prejudices (and caused a few others) which is reflected in law relating to women in the criminal and the civil aspect. Even if in the main International Women's Year proved in many ways to be what my mother complained of Mothers' Day—a day on which you don't kick the dog—above all it has wakened the consciousness of women, and in many cases the conscience of men, to the manifold injustices of our sexist society.

The more I investigated the situation in high schools, and the more I studied the whole educational system, the more I came to agree with the strong plea made by Dr K.S. Cunningham in 1936 for the major needs of Australian education: 'More autonomy, greater flexibility, more exploration and experiment; the building up of a strong, well-informed public opinion on education; continuous study of the educational problems as a whole. Greater rapidity and thoroughness in putting new developments into operation; better material, conditions and aids; higher professional standards and better status for the teacher; less formalism in school work, and more attention to the task of cultivating intelligent citizenship.'

As the widespread attitudes in the community became more and more attracted to the worldwide disease of Nazism and fascism, encouraged by the attitudes of our politicians and churchpeople—particularly in the highest ranks of the Catholic Church—I grew more convinced of the need for individual action for the freedoms essential to a democracy. Later in the thirties I realised

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3 Dr Kenneth Stewart Cunningham, first Director (appointed 1955) of the Australian Council for Educational Research; he was also the author of several books on Australian education, and acted as UNESCO adviser to the Indonesian Minister of Education.
that people of different opinions, politically and religiously, could form a united front on our common humanity when my mother agreed with me on the inexcusable bombing of Guernica by the Germans during the Spanish Civil War.

I found little support on the staff of the Sydney Girls’ High School. Though there were women there whose progressiveness I knew, they were too careful of their professional status to come into the open.

The degree of innocence or ignorance common to many women of that time must astonish young people today. It astonished even us when one day at lunch someone was telling of her visit to the hospital to see a former teacher who had just had a baby. ‘Poor girl,’ she said, ‘the stitches she had to have are so painful she can barely sit up.’ A senior teacher beside us looked astonished and said, ‘But ... but ... Aren’t babies born through the navel?’

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I can’t complain about my treatment at Sydney Girls’ High, at least for the first five years. The head made a pet of me; she even obliged the staff to give me a not-altogether enthusiastic party when my first novel, Jungfrau, was published. I remember a very fine woman and teacher complaining that she was quite wrong when she said that I was the first member of the staff to have a book published. She had had a Latin textbook published! Without exception the rest of the staff were extremely kind to me, other than Honey-tongue. With her departure to promotion elsewhere, another deputy head and English mistress arrived, whom I nicknamed Odora, for obvious reasons. With the most intensive research I never found anyone who had a good word to say for her in all the years I suffered her. Her only virtue for me was that she provided a character for me in Morning Sacrifice.

My lowest first year and my fourth year provided me with valuable material on the fine qualities of girls who were unsuited for our type of curriculum. They were a joy to teach and I collected their results and carefully collated them against their IQs, their home conditions and their general positive qualities—something I was not asked to do. Since I was not obliged to take them through set texts I had the freedom to introduce them to books of a wider interest. The fourth years were even ready to buy paperbacks containing modern classics such as Shaw and Galsworthy, Wells and W.W. Jacobs (‘Don’t waste their time on anything Australian, Miss Cusack’). But I did read them Lawson’s short stories and Furphy’s ‘Death of Mary O’Halloran’ from Such is Life (which I had the privilege of reading in galley-proofs when Miles Franklin and Kate Baker were compiling a book about its writing). I collaborated with Miles Franklin in Pioneers on

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4 Joseph Furphy: The Legend of a Man and His Book (1944).
Parade. The department refused an offer Frank Davison and I made to edit a book of Australian short stories for high schools—without payment.5

The publication of Jungfrau elevated me to the category of being asked to reply to the toast of the University of Women Graduates’ Dinner. Coralie Rees,6 fresh from England and as pretty as a picture, proposed it with an elegant speech on her literary experiences abroad. Then little trouble-maker delivered an offensive one in which she said that there was no real Australian university to which we could drink a toast. Our alma mater was only an offshoot of colonialism, slavishly following ideas and methods that might be good in English institutions of higher learning, but had little relevance to us here. The reaction proved my mother’s insistence that truth is not enough. At the best it could only make you unpopular. It did. The titled lady, consort of an emeritus professor, cut me at the end of the evening. The widow of the philosophy professor—herself a distinguished graduate—trounced me for expressing ideas that had nothing to do with the real function of a university. But many lesser women asked me to give the talk elsewhere to their groups.

Another speech to the Fellowship of Australian Writers had more success. I was the only woman on the platform of Henry Lawson’s friends who were all giving their interesting reminiscences while I titled my speech, ‘I didn’t know Lawson’. Among the solemn black suits I looked cheerfully gay in a crimson velvet evening coat beneath which I could put many woollies. When it was all over a strong-faced, smartly-dressed, middle-aged woman came up to me and said, ‘I’m glad you’ve learned early to do what it took me years to learn—please the eye that must look at you as you speak.’ It was Muriel Heagney,7 a distinguished ILO person, famous for her relief work after the first war. She went on, ‘When I came back from Europe I went to address a Labor women’s group in Melbourne. I didn’t care about my clothes in those days and when I’d finished a woman came up to me and said, “Your speech was good but you ought to be ashamed to come to a Labor group looking like that. If we had your money at least we’d dress well.” I never forgot it.’ Neither did I!

Next day the head summoned me to her office and said, in front of the chief inspector, ‘I hear you made a good speech about Lawson last night.’

‘I’d like to know what you found to say,’ the inspector interposed. ‘The only thing I remember about Lawson is giving sixpence for a beer he begged for.’

‘Then,’ I said with that outstanding tact that endeared me, ‘you have at least one mark in the Hall of Fame.’

5 Frank Dalby Davison (1893–1970), novelist and short story writer, best known for the books Man-shy (1931) which won the Australian Literature Society Award, and Dusty (1946).

6 Coralie Rees, or Coralie Clarke (1909–72), travel writer and playwright; with her husband Leslie Rees she published five books on Australia.

7 Muriel Heagney (1885–1974), trade unionist and active Labor Party member; she published three books on the subjects of women’s employment and equal pay, for which she campaigned all her life. In Geneva she worked briefly for the International Labour Organisation.
I assisted with a survey on the health of children of unemployed parents largely in depressed areas. In 1937 I was involved with the Teachers' Federation, the Fellowship of Australian Writers, and numerous other organisations in a demand for a Royal Commission on censorship, largely of comics, which fell through.

I began inviting people of different professions to speak to those who were leaving school that year. Permission was granted to do it after school. Women came from the Free Kindergarten (the more socially-minded girls went to work in them after school); Doris Fitton came, and loaned us the costumes for a delightful production of *Lady Precious Stream*. We had speakers from the Business and Professional Associations (which I had just helped establish). We had nurses and doctors. A whole panoply of distinguished women who told these starry-eyed young creatures that if they had twice the ability and worked twice as hard as the boys, they might possibly get a similar job, but in a lower grade and with lower wages. As an instance of this, a woman who has written many interesting books on the history of Australia told me: 'When I came to you at Sydney High and told you that my mother was angry because, unlike my sisters, I was no good at maths. You asked me, "What are you good at?" I said, "I love writing compositions," and you said, "Tell your mother your sisters' skill in mathematics will probably be no use to them unless they become teachers, but your love of composition will give you pleasure all your life."' Valmai says I was right!

I really worked, what with the incessant office work of being counsellor, and my attempts to make the year worthwhile for my lower firsts and fourths unsuited for the academic courses. I produced plays (in my own time). I won shields outside the school for the quality of the productions. I carried on an incessant attempt to collect clothes for unemployed women and the children of unemployed parents. My work as counsellor constantly impressed on me how little the system cared for the children it taught.

But the storm was gathering. As my mother used to say, I had brains but no commonsense. In spite of the fact that a highly respected parliamentarian who later became prime minister returned from Europe full of eulogies for Hitler's road-making activities, and an English teacher from the boys' high went round saying a Hitler was what we wanted here, I, in a nice, stimulating, interesting

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9 Valmai Phillips (d. 1991), who published several historical-geographical books for schoolchildren.
10 Robert G. Menzies (1894-1978), who was prime minister 1939-41 and 1949-66.
job, joined the Left Book Club and began passing the books around. I had a boyfriend, a political journalist, who was deeply involved in the Spanish War. I went to WEA seminars at Newport.

Those brains transferred to my bones the certainty that war was coming, not only in Europe but in the Pacific. I in turn passed on the forebodings of which I had first become aware during my trip to Ceylon. You couldn't meet a friend of Nehru's, one of the first Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany, and missionaries evacuated from Abyssinia because of the threat of Italian invasion, without being influenced. I read avidly. I asked permission to give my fourth years a course in current affairs. Granted, I hung up in the classroom copies of the Sydney Morning Herald, the New Statesman, Tribune (communist) and the journal of the Australia First Party (fascist), and we studied the way they treated the same events. It was illuminating to me as well as to them.

At considerable trouble (to myself) I got permission to order enough copies of the Atlas of Current Affairs, published by the Left Book Club. And, because they were cheap, was allowed to sell them to all fifth and fourth year. During that time my popularity began to decline. Munich shocked all the staff but they learned nothing from it. Those who did had the commonsense I lacked to keep quiet about it. I didn't. I wanted everyone to know what I had learned about the awful danger that we were facing with our head in the sand. I 'corrupted' my drama group by putting on an anti-war play. I disseminated among girls and staff what I learned from the books I was reading: Gedye's excellent Fallen Bastions when we gave Czechoslovakia away; Ernst Henri's Hitler Over Germany and Hitler Over Europe, and Mussolini and the Mediterranean.11 All but my closest friends began to dodge me.

I became involved in the affairs of the Teachers' Federation where, till then, I had been content to be a loyal member. I did the publicity for a remarkable educational conference we held in 1938 with that equally remarkable man, Sam Lewis,12 as the organiser. I became president of the Teachers' Federation Drama Society. I helped to produce plays, even my own Red Sky at Morning and a satire I wrote called 'Tubb's Teaching Tabloids'13 which held up to ridicule our teaching methods. Very popular with teachers, but ...

I was on the Committee for School Broadcasting; I gave secondary school broadcasts. I also gave critical broadcasts about the high school system on the ABC in the programmes under the direction of George Ivan Smith (now a

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11 G.E.R. Gedye, journalist, was the central European correspondent for the London Times for twelve years; his Fallen Bastions, published in 1939, became a Left Book Club 'classic'. Ernst Henri's books were all published by Dent's, 1936, in translations by Michael Davidson.
12 Sam Lewis (1900–76), teacher and active Federation member; he was an educator of deprived children, and was well known for his peace campaigns and his support of Soviet Russia.
13 Red Sky at Morning, broadcast many times by the ABC, was published by Melbourne University Press in 1942. 'Tubb's Teaching Tabloids' remains unpublished; a copy is held in the Dymphna Cusack Papers, National Library of Australia, MS 4621, series 4.
famous representative of the United Nations Organisation) and Vicky Redman, a professor’s wife, both of whom I had taught.

I was appointed to a committee dealing with the improvement of films for children. At one particular film show I got a knock-back on the presumed sensitivity of children. In this particular scene an Indian carrier had fallen into a river and before he could be rescued, a crocodile started on his scent. The poor man struggling vainly to escape the ripple of water as the crocodile surged forward: I was sick with horror, thinking, ‘Oh these poor children, what nightmares will they have!’ Two ten-year-old boys ahead of me stood up screaming. My heart turned over. One hit the other on the back as the tension mounted. His words are still with me: ‘Ten to one on the croc!’

In the holidays I did a series of broadcasts, one on ‘How the Other Half Lives’, using women I had met in my social work on unemployment. Another, the year the war broke out, on ‘Women in Other Countries’, in which I had a Chinese woman who was anti-Japanese and I was reproved for it. The interview with a Soviet woman marooned in Sydney was banned because it gave a favourable picture of child care in the Soviet Union!

The department supported me in everything (except the critical broadcasts). I complained to the Director of Education, when asked to take on something extra, that I was feeling the strain (no wonder: during this time I had three operations, all of which went wrong because of my anaemic condition). The director patted my hand and said soothingly, ‘Keep on. We are preparing you for a special job next year.’ It was obvious perhaps also to him that I had no sense.

Since I was giving radio broadcasts in the educational programme, I instituted the habit of my classes listening to the various experts as we were all presumed to be. I was soundly trounced for it. ‘No place here for teachers who want to dodge their real duties, Miss C.’

With my two ex-students Vicky and George in charge of their departments at the ABC, I turned a talk on Peterloo I was scheduled to give into a play. We produced it ourselves and it went well. I can see George announcing Shelley’s lines in his best voice: ‘Rise like lions after slumber / In innumerable number / Ye are many, they are few.’ We were accused of disseminating propaganda, the best part of a century and a half after Shelley wrote it.

About this time an event occurred which emphasised for me the tragedy of the teacher who can teach but who can’t keep a class in order, something that brings out the devil in the best of children. She was in her forties, and astonished us by telling us one day that she was leaving the department and going to the country to act as housekeeper to a woman doctor she had taught. We gaped. She stood looking at us and suddenly burst out: ‘What would you do if you were like...

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14 Both series were broadcast on the ABC (2BL) during December 1939 and January 1940.
15 The play, 'The Peterloo Massacre', remains unpublished; a copy is held in the Dymphna Cusack Papers, National Library of Australia, MS 4621, series 5.
me? I stand outside every class I’m going to teach and tremble with fright before going in.' I hope she was happy.

I collaborated in a report on the medical conditions of children of unemployed, initiated by that remarkable teacher, Lucy Woodcock.\(^\text{16}\) But I was on the skids, a parlous situation precipitated by my recklessness and crusading zeal, political as well as social.

I went up to Cessnock to spend a weekend with friends I had known in Broken Hill and Goulburn. They suggested that I should come with them to a session on Saturday morning at which the conservative Minister of Education,\(^\text{17}\) backed by the local Labor member, was going to meet a group of unemployed to hear their appeal for milk for schoolchildren. I would at least look relatively elegant and well-fed among the poor creatures who had been out of work for the best part of ten years. The minister agreed to meet them \textit{only} on the condition that when he had made his pronouncement, Yea or Nay, no-one should have the right of speaking.

He looked us over after the introduction by the Labor member. He eyed the respectable, largely reverend people arranged to speak. He scorned the washed-out white shirts, the threadbare trousers, the carefully cleaned white sandshoes. He listened to the painfully correct appeals made by the extremely proper people who had come to plead the cause of the ill-nourished children of a town that had known unemployment since the end of the twenties. They told moving stories based on their experiences among unemployed families. They were good people, courageous people, largely the offshoot of Bishop Burgmann’s\(^\text{18}\) excellent college for ministers at Maitland. I had the privilege of being a friend of his.

The appeals were finished. I felt that I was weeping tears of blood. Then the minister rose; full-blooded, full-bellied like the Labor member—both an affront to the paper-thin miners they stood before. The minister spoke in the rotund, rolling periods of the lay preacher. He pointed out that the demand for milk for schoolchildren was ridiculous. Personally he could not imagine anything more unpleasant than a pint of cold milk on an empty stomach (which I swear he’d never had) on a cold morning. He derided the speakers. He derided the political motives that had organised the meeting (communist, of course). Why is it that any sane, humanely motivated appeal on behalf of the outcast, the rejected of our communities, \textit{must} be communist? Have we no practical Christians among us? There they were before us, downcast, ridiculed, depressed. I have

\(^{16}\) Lucy Woodcock (1889–1968), teacher and Federation executive member; she taught in Erskineville for over twenty years, fighting for better conditions for disadvantaged pupils. She also campaigned against the Married Women Lecturers’ and Teachers’ Act, and for equal pay for women teachers.

\(^{17}\) David Henry Drummond (1890–1965), Member for the Northern Tablelands (later New England), was Minister for Education 1932–41.

\(^{18}\) Revd Ernest Henry Burgmann (1885–1966), Bishop of Goulburn 1934–50, then Canberra and Goulburn 1950–60; also the author of several books; Cusack may have met him when at school in Armidale.
never heard a more heartless speech. I think I never will in these days of greater social consciousness.

He sat down fingerling his lapel in the irritating way some men have of emphasising the banality and the portentiousness of the words they have uttered. My friend beside me muttered, 'And no-one can answer him.' I stood up, aware of my elegant crêpe-de-Chine dress, my smart balibuntal hat (I had become clothes conscious in those days). I smiled my sweetest smile. I cooed my most dulcet coo, 'Please, Mr Chairman, may I speak?' They both looked at me approvingly. I look so middle-class; it's my nose.

I began. What I said has long been forgotten. But I know all my rage and pain boiled over in coherent, blistering words. It was the first speech I made that might be called political, if you have one of those noses for smelling out implications, though it was purely humane, nothing else. But in those days (and often still today) if you make a humane statement there is still some reactionary nut to scream communist. When shall we ever learn?

The audience was electrified. How did it happen that a person so well-dressed, well-fed, well-informed and so regardless of rank and position came to be there? Conspiracy, of course. What politician could think otherwise. I sat down having poured out all I had learned over the year in that supposedly innocuous counsellorship. In my contacts with unemployed women. With the Salvation Army (I was the only non-religious member, and the only one with lipstick at the centenary dinner for the founder, General William Booth). I was trembling with anger. The minister got to his feet as quickly as his paunch allowed. He sneered at this outsider who had dropped in so opportunely (it was indeed an accident). He demanded to know whether I was aware of the fact that the terms on which malnutrition and general needs in Australia were based were the same as those on which the British welfare was based? Coup de grâce! Triumphant, he sat.

I leaped to my feet. The chairman cried, 'No, no!' The audience shouted, 'Let her speak!' I began, thanking whatever powers that be that I read the important parts of the paper thoroughly which obviously he didn't. Only the day before, on my train trip from Sydney, I had read in the *Sydney Morning Herald* that the British Health Ministry had stated (this as a result of a survey precipitated by Munich) that there was great concern because four out of five of the boys examined for conscription in the depressed areas were graded C3! I told him so. The audience went delirious. I ended with the peroration that if he was satisfied with these conditions which reduced our youth to creatures not even fit for cannon-fodder, I was not.

When the shouting and the tumult died, the minister said to his chairman that he would like to meet me. My name? Ah, Cusack! Not the Dymphna Cusack from Sydney High? It was. I was marked.

I spent the rest of the weekend meeting the long queue of unemployed who came to thank me and my hosts for importing me! They were the most surprised
of all. Months later I wrote an article on the general poverty-stricken conditions in Cessnock and the coalfields generally. It was published in Smith’s Weekly and caused a commotion as my interview with a woman whose family was on the dole did when it was broadcast over the ABC that Christmas. One thing in which we have improved since those days is in our willingness to listen to unpleasant facts. This goes not only for Australia. The head-in-the-sand obsession has disappeared. Three wars on our doorstep and the sizzling documentary reporting of television and radio was responsible.

Not long afterwards the first thunderbolt dropped. The father (himself a member of the minister’s party) of a very nice girl in my fourth year current affairs, dropped it by coming to the school to complain that I was teaching the children communism. Nothing about the political variety of books and periodicals to which I gave them access. At no time did he say I was teaching them fascism. That would have been acceptable. I was hauled up by a worried head to whom I showed the material she had already seen without realising its significance. Poor thing; she was really a nice woman who even had the courage to sign a demand for equal pay the Teachers’ Federation was making when she and I were the only ones among a staff of forty-two who did so. What a lot of fearful creatures women teachers were on the whole. I escaped with the warning to cease my ‘corrupting’ course.

It wasn’t strange that this should happen when that same year one of our leading politicians—soon to be prime minister—came back from Europe saying that Adolf Hitler was an admirable politician and that many of his policies could be, with advantage, put into action in Australia.

The last of my personal misadventures was due to an accident on school property. I caught my heel in a knot-hole in the floor, fell and broke my coccyx. It needed an operation which took several weeks in hospital and some time recuperating. It wasn’t till months afterwards the bank manager told me my account was overdrawn. I was incredulous. My salary cheque was paid into the bank and I had too much experience of poverty to overspend. I was informed that for some two months no cheque had been paid in. I wrote to the accountant of the department. He replied by scrawling across my letter, ‘No money due during time on Sick Leave.’

Through a friend on the staff, I went to the man in charge of Workers’ Compensation who told me that this was a favourite trick of public service departments. They’d been wanting someone to make a test case for a long time. Would I have the courage (he should have said imprudence) to do it? The familiar rush of blood to the head. Without any consideration, I said yes. So began a case against the Department of Education by one of its members that became a classic in its own way and a precedent for many others. At the end of a year’s

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19 The talk, ‘Married Women on Unemployed Relief’, was part of her ‘How the Other Half [of the World] Lives’ series, and was broadcast on 30 December 1939.
negotiations, the Workers’ Compensation had a dossier a foot high of their negotiations with the department. But no satisfaction. Of that more later.

As the world proceeded with frightening haste towards World War II, my reputation declined. Was it the Greeks or the Romans who executed the bearer of bad news? The boy who cried wolf was probably unpopular when the wolf turned up one day.

It was the perfect case of guilt by association in their uninformed minds, for which they could not be blamed considering the radio and press of the day. Think of it. I was on a committee for anti-Hitler refugees. I was a member of the Left Book Club which published anti-Nazi books. I did the publicity for an educational conference which brought anti-Nazi speakers from Europe and the States. I broadcast and lectured on the need for educational reform (this was when the Public Service forbade public servants to criticise the terms of their employment, which it still does in 1976). I wrote articles and broadcast about conditions of the unemployed and the lower income groups. I collected from a (generally) prosperous school clothes for out of work adults and their children.

I was constantly, and maddeningly, talking about the evils of the Spanish War. In all I was an unremitting prodder of complacency, pricker of consciences, when it was much more comfortable to have only the one permitted by the establishment. It was a miracle I lasted so long.

Strangely enough, it was only at school that I began to rate so low in the popularity stakes. Somewhere in the middle of the year, the director of education (God Himself) sent for me, explaining that he would give me a month’s leave to write a pageant to celebrate Australian–American friendship. I did it but fortunately the outbreak of war put an end to it. It was very bad.

My month’s absence gave Odora and the chief inspector the chance they sought. One morning my assistant counsellor (I now had an assistant who was much more competent than I) rang me to say that Odora and the chief inspector had literally broken into my office and spent several hours going through the files I kept to prove with exam results that the university-oriented curriculum to which the girls were subjected was entirely unsuited to them. I had unknowingly woven the rope to hang myself. I carefully noted date and time and went back to school the next week with a horrible premonition that something unpleasant was brewing.

The inspectors were still snooping round the school when I returned. The chief descended on me—in company with Odora—to say, ‘I am very disappointed at the standard of your first and fourth years.’

‘Yes,’ I said breezily, ‘I’ve been trying to persuade the director that there should be another syllabus or a different school for such people. They are nice children but their talents are not academic. I’d like you to see the exhibition of costumes and houses the firsts have made to illustrate social history.’ (The most beautiful things in it were the Greek house and costumes lent me by the classics
teacher, who had the misfortune to be put under Odora when her own subjects were diminished. A lovely woman. Her suicide pained as much as it shocked us. We had our own views on the reason for it. I used it and the fictionalised protagonists in my play *Morning Sacrifice.*

But back to the chief inspector.

'Ve don't interested in such childish things,' he said with lordly scorn. 'What I want to know is why both classes seem to have been deliberately taken along courses not in the syllabus.'

'Because they should not be doing it, nor will they be sitting for the exams to which it is directed,' I cried in despair at the hopelessness of getting anything human through to him.

'And the fourths? All that dubious political material?'

'I dropped that when requested months ago,' I replied weakly, knowing that it would be useless to try to justify anything to him.

We parted with the remark that he was disappointed that a teacher he had thought possessed unusual talents should have proved so unsatisfactory in many ways. Odora took him out the door with a gleam in her eyes.

I thought the matter was settled till the inspection results came. All my teaching life from the beginning I had received an A grade. Now I was told that because of the unsatisfactory results of my two classes I would lose it.

I hit the roof. Grandpa rose in his grave. I went to Odora and demanded to know the meaning of this. She mumbled unintelligible words. I said if I didn't get an explanation I would take the matter to the director of secondary schools.

She said soothingly, or at least she meant it to be soothing, 'Please don't do anything like that Miss C. The trouble with you is that you are so Irish!'

I said with all the dignity I could muster, 'My Irish ancestry seems irrelevant here but I'll say that any qualities of any value I may have, come from them.'

I inquired from my classes on what day the inspector had visited them. He had never been. So off I went to the director of secondary schools, with a letter making an appointment in my purse. His reply to mine was non-committal.

At his enormous desk in his vast room, he sat flanked by the inspector I was there to report. Obviously neither was sympathetic. I was asked to state my case (we were always addressed like a public meeting). I gave my version of it.

The inspector gave his, saying nothing new. He once had had a high opinion of me. But now my classes showed a deplorable lack of the basic facts in the first-and fourth-year syllabus. The history inspector, Mr G, agreed with him.

'How do you know all this?' I asked.

'That was obvious.'

'From what?'

'From our inspection of them while you were away.'

'But you never inspected them, either of you. Accompanied by Miss Odora you broke into my office when I was on leave at the request of the director. At
10.15 you both unlocked my private filing cabinet, to which only I am supposed to have a key, and took out the special reports on the results of my two classes which were drawn up, not for you, but for the director of the psychology department. From these results you concocted a story that would allow you to reduce my efficiency mark.'

He first blushed a beetroot red. When the colour receded it left him a dirty grey. He looked from me to the director of secondary schools. He stood up, gasped, 'Excuse me, I don't feel well,' and stumbled out the door. The director slowly raised his eyes. 'I think the matter is closed, Miss C. You will get your mark.'

I left the department with none of the triumph I expected to feel. All I saw was that dirty grey face and the figure stumbling out the door. As my husband tells me, I am sentimental to a fault.

* * *

Catastrophe approached. I remember with a shiver the day the Soviet–Finnish war began. What else could the Soviet Union do when our betrayal of Czechoslovakia left them with a direct path from the armies of Nazi Germany, and a commanding general who was a noted Hitlerite? I came into the staffroom and all eyes turned on me accusingly. A woman I liked and I thought liked me, since we had worked happily together producing the pageant for the 150th Anniversary, now snarled, 'Now what about your Russians?' I was completely on the outer. When war eventually broke out between England and Germany you'd have thought I started it.

The war went on and we became hysterical as so many women do in wartime, because their abilities are called on then as never before. I objected to spending an hour after school learning first aid. I already had a smattering of it and it seemed improbable that any victim of the raids in England would fall into my hands. Besides I was spending much time with the Workers' Compensation after school as my case was simmering to a boil.

It reached it the Friday after school closed for the Christmas holidays. That was when I had the series of broadcasts about women in other countries. One was a Chinese lady, a supporter of Chiang Kai Shek. It was seriously cut by the censor (we were buddies of Japan) but in the actual broadcast it was given as written because the controller had given the girl in charge an uncensored script. My eyes goggled as I heard the blue-pencilled lines stream out of her rose-bud mouth and I could do nothing but follow them. It brought in a flood of protests from the High Ups, but I was not held responsible—for once.

So many things happened in these days that show how panic-stricken the country becomes when the danger (to whose advance they have taken no notice)
becomes real. To anticipate a little: in the next year, our outstanding writer’s lectures on Australian literature were cancelled by Western Australia’s university because she was a communist.  

Guido Baracchi’s library was cursorily searched by the police because he had an Italian father. Later he was searched in earnest when it became known to them that he was also a communist. By then, anticipating this, he had hidden his valuable books. A medical student I had taught at Parramatta came to me with the news that she had also been searched. As usual the police knew next to nothing. At least she saved Engel’s *Origin of the Family* by telling them it was a textbook about contraception! They blushed and left. My mother, appalled at her story, hid all my library of poetry, drama and novels under the house. The only one that could have been called vaguely political was Kropotkin’s *Mutual Aid*, published half a century before this war. At Frank Dalby Davison’s request I spoke (a most unsuitable speech) at a meeting protesting against the imprisonment of two communists who had a printing plant.

My court case against the Minister of Education got more publicity than it normally would have received because I was already in the news in a big way. The Workers’ Compensation had arranged that my case against the Department of Education would be held the Friday after we broke up. They had more than fulfilled their promises. I was represented by one of Sydney’s most distinguished barristers, later a judge. The department sent along a young, nervous clerk, horrified at finding himself against such an important adversary. Resplendent in full court regalia, the barrister rose and addressed the judge in mellow tones and scathing language: ‘There was a man named Ned Kelly and another named Dick Turpin,’ he intoned, ‘but they are both gentlemen compared with the Minister of Education in his treatment of this poor little woman.’

The two journalists on their bench turned to see the poor little woman and when they found it was me, grinned. I knew them both and the idea that my ‘fiery temperament’ as they called it, could be described in such terms was extremely funny. But not to my advocate. With a superb flow of language he put my case before his Honour. His Honour was suitably impressed. The Minister of Education came out of the description as a repressor of women (preferably little), a denier of justice, a skinflint. The nervous clerk wilted. The journalists wrote happily.

20 Almost certainly Katharine Susannah Prichard (1883–1969) who was a founding member of the Communist Party of Australia.

21 A prominent communist, he later became the de facto husband of writer Betty Roland.

22 Alfred Rainbow, QC (1900–64), later a judge of the Workers’ Compensation Commission.

The upshot was the judge declared in my favour morally and personally. Legally he regretted that he could do nothing. 'If this young lady had been a barmaid in a hotel,' he said, 'there would be no question about her rights to financial compensation, to damages for pain and suffering, indeed all rights. But she is a public servant and as such I can do nothing but commiserate with her in her unfortunate situation which I do most sincerely.' He addressed the clerk, 'Have you anything to say?' He had not. The barrister pressed me to his portly chest. The journalists begged for more information. The nervous clerk crept out as if he was personally responsible for the minister's commission and omissions.

The evening papers came out with large captions saying, 'Minister of Education Likened to Dick Turpin and Ned Kelly'. My mother almost fainted. The Teachers' Federation said they would fight the case if the department did not yield. The phone rang incessantly. I was a mini-heroine among public servants who were used to being kicked around but not used to kicking back.

A Pyrrhic victory! A week later I received a notification from the department appointing me to Bathurst High School. So much for that job for which I was being trained!

I spent the holidays in conference with the Teachers' Federation. Various papers came for details of my story. My coccyx was as famous as a saint's elbow. In vain: I went off to Bathurst the night the troops embarked from the Bathurst Camp, and watched them march onto their train with their tropic rain-capes over their packs casting monstrous moving shadows on the wall. I wept for them rather than myself.

As can be imagined, my deportation to Bathurst had all kinds of reasons attributed to it. Rumours proliferated. Inevitably there were those who said I had been booted out for teaching communism (just as inevitably no-one complained about teaching fascism). Besides, hadn't the ABC put off the air my interview with a Russian woman who said her countrymen regarded children as the 'flowers of their society'? Definitely subversive!

Others said that anyone who was fool enough to argue with the Minister of Education deserved what was coming to her. Others again attributed it all to the court case. No-one before had been stupid/reckless/brave enough to protest publicly and legally at the multiple injustices of the Education Department. The wise line was to suffer in silence.

Personally I took it to be a combination of them all. And only thirty-five years later, a letter came that threw a different light on it. The writer said she had always tortured herself at being the innocent cause of my troubles. Her father was the member of state parliament who had protested, etc., etc. after reading her homework and looking at the Left Book Club maps which showed what Hitler had already swallowed. Dangerous, seditious information. But no; poor
Father was only the unhappy intermediary. So was the minister of education. The Edict came from on high. From the federal parliament itself, which was much like saying from Jehovah himself. All these years later I shuddered. Think of a national government bringing up its big guns to attack anyone so unimportant as me. An ordinary teacher (extraordinary only in that I took it seriously). A trouble-maker who belonged to no political party and went by the light of what commonsense, experience, and a passionate love of my own country dictated. Frightening to think that so unimportant a creature was under fire when the whole of the commonwealth to which we belonged showed itself utterly unprepared for the war I and so many others knew was inevitable.

24 No documentary evidence has been found to support this, although later in 1952, Cusack’s name was mentioned in parliament under a charge of being a communist. And a CIS (Criminal Investigation Service, formerly Bureau) file (Australian Archives, series A6119/21, item 35) proves she was under surveillance at least from 1940.
CHAPTER NINE

I had barely settled in to the very nice boarding house in an old colonial mansion—Braemar—and been kindly received by the staff, when the news shot round like lightning that Smith’s Weekly’s large poster that week announced: ‘Dymphna Cusack v Minister of Education’. A detailed story illustrated by a soulful portrait gave the account of my move to Bathurst.¹ You can imagine what a bone-shaker it was for a respectable headmaster and a conservative city like Bathurst. But less than a week after, I got a cheque from the Department of Education for the full amount over which they had been haggling for two years, without a word of explanation.

Bathurst generally received me kindly in spite or because of the scandal; as a writer my reputation was then minimal. But the head was embarrassed. There was no teaching place for me. So for the first three months I enjoyed myself writing letters and making tea for the staff.

I found myself a minor celebrity. The children goggled at me. People whispered after me in the streets. The local papers wrote articles about me. Those who would otherwise never have condescended to know mere teachers invited me to tea. I was asked to take a drama class for the Anglican church. The Rotary Club invited me to lecture about youth welfare.

I went in my best dress to the Rotary meeting, and in a mood of simmering fury at what I had learned of the disgraceful conditions of youthful unemployed in the city. In consequence I gave a blistering speech on the iniquities of a social system that had no jobs for young people till they sent them to fight and die. I was particularly bitter because my younger brother² had come from the city to tell me he had joined the RAAF, and I had gone to Sydney to say farewell to a young unemployed cousin who sailed with the AIF on the Queen Mary. Oh the

¹ ‘Education Dept.’s Strange Treatment of a Teacher’, Smith’s Weekly, 10 February 1940, p. 4.
² John Bede Cusack (1909–79). As ‘John Beede’ he wrote two books based on his war experiences, They Hosed Them Out (1965) and You Can Only Die Once (1978).
stupidity and waste of war. Withal it was a reasoned and reasonable speech I gave at the Rotary dinner. I thought I had learned moderation. Two-thirds of the way through an old gentleman got up and went out, unnecessarily noisily. I attributed his departure to nothing more than the defective bladder of age. If the questions were sharp and the comments sharper I thought it was merely that I had given a stimulating address. Both papers reported me favourably next day. Not till lunch time did the headmaster come to me in a state of perturbation.

I listened to him incredulously. I had no sense of guilt. This was mild compared to a lecture I had given to the Goulburn Rotary the week war broke out on 'Are We Worth Defending?' and repeated for the Soroptomists and the United Association of Women just afterwards. But Bathurst, I was to find, was touchier. Much more conservative than Goulburn with its ruling families owning the surrounding country and no industrial activity (they had refused a railway depot which went to bring neighbouring Orange prosperity). Bathurst had only a vegetable-canning factory on the periphery of the city. It was the patron and patriarch of this who had taken me wrong.

The head, a pleasant fellow but nervous, told me in great agitation that the Asparagus King had rung to say he objected to my speech and that the headmaster must bring me out to his mansion that afternoon.

'During school time?' I inquired.

'Oh, no. After.'

'Then ring and tell him I am under your orders till 3.30, only after that am I my own mistress.'

'Then you won't go?'

'No.'

Poor man, he expostulated, he begged. He went alone.

Next day the head told me in increasing agitation that the old autocrat was coming to see me. 'Don't upset him,' he begged. 'He's very influential.'

The next afternoon he rang the Braemar bell furiously just as we finished afternoon tea. The maid put her head round the door, eyes popping. I went into the entrance hall, smiled and put out my hand. He put his behind his back. 'This is not a social call,' he growled. 'I have come to see you privately.'

'Come upstairs, then,' I said. 'The only private place in a boarding house is my bedroom.'

He followed me grumbling. 'It's the first time in my life I've been in a single lady's bedroom.'

'Oh, Mr E!' I said with mock coyness.

He sat down on my one chair as far as possible from me on the edge of the bed, unfolded several sheets of paper and cleared his throat.

'I intend to read this at the next Rotary meeting,' he announced.

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3 R. Gordon Edgell (nicknamed the Asparagus King), a retired civil engineer who bought land in Bathurst in 1906 and established the well-known cannery there in 1926.
'What a pity you didn’t do it after I spoke. Such a shame for me to miss it’ (as a mere woman I was ineligible to eat their food unless also entertaining them). ‘You won’t miss it,’ he growled ominously, and began. ‘At a time when Australia is fighting for her life, the British Empire has her back to the wall and the press, the radio, and the schools are infested with communists—’

I put up my hand. ‘Are you implying that I am a communist?’ He glared at me over his bi-focals. ‘As bad as.’ ‘Good,’ I said, ‘I shall sue you. The last time our leading newspaper made an incorrect statement like that the man in question got heavy damages.’

He sat staring at the paper, took out a gold pencil, and said, ‘I’ll leave it out.’

He read an incredible farago of nonsense which would have been out of date at the time of the Boer War, to which he no doubt belonged. It was so laughable that I made no comment beyond saying, ‘I suggest you don’t read it. People will laugh at you.’

The people who counted did. Ben Chifley, a local resident who was to be one of the best prime ministers we ever had, rose from his seat and trounced him. The police inspector, an older man with an Irish name, warned him that such nonsense could lead him into trouble. Both these men wielded great influence in the town.

The only effect of poor Mr E’s diatribe was to get me a spate of invitations to speak at this and that. Out of an address to the Apex Club came a campaign I inaugurated, and they worked for, to establish a school of physical culture for young people not yet ready to be pulled into the forces, and who till then spent their excessive leisure time hanging around pub corners, in billiard rooms and on the river bank. I also helped to organise a women’s auxiliary. Lovely women. I remember them with affection. I filled an unimportant role at school since I was a supernumerary. I got most of the poorer classes since I no longer had any ambition to show my skill with better ones. My Canberra experience of mentally stuffing the young killed that. Besides I knew that so far as the department was concerned I was finished. Only the fact that I was practically keeping my mother (and I had this dicky health history) kept me in the department at all. Surprising the number of people who offered me jobs outside it.

But what a relief it was to my overworked body and my frayed nerves to have no responsibility at all. I had nothing to do but be my usual cheerful self (though a world at war kept me worried enough). Certainly senior English teachers with honours classes had the sense to ask me to take them while they did something duller and more boring like correcting my exam papers or drawing up reports for me. As usual I took over the drama classes.

4 Ben (Joseph Benedict) Chifley (1885–1951), Labor member for the Bathurst region 1928–31; he returned to federal parliament in 1940, serving as prime minister and treasurer 1945–49.
In all I enjoyed myself. My counsellor work had taught me to appreciate children for themselves and their lack of orthodox ability didn’t worry me at all. Dear Lennie, my nickname for him via Steinbeck, was a giant of a boy for his age. A round, smiling, freckled face, yellow curls rioting over his large head; he was the lowest rated in IQ of the lowest second year geography class. Properly educated, I am certain he could have become a good naturalist. There was never a day he did not bring some creepy-crawly to class, nursing them tenderly in his big freckled paws till I insisted that they should go outside or into his locker. One day, as I was walking round the class to see what they were making of the map they had to draw—they were good at maps—they were good at maps—I was horrified to see long thin legs waving through the air-hole in the locker not three feet from me. ‘Lennie,’ I said sternly, ‘take that monster outside.’

‘Gee, Miss,’ he pleaded, ‘can’t I leave her there? She gets lonely outside. She’s my pet spider.’

‘Outside,’ I commanded as a body flat as a halfpenny emerged and two glittering eyes fixed themselves on me.

Lennie picked her up gently, murmuring a noise she seemed to appreciate from her reaction.

‘Can I put her in that empty chalk box and leave her there till lunch time?’ Lennie begged. ‘Then I’ll take her home to her place in the corner of my bedroom.’

Reluctantly I agreed; and as he took out a pocket knife and began to poke a hole in it, I protested: ‘No ventilation, Lennie. She’s to be safely locked up.’

Lennie lowered her into the box and murmured, ‘It won’t be long sweetheart and there’s lots of air for you.’

I saw the closed box deposited in his locker and sighed with relief.

The playing fields of the school were built on the enormous quarry that had been excavated on a lower level. As I was doing playground duty, Lennie passed me on his bike. ‘Look Miss, no hands,’ he cried and as I watched, went over the edge to the grass twenty feet below. ‘And no Lennie’ my companion commented as we raced to see what had happened to him. Nothing! He picked himself up smiling and said, ‘Lucky I didn’t have my best sweater on.’

When his father was moved on to another town he came to the school and asked to see me to thank me for my kindness to his son. I often wonder what happened to Lennie. I would have welcomed him anywhere.

The syllabus for geography had been drawn up by the staff specialist in the subject, who kindly gave me duplicated notes of the lessons, hearing that I knew little or nothing about it. I was horrified. Here were a series of highly technical lessons on what should be a fascinating subject, more suitable to a senior class than a poor second. What a delightful and informative trip they could have had round the world. What fascinating encounters with different races in countries foreign to us. What enchantment in customs unlike ours. What useful examples
of countries and races through trade. But no. We—I as well as they—worried our brains over the material that more correctly belonged to geology or geophysics. It was another lesson for me in the stupidity of trying to fit the child to the material instead of the material to the child, with the usual inevitable results of disinterest and indiscipline.

Why the geography as well as the history of the city itself were never mentioned at school, I shall never understand. The oldest settlement west of the Great Dividing Range, it was set in a rim of blue-grey mountains. Its links with the early days, its lovely parks, its public buildings and tree-lined streets gave it an atmosphere rare among New South Wales country towns. It would have been interesting to read Charles Darwin’s account of his journey there in 1836. But we never learned anything about the fertile surrounding devoted largely to the production of wool and fat lambs, though vegetable growing along the Macquarie River was an important feature of its wealth.

Historically it was fascinating from the time in 1813 when G.W. Evans began the journey from the point which Lawson, Blaxland and Wentworth had reached when they found a way over the Blue Mountains. By January 1815 William Cox had built a road across the whole distance of the ranges from Emu Plains, for which he received a grant in the district. And, so said legend, grants were made to the convicts who slaved to carve that road out of almost impenetrable bush and sandstone cliffs. To those with the history of our country in their blood it is intensely moving to put one’s hand on the strokes of the pick they made coming down Victoria Pass.

The story of the terrible early days are told with biting truthfulness in Neil Stewart’s novel, House of Bondage, which has much of the quality of Price Warung’s short stories of the convict days woven into fiction. It was not till after 1851 that the district began to go ahead by leaps and bounds. The catalyst was the discovery of gold about thirty miles to the north-west. In the same year a nugget weighing 106 pounds was found. News of the gold discoveries brought thousands of prospectors and also bushrangers, principally Gardiner, Gilbert, Hall, Burke, O’Meally and Vane.

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5 Charles Darwin’s *Journal of Researches into the Geology and Natural History of the Various Countries Visited by HMAS Beagle* (1839), chapter XXI describes his visit to Bathurst.
7 Published in the *Bulletin and Truth* in the early 1890s and collected in various volumes 1892–98. ‘Price Warung’ was the pseudonym of William Astley (1855–1911).
8 Frank Gardiner (1830–83), born near Goulburn of part-Irish and Aboriginal extraction; he was sentenced in 1866 to thirty-two years penal servitude, but reprieved in 1874 and released after serving ten years of the sentence; as Frank Smith he operated a saloon in San Francisco, until his death. Johnny Gilbert (aka Roberts), born in Canada, and shot dead by police in 1865, near Biralong, before his burial, people travelled for miles to pay their last respects. Ben Hall (1837–65), born of ex-convict parents in the Liverpool district, his funeral at Forbes Cemetery attracted a great crowd. Burke (first name unknown) died in 1863, shot by the Assistant Gold Commissioner, Mr Keightley, at Dum’s Plains, near Rockley. John O’Meally, of whom little is known, also died in 1863, after being shot by David Campbell, owner of Goimbla Station, near Bathurst. John Vane surrendered in 1866 and was sentenced to penal servitude for fifteen years.
What stories, what drama! But not for the children we taught. They were limited to less exciting and less interesting material largely culled from the duller reaches of British history, doled out much as the Bible and New Testament were doled out, with as little relevance to them or our time.

Sometime early in the year I made one of my classic 'blues'. A meeting of the Historical Society was called to prepare a long-range plan for the century-and-a-half anniversary fifteen years off. Among the suggestions I made what I thought was a bright one. Would it not be extremely interesting to trace the families of convicts who were given grants in 1815? A Falstaffian figure oozing blue blood and whisky stamped his silver-topped stick on the floor and growled, 'Never any convicts in Bathurst.' We all drew our breaths. No-one who knew the city was prepared to take on an argument with a member of the pioneering clique. I never went to another meeting of the society, though I suppose it was done when Falstaff passed on of whisky and apoplexy.

By my time Bathurst was reduced to a snob-ridden city which eventually, coupled with Goulburn, was reduced to its microcosm, Gubba in Picnic Races. The editor of the Labor Party paper, old 'Westy', one of the best-informed men in the district, told me that the city was owned by seven squatting families whose properties rimmed it in. Like most of their ilk—though I know some who don’t conform to the pattern—they are incredibly snobbish, as though the blue blood of their flocks had subtly transfused to theirs. Narrow for all their broad acres. When a canteen was established for the troops in the local camp, the upper-crust women running it refused to allow girls from 'places like Coles and Woolworths' to help with the work. Only the 'pure merinos' were fit to serve the troops—who were not of the same opinion.

It may have been something to do with the soldiers’ consequent frustration when some of them beat up a visiting officer's wife (only officers were allowed the privilege of visitors to the camp), saying they mistook the poor creature for a prostitute who had infected them with syphilis.

It no doubt had much to do with their fury at being kept out of hotel lounges (officers only) that they went along the main streets early one morning kicking in the windows and glass doors of all the hotels on the way.

Inevitably I was writing. Polishing a radio drama, 'Spartacus', which I had done on holidays in Goulburn the year before with the research background of Bishop Burgmann’s excellent library. The ABC rejected it then, but after the fall of France, they asked for it again and broadcast it. I began another play, Morning Sacrifice, set in the staffroom of a girls’ school. If the familiar morning hymn from which the title came was lifted from Sydney High, and the suicide as well, the characters and events were a composite of all the schools I had taught in. It was broadcast, played on many occasions here and even in England and in the

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9 Never published, it was broadcast in October 1942.
States. My prototypes were inevitably international. In 1942 it won the Western Australian Drama Festival Prize.

Naturally with a full-time job on my hands, giving many lectures, being involved in making a success of my youth club venture, writing had to take a minor place. But I went on making the notes which twenty years later were to give such an authentic flavour to my fictional town of Gubba.

My extra-scholastic reputation led me to one of the most interesting experiences of my career. A young Church of England minister asked me to go to his centre at Hill End—the old gold-mining town—to speak to his group. I went on the ‘All Red Route’ as the bus was called because of its owner-driver’s far-spread views. There in this old mining town (population eighty) I spoke to the fascinating group of eleven, including a rabbit trapper who had once been consul of Algeria for ten days.

The minister was one of ‘Burgie’s young men’, whom I’d met at Cessnock, a Christian Socialist who, as the locals said, went around committing celibacy all over the place. He told me about two old sisters in a neighbouring township who were ostracised by the townspeople who for some unknown reason suspected them of being German spies. He found them on the verge of starvation because no-one would sell them food. From that rare and stimulating weekend I drew the pattern for my township which became Gubba in Picnic Races, naturally combined with a number of other country towns which I had known. Goulhurst in the book is a combination of Goulburn and Bathurst.

Bishop Burgmann came to preach in the city cathedral and he and his charming wife paid me a visit in which we discussed the situation of people like ourselves, who had learned too much of the real position in the world to accept the nonsense put in the name of fact. ‘Truth is the first casualty in war,’ he reminded me. That Sunday I went to hear him preach as I had promised and listened to a superb sermon on ‘The Nazi Within Ourselves’. It made him very unpopular.

Over supper after the service, I can still see the local archdeacon looking archly at us and saying, ‘Think of it: a red bishop and a red writer in the cathedral together and the roof didn’t fall in!’

Lennie’s class was responsible for a brush with the history inspector who had not inspected me at Sydney High. This time he was specialising in geography. I refused to be inspected saying this was not my subject.

‘But Miss C,’ he cooed, ‘if I am able to inspect a class in what are not my subjects, why can you not?’

‘Probably because I haven’t your versatility and brilliance’ (he had neither).
‘Then,’ he said, swelling at what he mistook for praise, ‘I shall give the class a geography lesson which may be helpful to you.’

I said I was certain it would be and retired to the back seat to be instructed. The theme was ocean currents in all their technical details, definitely not the type of material in which the class shone. Though to be frank I had yet to find what that was—except spiders and sport.

The inspector began. He had the patronising air of an inferior lay preacher. He wrote careful headlines in impeccable script on the blackboard. The class copied them down, something they loved doing and rarely did correctly.

He went on to the next phase. They copied that down too. I glanced over the shoulder of the boy in front of me and found not without satisfaction that it was wrong.

Phase Three. His teaching experience had never taught him that with a class like this you were happy if they came to grips with One and Two in a week, much less in a lesson.

He was visibly swelling with pride in his success to date. But pride comes before a fall. And he fell. Ten minutes before the end of the period he announced, ‘Now we shall recapitulate.’

They didn’t know what the word meant but he recapitulated. Hands waved enthusiastically; they never failed to wave like this. He selected the brightest face (how deceiving faces can be!). The answer was one of the wild and woolly irrelevancies to which I had grown accustomed if faced with any abstractions. His lesson made an abstraction even of tides. I found difficulty in following it. His face grew redder. His voice more acidulous. When the period bell rang he summoned me with an imperious forefinger and as we went from the room said, ‘I think your lessons err on the side of too much abstraction, Miss C. Classes like this require … ’ I have forgotten what they require but certainly they would never get it from him.

I had a memorable third year, remarkable for the fact that it had never completed the syllabus of any earlier year and was there only by age. I liked them and they liked me. We enjoyed lessons but there was only the faintest hope of ever getting them to Intermediate standard. Why it should be the intention of the school to do so, I never knew, but I found in my teaching life teachers are sublime optimists—why I can’t tell. Education should be a process of bringing out what is in children, not trying to stuff into them what is foreign to their minds and hearts.

When the results of the Intermediate exams came out in the next January, my class had done as well—or badly—as I had anticipated. But so had the students of other schools in the same region, and in a particular region on the south coast. I began some investigations when an irate parent wrote in to the *Sydney Morning Herald* to complain of the standard by which these particular children had been judged. And I found that they had all been done by the same
group of examiners (this top-secret information is always available if you know someone in the examining racket; for racket it is). When I returned to Bathurst after the holidays I found the local inspector all ready to draw blood, in spite of the controversy that had been running in the Sydney press. Maybe inspectors don’t read the papers! My only response was to bring out the letters I had carefully filed, along with the results of my investigations into the examiners—this tantamount to high treason. But I made my point. Not to the advantage of the poor creatures who had failed and therefore lost their chance of promotion because some examiners did not know what was a fair standard for that exam. I wondered how often this happened.

Apparently the officials in the higher brackets of the educational departments never learn. I have before me a cutting from a paper of 3 January 1976 (thirty-five years later) in which a senior lecturer in English at Monash University, Melbourne, says: ‘I could write ten pages listing the faults … in the examination system. A major weakness is the age of the examiners.’ She said she became an examiner because she was puzzled by the discrepancies between the ability of her students and the results of their high school certificate exam. She found the marking system inadequate. ‘A predetermined statistical pattern decided arbitrarily between students on the same marks, passing one and failing another.’ This was because there was a maximum quota of 440 who could be passed in each group.¹⁰

I suppose there was something of this kind in our day but you’d have expected the masters of the fate of unfortunate children to have devised something in which not only is justice done, but is seen to be done.

The staff was particularly kind to me, especially three women who stayed at the same boarding house. A man teacher was a great comfort since he had much the same ideas all round. I might have had a closer relationship with him had I not been involved with a wholly unsatisfactory man at the time who was to give my heart one of the blows to which by now I should have become accustomed. But one never grows accustomed to pain. As I said elsewhere, I was doomed to it in most of the relationships I made because in reality my heart as well as my mind had as its ideal the man I was to marry much later and with complete success.

I taught only one class of outstanding brilliance: a high-spirited first year with an equal amount of devilry and equally bright in either sex. One of them became a minister in the Australian Parliament. Since there was nothing vicious about them I didn’t particularly mind their rumbunctiousness and as the class was in an old detached building well away from the new block that made up the main school, any noise they made worried no-one. I am certain that some people work better if they do it without the unnatural restraint forced on classes in the name of discipline.

¹⁰ See the Melbourne Age, 2–3 January 1976, pp. 3 and 5.
This classroom was in a state of decay with no means of heating, a relic of the old days when rooms were divided by glass partitions which were not soundproof. At various periods I taught a second year in the other room while the large, gloomy geographer took the first years. Poor man, he was one of those unfortunates to whom the gift of controlling a class had not been given; and that first year behaved like devils indeed. Chalk and paper kites flew round the room. When he turned to the board, pen-nib darts spattered it; in the meantime the laughter, the hooting and even singing went on unchecked. Not that he didn’t try to check them, but in vain. On my side of the partition I used to work myself into a fever meditating what I would do when my turn came. But I never did. I would rush into the first year when he departed to face a class sitting in absolute calm, arms folded, faces ahead. Not a sound. The only time I tried to take up the cudgels on behalf of the poor man, the spokesman for the class—a bright boy, the son of a local doctor—said with complete reasonableness, ‘You can’t do anything about it, Miss. Just be glad we don’t do it to you.’ *Finis!*

My mind-mate on the staff and I made all the comments that people of our ideas made about the phoney war. It led, to our astonishment, to our being pulled up, in a confidential meeting, by a nice sincere young man on the staff who said if we continued to speak in that way about the war he would have to report us! He had the decency to apologise to us after the fall of France.

During the September holidays I took part in a weekend seminar on ‘Literature in Wartime’, organised by the Fellowship of Australian Writers. It was mainly memorable in that I met Judge Herbert Evatt, just preparing to go into politics, and Brian Fitzpatrick, who had established the Council of Civil Liberties in Melbourne. Both of them remained valued friends until their tragic deaths.

I was the mini-heroine at the school break-up for I produced the only play the school had ever had. Twenty years later I met my ‘hero’ in charge of a WEA school at Maitland. More remarkably, the Asparagus King asked to be brought to me as he had a large tin of asparagus for me, the only one he ever gave away. *And* he wanted to apologise for his earlier misconceptions about me. The fall of France had taught him something too.

11 Dr Herbert Vere (‘Doc’) Evatt (1894–1965), member for Balmain 1925–30 and High Court judge 1930–40, when he returned to federal politics, becoming leader of the ALP in 1951; in 1960 he became Chief Justice of New South Wales.

CHAPTER TEN

I returned to Bathurst early the next year only long enough to register my protest about the examiners. Then I got leave of absence for six months because of my mother’s illness. I had only to mention to the department, rightly or wrongly, that I had developed pernicious anaemia through their refusal to accept my doctor’s advice to leave Broken Hill at the end of my first year because of the deleterious effect of the climate on my health. Someone in charge of the section that deals in such matters had definitely blundered there.

That six months actually spent looking after a block of flats in Kings Cross in which family money was invested, taught me more than I’d ever learned all the rest of my life. The flats had become run down because of mother’s bad health and I took on me the job of cleaning them up—literally and morally. The locals called me the ‘Sky-Pilot of Orwell Street’. It was a job that would have tested the strength of Hercules and I never succeeded in what I set out to do. But it gave me experiences that made it possible to write *Come in Spinner* with a terrifying authenticity. Strange that this and my superficial experience with the Children’s Court as counsellor should have given me the background of a world I didn’t otherwise know. Prostitutes, bludgers and black marketeers are not normally part of a teacher’s life.

I have mentioned my fate and Job’s together before, without claiming equality with him. But in a minor way, things destined to bring me into the upper educational brackets did the opposite. At this time a new Labor Minister of Education (brother of the famous Dr Herbert Evatt)¹ was appointed. Not unnaturally, he was surprised to learn that a teacher of whom he had heard through the much-publicised court case, and whose work he respected outside the educational field, was consigned to the outer. He sent me an invitation to visit him.

¹ Clive Evatt (1900–82), member for Hurstville 1939–59; amongst various portfolios, he held the position of Minister for Education in 1941 and was also president of the Australian-Russian Society in the 1940s. He resigned from the ministry in 1954 and resumed his Bar practice.
The honour with which I was received positively startled me. I was unused to anything like it. We discussed books and plays. He expressed his admiration for my one novel and for one play, the first of which he had actually read and the second had seen played. This was almost incredible because of a widespread assumption by teachers that the previous minister had been illiterate. With this new, handsome man, barely older than me, and his ideas I began to feel there was hope. He had a well-thought out idea of establishing a Drama Section in the Department of Education. Who better equipped than me to take charge of it? Over an excellent cup of tea we discussed his plans and I added mine. Of course to cover such a wide field I would need a car. Altogether we worked out an excellent scheme. He had the Evatt brains and progressive ideas. I had the experience. He rang the director of secondary schools' secretary, making an appointment to discuss the matter. I went out walking on air.

Alas, pride goes before a fall. I ought to have known better than to expect anything good to come of such an intelligent scheme. I heard the tale from a friend at the Public Library. After discussing the matter with the minister, the director of secondary schools threw such a tantrum that his staff expected him to have a stroke. He always looked as though he was on the verge of one. He grabbed his hat, staggered up the hill to the Public Library and collapsed into a chair opposite the chief librarian and demanded in a voice choked with rage, 'Do you know what that idiot b— of a minister wants to do now?'

He said he didn't.

'Put that trouble-maker Cusack in charge of a new drama section. I told him I would resign if he did.'

Of course it was quashed, or rather, my role in it was. It was later put into action with a competent woman in charge of it. She did a good job.

Almost immediately I was informed that I was to be sent to Parkes High School to take the place of a girl I had taught at Parramatta. As she would not be leaving till the end of the month, I should spend three weeks supernumering at Fort Street Girls'. Job was dogging my heels. While I knew several teachers on the staff and found them kind and helpful (I needed it!), the headmistress, a dominant, brilliant woman in the mathematical line, pounced on me as soon as I arrived. Anyone who sued the department must be an outlaw. I got an outlaw's treatment. Incredible that a cultivated woman who had reached the highest position of her career should show such pettinesses. I fully realise the strain put upon feminine human nature by the inhuman conditions under which we worked. Today I am told by young teachers that their headmistresses show a different character in general since they are not bound by the conditions of their employment to renounce all the things that fulfil a woman's life: sex and marriage and probably child-bearing, though today zero population growth and the Pill have ruled this out as either inevitable or essential.
Whatever it was I got the rounds of the kitchen. Naturally what classes I was allowed to corrupt were the lowest. Dear little girls, with bright, inquisitive eyes and minds the same. I loved them. A friend recently asked me whether I regretted not having had children. I replied that I'd found so many children in my life on whom to pour out maternal affection that I had no sense of loss.

For those three weeks at Fort Street I needed it to keep me warm. I did all the odd jobs around the place. All the dirty jobs. A particular horror was a second year maths class that knew very little, but that little was more than me. Still, whatever talents I had were not entirely wasted. The very nice English mistress asked me if I would give her Leaving Certificate class lessons in honours English. I agreed with enthusiasm. We both knew this must be kept from the headmistress and were delighted to find that I had some free periods which coincided with her honours period. A heart-warming job, something of which I never tire. To open up to bright minds the riches and resources of literature. To feel spirits responding to a poem, enjoying the beauty of prose, endeavouring to translate the mystery and wonder of life into words. Even today when I am asked to lecture to a senior citizens' group, I find the same joy.

But the joy came to an end when the head walked in one day—fortunately towards the end of my time—and found me usurping the role of the teacher. 'How dare you?' she demanded, but not in front of the class, though she ordered me out in a voice that would have condemned me to the whipping-block. 'Presuming to teach English honours when you are going to a junior position in a country school.' No comment.

I remember with gratitude and affection Marita who accompanied me voluntarily day after day on my incessant playground duties, normally a chore that falls to your lot once a week at the most, the wind from the harbour freezing us on that exposed hill. And I learned again what I had already learned, that few people are able to handle power without being corrupted by it. Lord Acton would have loved the example of it before my eyes daily.

I went off to Parkes at the end of September 1941. To a small town on the western foothills in which summer was already making itself felt. A pleasant school with a considerate headmaster and a staff that reflected the same qualities, with the usual mixed bag of children most of whom should have been educated in a different way. Being a latecomer and replacing a junior teacher, naturally once more I got the poorest classes, though the English teacher of the senior classes arranged with the head that I should take her honours classes, as did the fourth year teacher, while they took over some of the chores I loathed.

But what a thankless business it was trying to teach French to children whose only knowledge of France was that it had been overrun by the Nazis. I got used to sneaking up to little boys, heads bent over the desk in what looked like absorption in the lesson but was really concentration on the prowess of the elephant beetles they raced.
And the poor little girl from a family whose father had been unemployed for a long time, but made up for it by begetting many children on the slatternly mother. In extenuation I must say that any woman who lived in a humpy like that could hardly be otherwise. The child got the breakfast for the whole family before she came to school and her red, roughened hands did most of the hard work at other times. I—'always an interfering bitch' to quote one of my superiors driven to vulgarity by my habits—tried to arrange some way in which she could be saved. Child Welfare could surely do something and nothing could be worse than what she had. She was intelligent, but just too tired to put her efforts to any school work, and I had a suspicion that her invalid father or slattern mother beat her.

All I succeeded in doing was in having the local priest descend on me for my impertinence in 'trying to break up a good Catholic family and give a girl ideas beyond her sex and station.'

I was happy in Parkes since I had no academic goals to reach and could hope for little from any inspector who came our way. Fortunately the only one I met was the man in charge of the district who for some extraordinary reason regarded me as a blessing to the school.

I remember the town with affection, and today, thirty-five years later, I still have a friend I made there. But teaching there only confirmed my opinion that it was the wrong school in the wrong place, and that on the whole we were wasting our time cramming the children with material that had no relation to their community and little relevance in the lives most of them would lead. And to me, relevance is the main thing education must have.

What a story is to be told as a normal part of learning the history of the development of the town from its establishment as a mining camp, Bushman’s, in 1862, through its change of name to Parkes after the statesman, in 1873. Its growth as a district which produces largely wool, fat lambs and wheat. The widening of its horizons with a military camp in the war and the building of a radio-telescope after it.

Why did a school like ours which was disrupted in harvest-time by the departure (permissible) of all the able-bodied sons of farmers to harvest the wheat crop, know nothing about the history of the development of wheat which makes us one of the world’s main exporters? Why did no statue or even photograph of William Farrer dominate the school to inspire future wheat-growers with his great achievement in blazing an original trail which led to the extension of the wheat belt and the production of climatic strains of wheat? Why did we not celebrate the development of agricultural machinery, climaxing in the invention

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2 William Farrer (1845–1906) was a surveyor in New South Wales before concentrating on producing a rust-resistant strain of wheat, widely adopted around the time of Federation.
and construction in 1884 by Hugh Victor McKay\(^3\) of the first commercially-successful machine which stripped, threshed, winnowed and bagged the wheat in one continuous operation? Or the header-harvester which followed it to retrieve crops flattened by wind or hail which three Australians, Charlton, Chapman and East, developed from 1905 to 1910, thus predating the similar American machine of 1914? Why did we not learn about such productions which placed Australia in the forefront of mechanical harvesting?

In my three months in Parkes I learned less about the district, its history and geography, than I learned in the twenty-four hours I spent there in 1970, at the invitation of a group (largely rich farmers) who asked me to talk to them about my work and my travels.

I was delighted then to discover what thirty years of war-news (three in as many decades), radio, television and a greater choice of papers and magazines had taught this farming community which in my day had been exclusively local and generally ignorant of the wider world.

Back in 1941 I would have stayed there quite happily, muddling along in peace at school, writing in the evenings and weekends. I corrected the proofs of a Melbourne University Press edition of *Red Sky at Morning*, enjoying board with a fine woman, a young widow, who taught me that tragedy does not spare rural quiet.

But Fate and the department had other things in store. When news of Pearl Harbor broke, they thought of the one place I was likely to be bombed and thus relieve them of the embarrassment of my existence, and sent me to Newcastle.

\(^3\) Hugh Victor McKay (1865–1926), agricultural innovator; his 'Sunshine Harvester' was invented in 1884 and patented in 1885. He was also the first Australian manufacturer to apply for certification under the New Protection Act, incidentally leading to the famous 'Harvester' case in which Judge Higgins of the Arbitration Court ruled on the 'fair and reasonable' wages and conditions of his employees; this became the first positive expression of the principle of the basic wage.
I fell in love with Newcastle on first sight, though this emotion was mitigated when I went to school the first day and discovered that Odora had preceded me as deputy headmistress. Not that she worried me the first fortnight when the girls had a holiday because we were preparing the school for potential air raids. Australia was shocked at this time by the first air raid on Darwin. As the main producer of munitions Newcastle seemed likely to be the next.

The staff at the girls' high school at Hamilton welcomed me with the usual politeness accorded to newcomers. I have never known them anywhere to fail in this. As for the headmistress and the deputy head, it was a different matter. Either reports on my past behaviour or Odora's poisonous whispers caused me to be ignored entirely by the head and inevitably by Odora herself. I waited to present myself, outside the head's office as custom decreed, only to be snubbed as she swept past me. When at the end of a fortnight the Latin mistress discovered that I had not yet succeeded in presenting myself, she escorted me round to the office, certain that it was all a regrettable error. She was soon disabused. As for me I knew I was set for a torrid year.

But Newcastle provided so many compensations from that first weekend that not even a session with Macbeth's three witches could have discouraged me. Oh that incredibly lovely view from the 'Hill', up which I walked to try to orient myself. In the foreground, King Edward Park in its narrow gully descending to the edge of the cliffs. The old shot-tower, now given over to pigeons, on the Hill beside me, and below the cliffs the old convict-made pool in the rocks. The coastline sweeping north and south in innumerable bays and beaches fringing the great sweep of the Pacific. Nobby's and its lighthouse topping the one-time island that marked the channel to and from the harbour. Away on the other side of the river the smoke-stacks of BHP pouring out billowing white clouds that turned to grey as they rose in the upper air.
CHAPTER ELEVEN

The city’s history since its discovery in 1797 by Lieutenant Shortland was a source of unending fascination to me. So far as the school’s curricula were concerned, the people who set it didn’t know that the place had a history. Incredible in these more enlightened days when every facet of local history is meticulously studied, that less than thirty years ago the Department of Education set its study courses as though we were a suburb of Europe, and made no effort at all to inculcate into their products the knowledge of their country that makes for love of it.

Five years later I wrote two documentaries for the ABC to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the settlement at what was known for a considerable time as Coal River, though Lieutenant John Shortland gave it the name of the governor, Hunter, which it now bears. A terrible and inspiring story—as most stories of our early settlement are—I followed it from the finding of coal there by escaping convicts in 1797; through the days when Sydney traders dealt in coal from the area; through exploration of its riverine areas by the botanist Robert Brown in 1804, when the banks of the river were lined with cedar down to the sea, though it was not till 1810 that cedar-cutting became a feature; through the horrifying records of the convict settlements that were established there largely to take the malcontents from Sydney. Many of the Irish political prisoners were sent there after the abortive rising of 1804. Stories of poor wretches with their backs raw from flogging carrying lime (another industry) through the water to the ships that took it to Sydney, and drowning themselves to escape the agony of the lime-water trickling into their open wounds. The background I used for my ‘hero’ in the historical play, Red Sky at Morning, in 1936.

But coal was to become its great industry and the stories of the conditions under which the first mining was done are hair-raising. We say we were a convict colony, but in reality we were a slave state. In those days Newcastle—as it became somewhere along the line—was linked with South America and South Africa with which it traded in coal. An old man told me he remembered the port when it was ‘a forest of masts’, and on the foreshores you can find today shards from Inca burial grounds, plants from South Africa—traces of everything that was brought back as ballast.

Its development into the leading steelmaking place in Australia is part of modern history, no less fascinating for that, linked with the Broken Hill Proprietary which owned the ore-mines I had known earlier—indeed most of Australia!—as well as the coal mines in the Newcastle region and the iron mountain of Whyalla, plus the fleet of ore-ships that plied between Whyalla and

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1 Entitled ‘Newcastle: Blood on the Coal’ and ‘Newcastle: From Coal to Steel’, they were both broadcast in September 1947.

2 Robert Brown (1773–1858), a Banksian botanist and librarian, explored the Hunter River in November 1804, adding about fifty species of plants to his collection in that month.

3 The infamous Vinegar Hill rebellion of 5 March 1804, the only organised attempt by the Irish convicts in New South Wales to overthrow the authorities.
Newcastle. Altogether the ideal place for a person like me whose earlier years in Broken Hill had left me with an insatiable interest in industrial cities, not so much for their industry as for the effect they had on the people who lived in them.

Though this is anticipating, I was particularly fortunate in the friends I made there who were able and willing to untangle the roots which made the modern city. One was an old-age pensioner who had a passionate desire to write about his natal town, and got to the stage of collecting priceless historical material. Dear old Hoppy, as he became in the book I eventually wrote. I can see him still, limping into my flat, laden with the flowers and vegetables he grew out on Lake Macquarie. Godfrey, a young journalist who also had literary ambitions, son of a mining family from Cessnock, was of priceless value to me with his reminiscences, and the material he had collected and—alas—did not live long enough to use. And Irwin, a brilliant, handsome descendant of Irish pioneers, with all their charm, wit and mordant humour, who gave me a picture of the city profound in its insights and savage in its criticism. I used some of his phrases ready-made in the book I wrote. To them all I now give my deepest thanks for the inspiration they gave me. I should also thank the BHP who gave me all the material I needed because they wanted me to write a book about the great steelworks. Of this, more later.

I could never understand—and can’t now—why Newcastle doesn’t feature more in our literature. In all my stay there I found nothing but some good racy tales by Will Lawson which recreated the days when the harbour was a ‘forest of masts’ of sailing ships from all over the world; when the waterfront was like that of San Francisco which has had so much written about it. There was no guidebook to Newcastle (that has been long since remedied, but not very imaginatively). No maps to be bought, because (according to the locals who had a salty sense of humour) they had all been given to the Japanese who visited the BHP before the Pacific war.

Now we were all keyed up by the realisation that war had really come to us. That was very obvious during the holiday so the teachers could bomb-proof the schools. The bombing of Darwin struck at our hearts. One of our cities bombed. Australians killed on Australian soil. Our reaction to that was—in a minor way—similar to the American reaction to Pearl Harbor, though we had none of their inflated pride to prick. Still the unbelievable had happened, and to us! What a singularly innocent people we were before the Second World War brought fear of invasion (never justified) to our shores.

The headmistress and Odora ignored me completely when I arrived. Betsy, as she was generally known, was the old-fashioned kind of head who believed that her staff were her slaves. She was notorious for two things: that she had worn
the one evening dress to school dances and break-ups for most of her time at the school; and for phrasing her speech to school-leavers as, ‘Some of you will become schoolteachers, others will go into different jobs, but most of you will join the oldest profession in the world!’ It convulsed generations, but nobody ever dared tell her.

During that first fortnight we protected the windows inexpertly with mosquito netting against air raid blast. Trenches were dug in the grounds. Since we were a short distance from the sea, within a week they were half-full of water. When the girls returned, they were ordered to prepare satchels containing all they would need in case they had to be evacuated anywhere. When I suggested that the sensitiveness of female bladders made a second pair of pants essential, Odora said, without looking at me, that only a person with a dirty mind would think of that.

Of course I collected all the poorest classes. I had two periods more than anyone else, and more chores such as playground duty and service in the book stockroom. If it was intended as an oblique punishment for my past sins, it failed. The other women on the staff, however they might view me and my history personally, were professionally horrified at such discrimination against a staff member who had not yet had time to reveal her criminal characteristics. They all helped me in some way or another.

The local inspector from the top put his imprimatur on my ostracism by refusing to have me presented to him on his official visit. In the two years I spent at Newcastle he never acknowledged my presence. Since the staffs of the various schools had nicknamed him the ‘Breast Stroke Champion’ I realised that I was lucky.

My work at the high school was deliberately chosen to humiliate any senior teacher with an A teaching mark. With the collaboration of the BSC those who ruled my fate saw to that. Since I had no classes that mattered in the academic-ridden atmosphere of a high school, I enjoyed myself. All those dear little girls on the edge of puberty, with their swelling breasts and their minds open to the wonders of the world they faced; it was perhaps the most fascinating time for them and for me. They loved me because I never implied that they were less worthy than their academically-minded sisters. How could I when I did not think so? These would be the people who would carry on our world (and what a mess we were leaving to them). These would do all the things despised by the more professionally-minded, including carrying on the race. Such a joy to face these bright, smiling faces on a bright morning and take the flowers with which they overwhelmed me. Such a pure joy. I never enjoyed teaching more than in these days when all ambition had left me and I could concentrate on teaching the things that would enrich their lives as normal human beings.

But I certainly worked! For my sins I had two more teaching periods a week than anyone else. I had two playground duties where everyone due for it had one.
I was sent to supervise sport every week. Odd jobs like assistant to the woman in charge of textbooks came my way, as did a stint in the library. In addition to all that, the headmistress had a slave system I have struck nowhere else. Every day and all day, the teacher who had a free period sat in the room opposite her office and at the sound of her bell, rushed in and was commissioned with a message to somewhere in the school. Probably because I had shorter legs than anyone else, she complained that I took longer than anyone else to do the job.

Whether it was Newcastle’s climate or the fumes from its various works I don’t know, but I began to be afflicted with a series of colds accompanied by a racking cough that put me in the Camille class.

Here, during what was to be my last experience in a girls’ school, I must add a word about that much-maligned creature, the woman teacher. It is true that in those days the prohibition on marriage meant that most women suffered from sex frustration of the most obvious kind. Those who didn’t had to enjoy their experience in underhand ways. Yet, in spite of my belief in the accuracy of Freudian observations up to a point, the amazing thing is that in all my years as a teacher, I never suffered—only in Newcastle—from meanness and the pettiness that are said to be the result of the life that most of them were obliged to lead.

In these sex-obsessed days, it is important to stress this fact. I have known among the women I taught with, to whose virginity unto death, forced or chosen, I would swear (if it mattered), those who were not frustrated. Their love for their job, the dedication with which they approached the children they taught, were fulfilled in a way to which Freud had no inkling with the rich, bored, middle-class Viennese women who were his patients. I knew only one woman whom the system beat to the extent that she ran out into the street one night in her nightdress, screaming and embracing a lamppost. After a period in a sanitarium, she returned to the staffroom, acting as normally as anyone else. Who knows what normality is? I do think that a normal married life is a good background for a teacher; but when I met the women who had been my school friends, I found that after fifty years of conventual teaching life, in which they had risen to the dignity of Reverend Mothers, they had retained the sweetness, the sense of humour and the profound humanity which had made them friends in the first place. They were far more completely fulfilled as human beings than friends of my university years who had everything that rich, happy, middle-class lives could give them, and at the end were completely shut off from the world, refusing to admit that it had changed at all.

At Newcastle Girls’ there were enough of us of a more liberated type of mind and outlook to form a lunch table where the gaiety and the general enjoyment of what were really difficult lives were a tribute to the resilience of the human mind and frame, particularly the female frame. One I especially remember, a large, middle-aged blonde with golden hair and a witty tongue. She described the president of the local canteen as looking like a ‘pregnant dugong’.
And she did. She did more than anyone on the staff to mitigate the woes I inevitably suffered considering the head and deputy head. Dear Ilma, I shall always cherish her for her capacity to reduce the most pompous to a state of gibbering fury by the superb dumb insolence with which she treated their comments. It takes a kind of genius to do that. For that, for her repertoire of clever, off-colour jokes, and for her irrepressible sense of humour as well as her great kindness, I shall always quote her as an example of a woman who out-Freuded Freud at his own game.

My life was brightened by a friendship with a lovely young woman some ten years my junior who was the visiting counsellor. But our headmistress had only contempt for such newfangled nonsense, and Hazel was never allowed to counsel nor asked for advice. For all that she was beautiful and extremely clever, with an MA in music (sniff, sniff from the head), she was afflicted with a sense of inferiority that was almost pathological. She had no confidence, even in her marked ability. I, under the lash myself, became her protector.

Because of our training in psychology, Hazel and I confessed to a mutual anxiety about a nice little girl in first year. When all her companions were budding little breasts and showing that exquisite grace of girls at puberty, little Y was straight as a boy, sprouting a moustache and convulsing the class with the oddities of her breaking voice. Obviously she was one of those tragedies who, by accident, ignorance or sheer mischance, had been put into the wrong sex at birth. We both thought now was the time to do something radical about it. If the father went to another town, Y could start life as a boy. Hazel went to the headmistress and, driven to the wall, quoted me in support. ‘Oh, indeed,’ sneered Betsy, ‘so Miss Cusack thinks so too! Then let me tell you I think you’re both bad-minded. I knew a woman in Queensland who had a moustache and she married a very rich squatter and had five children. Don’t let me hear more about it.’

Poor little Y. Just before my lovely Hazel died a year ago, we spoke of her and damned all ignorant stupid women and men ‘dressed with a little brief authority’. We doubted whether any kind of squatter came Y’s way.

I had one exam class, the lowest third year which was doomed to sit for the Intermediate Certificate none of them cared about nor wanted. Since it was considered a waste of time (even by the Gorgons) to do much with them, I was allowed to teach them my own way. At the end of the year, to their astonishment—and mine—they got remarkable high passes. Which proved something, but what I don’t exactly know.

A fourth year, in my hands, was an interesting experiment in inculcating non-academic types with a love of literature and the capacity to express themselves clearly—surely the best heritage heirs to all our culture can have. Today when I read in the newspapers the complaints about students reaching senior high school level without the ability to read intelligently or write effectively, I wonder where along the line the system went wrong. For it is without question the fault of the
educational system which either puts its emphasis on the wrong things or fails to emphasise the basic need for communication in society.

The fact that one of the Newcastle papers had reprinted the article about my court case against the department in its local edition, immediately made me an object of interest to a lot of people outside the school. That plus my small literary reputation assured me of being much in demand as a speaker. When the function was in the evening it was my own affair. I firmly refused any lunch-time affairs, until Rotary rang the head and she ordered me to go and speak to them. A teacher on the staff who was popular as a lecturer was useful to the school’s reputation, however much you disliked her.

This led to my being asked to lecture for the WEA, then under the control of Esmonde Higgins, brother of Nettie Palmer, fondly known as ‘Hig’ by the many people who admired and loved him as I soon did. It was a valuable experience for me as I decided to cover the nineteenth-century history of Australia and its relation to the development of our literature, something that has always fascinated me. I had a large, very mixed class, for which I gave an evening at my flat every month to enable them to talk over the matters I had raised; they provided the food, I the tea.

This in turn led to my being asked to write articles for the Newcastle Herald. The first one I did on the shortage of accommodation in the city caused me to be accused of libelling the city; though no-one with the worst intentions could really libel in this respect a city which was employing the usual methods of our society when circumstances made scarcity a normal motive for exploiting the victims. It rose out of my search for a small flat or bed-sitter which brought me in touch with the kind of landlords and landladies I had come to know in Kings Cross. I was lucky in finding a flatlet in a large house in Murray Avenue just behind the baths. The owner, a wharf labourer, and his warm-hearted wife showed me the greatest kindness during my two years with them. Later they were to provide the models for a similar family in Southern Steel, the novel I wrote on Newcastle in wartime.

My varied activities caused the organiser of the Army Education Scheme (voluntary) to approach me to lecture to the wide-spreading groups comprising the 10th Divvy, which was scattered throughout the region preparing to beat back the Japanese. I agreed and was given a form to fill in. It demanded such irrelevant personal details that, certain I would never be appointed, I treated it as a joke.

To sex, I answered: Hermaphrodite.
To age: 92.
To religion: Calathumpian.
To marital status: Refugee from Harem.
To Trade or Profession: Crammer.

For titles for suggested lectures I began with one that had already caused disturbance among various middle-class groups in Goulburn, Sydney and Bathurst: ‘Are We Worth Defending?’

To my astonishment I was called to see the convenor, a nice fellow from the Reserve with a military title, a pharmacist in civilian life. Why he found me suitable I don’t know. I had a doubtful reputation for tractability. A dubious one for politics. And a mordant and irrepressible sense of humour that delighted in deflating the pompous. He found me personable, not young, beautiful or sexy enough to tempt sex-starved men, and off I went to ask my first assignment, Did they think we were worth defending? It was a RAAF outfit on the edge of the sea and throughout the evening the thud of the waves made a symphonic accompaniment. We argued till late then I was escorted across the scrub lining the beach by two young airmen who argued all the way. No doubt I was a splendid antidote to service boredom on the home front.

The Education Officer—Koshnitsky, of chess fame—was delighted. In general, lecturers rated with the troops above a route march and below a picture-show. And here was one they actually enjoyed! He had found a secret weapon. So for the rest of that year I drove out through the blacked-out city and environs to odd little pockets of servicemen tucked away in the bush. Things I particularly remember: the guard who stuck his bayonet and torch into the car as we crossed on the Stockton punt and demanded ‘Who goes there?’ ‘Army Education lecture,’ Kosh replied. The torch turned on me: ‘Yeah?’ he said derisively. ‘’Ave a good time.’

Another night we went to the area of the Divisional Commander, at least ten miles from the sea. To our astonishment every guard, and they were stationed a hundred yards apart, had his steel helmet festooned with camouflage net which in turn was decorated with twigs of eucalyptus. The first car we passed was similarly disguised under a full-size net. When I enquired why, Kosh replied with a straight face, ‘The Colonel’s watch-word is “Always Prepared”!’

Again we found ourselves one night in a shelter of rough logs and gum branches, with rough-hewn tables and benches at which the troops sat. That was particularly memorable because they had prepared for me since they were told of my visit by a neighbouring camp. We argued and fought for hours till the cook brought us hot cocoa and scones made in the ashes and I departed with cheers and thanks to see me off.

It also led to my becoming a private lending-library for men who wanted to read something more than the usual guff provided for them. As well I learned many Top Secrets, such as the reason for the explosion that had recently thrown us into an alert. One of the participants told me that he and a mate occupied a dugout on the beach at Port Stephens that had become infested with fleas. They decided to clear them all out, so one night they poured in a tinful of petrol (petrol was rationed for civilians) and after it threw in a match. The resulting explosion
threw them both into the air and set the whole port and the coastline in action under the impression that the Japs had arrived. I swore never to reveal it but it can do no harm now.

Opposite my little flat was a searchlight, visible twenty miles to sea. But the squad (largely reservists from the first war), on duty day and night, were not allowed to make a fire to boil themselves a cup of coffee for supper, though their last meal at the Fort was at six p.m. So I fell into the habit of boiling a billy at ten o'clock and whistling to them to collect it. A friend coming home said the funniest sight he had seen was a uniformed figure crawling up the sandbags blocking the basement window below, knocking on the pane and me emerging, Rapunzel-like, with a billy!

As a result of military extravagance in the matter of stores, my shelves were always piled with tins of cocoa, jam and large packets of cheese we benighted civilians could not buy. These great-hearted men became my dear friends.

That searchlight played another role when one day at school two large policemen came to accuse me of revealing secrets to the enemy. It seemed that in a letter to Pip I spoke jestingly of my nightly visitors from the searchlight, and put my address on the letter.

'But,' I stammered, 'anyone can see it twenty miles out.'

'Ah, yes, but not know its location.'

'Nonsense,' I retorted, 'not when you sold all the local maps to the Japanese visiting the steelworks before the war.'

Then rising to my full five feet I said, 'I shall report this to Dr Evatt who is a friend of mine. He has made strong criticisms of citizens being harassed by stupid policemen.'

I did. And Dr Evatt replied with one of his famous pieces of invective in the press. Censorship in Newcastle rapidly improved. I found later that my brush with it was due to someone who disliked my very popular lectures to the troops.

The main value of the lectures was the knowledge they gave me of ordinary Australians. On one particular rainy night when the whole region was lashed by a minor cyclone, we drove up to Tomago where a large camp was stationed. The men had returned from a forced march and, sodden and disgruntled, had gone to bed. They were still more disgruntled when they were routed out by the news that an Army Education lecturer was arriving. When the large sergeant-major carried me through the eighteen inches of water that had accumulated, they sent up an ironic cheer. I couldn't have been more unpopular.

I was presented with a glass of whisky (death to me) in the officers' mess room, and talked to monosyllabically by a small sour man. So allergic am I to military pretension in general that I thought the crown on his shoulder represented some minor rank. Since all the other captains and lieutenants kept well away from us I thought he was some miserable under-officer despised by his superiors. I was particularly nice to him with no effect. Not till a lieutenant came up to us and said, 'The men are assembled, Major,' did I realise my error.
In the large hall—it must have held nearly a thousand angry men with top-coats over their pyjamas—the platform was studded with the greatest number of red-tabs I had yet met together. With difficulty I refrained from saying that Army Education was supposed to be for the troops, not for the officers, who were mistakenly supposed to be educated anyway. The major introduced me still looking as though he’d been weaned on a pickle.

I began. Within ten minutes I knew I had the large audience in my hand. They were mainly from the coal-mining districts (some of them told me they recognised me from my encounter with the Minister of Education some years before). These were people who had gone from ten years of unemployment to their first job in the army. They were extremely sensitive to my criticisms of a society that seemed able to run only from war to depression to war, which I knew from the days when notices stood outside mines and industrial plants saying ‘No Hands Wanted’, to the days when every hand was wanted to carry a gun. From the days when there was no money, even for milk for the children of unemployed parents, to the present when there was money for everything required for war. Was that kind of society worth defending? I asked. The reply was a shout of ‘No!’ from the audience that shook the rafters. ‘Or must we fight for something better?’ The ‘Yes!’ that answered shook the officers on the platform.

It was a wonderful night. Never had the troops had their own ideas expressed so forcibly. And in front of officers renowned for their solidly conservative ideas. Discussion time afterwards was even more stirring. When the major said it was time to stop there was a howl of frustration. But we stopped, and—for the only time in my life—the men gave me a standing ovation. Then the chaplain rose and in his best clerical manner begged the men to take no notice of such incendiary ideas. ‘A pity such a charming young woman should be misled, but they in turn must not be led astray ...’ Hand-clapping, booing and stamping closed the meeting. Supper with the phalanx that had hedged me in on the stage was a decidedly chilly affair. Not even the major spoke to me.

I was so elated that when I received a message via Hig some weeks later that the officer at the head of Army Education wished to see me, I went along cheerfully till Hig met and told me I was in for trouble. It was soon elucidated. The OC had a complaint from the Tomago Camp that as a result of my highly unsuitable lecture, the men had done nothing for weeks. ‘Then,’ I said derisively, ‘they should arrange to have me dropped into Japanese camps to see if I have the same result.’

The discussion that followed was farcical, resulting half-way through in my resigning altogether. The other half of the time was taken up by the officer’s efforts to persuade me to change my mind. Eventually I graciously acceded to his request. Not that it mattered. By then Army Education was being organised on a professional basis and we poor amateurs who had borne the brunt of it were dispensable. It must have offended the Officer Corps at Tomago that the real thing was as bad as me since mainly progressives wanted to educate the army.
Army Education brought me an invitation to join a discussion on the local ABC with Hig, Major X, the head of the system, and a brilliant engineer from BHP. The subject was what kind of Australia did we want after the war, if we survived as (theoretically) a democratic country? Naturally, BHP and the major were all for more and more private enterprise; Hig and I for a country based on socialistic principles and community cooperation.

‘Nonsense,’ growled the engineer. ‘All that the government should do is come to the assistance of private enterprise if and when it gets into difficulties.’

I retorted hotly: ‘I refuse to consider my country a lifesaver to be sent out to rescue stupid swimmers when they get into trouble that is largely of their own making.’

At the time I didn’t realise that the rather feeble crack was to bring down the wrath of the mighty on me. Poor Hig had to bring the news that I was invited to an evening at the home of the major, to meet a group of BHP people. Breezily I accepted, was picked up by a very fine lawyer, driven out to a magnificent home in New Lambton Heights, ate a good dinner in mixed company, after which I was set up like an unpainted idol in the lounge room adjoining the dining room where the women remained in semi-purdah.

It was not till the engineer of the radio discussion rose and began to read a ten-page paper that it dawned on me that I was there not for a social evening but for a relatively public execution. Another night of the long knives! Scarcely able to believe my ears I listened incredulously to the sort of nonsense I had heard once before in Bathurst. But there my attacker was an old man. Here he was my contemporary, a young man of remarkable brilliance (in steelmaking at least) who had only recently come back from a world tour in which he lent his steelmaking capacities to the Allied world. But not, I hope, his antediluvian politics. He accused me of everything but murder. I was literally speechless. Then the lawyer interposed: ‘I must protest,’ he said. ‘I was told this lady was invited here so that we could discuss various things with her, not that she should be subjected to an ill-informed diatribe without the opportunity to answer.’

In the ‘discussion’ that precipitated I got back my wits and my tongue. To the statement that if there was any more government interference, the whole BHP would withdraw from its role as our chief maker of steel and munitions, I cried, ‘What? Desert your post in wartime? That is treason, which I shall report to the Prime Minister’ (an acquaintance from Bathurst days). The rest of the argument that night rarely reached such heights of intelligibility. I left in the familiar state of despair that my country’s fate was in such hands.

The lawyer drove me home and we stood leaning on my gate for two hours mutually sharing our opinions which were oddly alike. A fine man, a courageous
man. I wonder how many similar thinkers must hide their thoughts because their professional wariness tells them where the truth will send them.

However the night was not wasted. Having once crossed the sacred social barrier, I was next invited to a party the upper-crust women were giving in a suburban pub. Daringly, it was to be in the public bar, sacred to us for the afternoon, and the proceeds of the entrance fee (from which I was exempt) were to go to the 'the dear boys'. More out of curiosity than anything else I accepted. My Newcastle novel was already beginning to stir in my subconscious. The function got off to a good start with well-dressed matrons and maidens (in theory at least) fronting the bar and tossing the coins recklessly across the counter. The landlord and his efficient wife gathered them in, barely hiding their faintly gloating smiles.

In those days women as a whole drank very little, unlike today. Few 'decent' women were drunks. It was still the time when to be drunk was socially unacceptable, except for men in their own clubs and homes. Only the 'lower classes' got drunk in pubs. Knowing my own incapacity to take alcohol, after one brandy, lime and soda (to which an Irishman had introduced me), I settled for lime and soda, to a wink from the barman. But my companions were innocents. Never before had they seen such a dazzling array of bottles. Never seen such a variety of liquors with fascinating names. Never, never, never poured such an enchanting cascade down their throats, wrinkled and unwrinkled (and, I swear, never repeated it).

The bar was reserved for two hours. Long before that was up, lifelong friendships were being shattered. In Vino Veritas! An amount of veritas bandied round that would, in less genteel circumstances, have led to face-scratching, hair-pulling and kicking in the shins. But not here. There were few there who could stand on their feet long enough to get in a blow.

Women went staggering out to the adjacent toilets. The sound of vomiting rent our ears. Others never got there and lay sprawled in their own muck on the bar-room floor. Others draped themselves over chairs. Others lay flat on the hard horsehair sofas lining the outer wall. The landlord went to the phone. When agitated husbands began arriving in their cars to pick up the fallen, they stood aghast at the field of battle. One after another they carried, dragged or pushed their spouses through the swinging doors, ignoring their groans, their protests, and their belligerence alike. One of them, a powerful man with swarthy jowls, went to the bar and dropped a five-pound note on it. 'It's worth that to keep your mouth shut about this.' he snapped. The landlord pocketted it with fervent assurances.

But nobody had bribed me!

* * *
I have omitted the climax that stunned Newcastle and made me the first front-line war correspondent in the south. It was a Sunday night in June, memorable for me in that I was invited to speak to young people from the pulpit in the Unitarian Church. I was barely in bed later that evening when I was rocketted out by air raid sirens and the general hullabaloo that went with such exercises. But we found that this was no mere exercise when we emerged from the air raid shelter to which our fatherly wardens had consigned us. Japanese submarines were shelling Sydney! Hazel and I felt it was the kind of occasion on which we should drink at least a nip of our emergency brandy. Being poor drinkers, it sent us to sleep quickly.

Two hours later a terrific explosion literally threw me out of bed. I picked myself up and rushed to the window to hear the sound that till then I had only heard at the talkies. That high, whistling whine increasing as it came ever nearer. One of the guards on the searchlight opposite yelled, ‘Pull yer ’ed in luv, it’s the real thing!’

I was too stiff with fright to do so and as it went plunk into the sandhill covering their dugout I realised it was a shell. My undeserved reputation for cool and calm went by the boards as I raced round looking for my elegant blitz suit, hair flying in the breeze of my own progress, mouth full of hairpins, satin nightie-on-the-bias crawling up to my neck. When the big gun on Fort Scratchley boomed out, all the empty tins I was collecting for the war effort (why, I don’t know) fell off the shelf and I thought I was shot in the back. A knock on the door which opened to Hazel’s unperturbed face. She stood there like Queen Victoria (but for her blitz suit) and asked, ‘Are we going to the shelter?’

Soldiers from the Fort were ushering us out by then, our own warden, the landlord, a good six lengths ahead. Slippers on, a fur coat over my nightie, hair still flying, mouth full of hairpins, I went round the corner into Parnell Place, with guns booming up and down the coast. Just as we rounded it an explosion on the other side knocked us off our feet (we thought we had obeyed the order to lie down), then we went scuttering down the stairs into the shelter to find it crowded with invisible figures who only became people when you sat on them.

I ended up next to an old lady whom I saw by the light of someone’s torch sitting straight as Queen Mary and with a similar hat. On her lap was a neatly-packed basket. She patted my trembling knees and said, ‘Don’t you worry lass. I bin through three depressions and they’re much worse.’

During the two hours we spent in the shelter with the sound of guns getting fainter, I talked incessantly; would-be funny stories, similar jokes, etc. Pure shock. But it had the effect, when we finally got out, of having me elected as air raid warden of No. 1 Murray Avenue because I showed such admirable composure!

After drinking the last of the brandy I sat down as light came into the sky and typed out the first report of war on Newcastle’s eastern front. The local
Herald published it.8 In 1972 on the thirtieth anniversary of our shelling, I rewrote it, using most of the on-the-spot material. Two leading Sydney papers refused it.9 So did the Newcastle Herald. Our wartime enemies have become our friends, and principal trade partners.

The brandy and the disturbed night sent me into such a sound sleep that I was late for school. The head and deputy head, who lived in more respectable parts of the city, would not believe my excuse. I heard them say as I left the office, ‘Huh, dramatising again.’

Some ten years later when Southern Steel was published in London, a man wrote from Western Australia saying that such untrue reports of the war in Australia should not be published, that Newcastle was never shelled.

* * *

Hazel and I spent a delightful holiday in a furnished cottage at Lake Munmorah, where I finished writing a play, Comets Soon Pass, which won the Western Australian Drama Festival Prize.10 It was a period that widened our knowledge of people since the local keeper of the store (and everything else) discussed world problems with us each time we appeared. A fisherman, a silent listener we found, possessed a hut crammed with modern books, a radio with a short-wave receiver, and information we rarely found among our supposedly intellectual friends. At the end of the holiday we were washed out by a cyclone that practically wrecked the place.

Together with the sports mistress—a delightful young woman, herself a product of the coalfields and knowing in brains and bone what the Depression had meant—we precipitated another crisis. One of my fourth years (mine because there was no lower class to put her in) was outstanding as a runner. Her times (meaning nothing to me) sent the informed into rhapsodies. She won all the local sports. As an athlete and a person, she could not be faulted.

But—her father was an invalid pensioner from some mine disaster before our time. She could not pay the regulation school sports fee. So when the time came for the Country Schools Sports Day in Sydney, she was told by Odora (who always did the head’s dirty work) that she could not go.

Appalled, the sports mistress went to plead on her girl’s behalf. She was refused. Aghast, Hazel girded up her loins (poor darling, she was frightened of everything) and went to add her weight to the appeal. Rejected, I (how stupid I

8 'No Panic in First Test Under Fire', Newcastle Herald, 9 June 1942, p. 2.
9 'The Night Newcastle Was Bombed', with attached rejection slip from the Sydney Morning Herald, is in the Dymphna Cusack Papers, National Library of Australia, MS 4621, box 25, folder 16.
10 Comets Soon Pass won the competition in 1943; it was published in Cusack’s Three Australian Three-Act Plays (1950).
am) became the staff spokeswoman and went to appeal on behalf of one of my roll-class, the only reason for me to stick my neck out. Wham!

So the sports mistress and Hazel and I conspired to send her and pay the expenses ourselves (many of the staff cooperating) and be damned to them all! She went, carefully hidden by the other girls. She ran, and she won! Her name (such an honour for the school) was splashed all over the papers. And we never heard a word about it.

It was inevitable that the year should not end without a ding-dong confrontation. If I had showed myself cowardly in my meekness, there was a limit. It was reached when Odora came to me with her sickly smile and purred, ‘The headmistress asked me to tell you that she expects you to produce a play for the end of the year.’

‘I won’t,’ I blurted out.
‘You what?’
‘I won’t. My timetable leaves me no time.’
‘Follow me,’ she ordered. ‘This is a matter for the headmistress.’

The headmistress looked like thunder when she announced my rebellion; she approached me with her throat working like a turkey-gobbler. ‘And why not?’

In the rush of blood to the head that indicated that Grandfather had turned in his grave, I poured out the grievances of my timetable. They stood looking at me with indignation and unbelief.

I ended, ‘So you will see it is quite impossible for me to fit in the production of a play.’

‘It’s impossible,’ Betsy boomed. ‘No teacher on my staff can have a programme like that.’

‘I suggest you look at the school timetable,’ I said.

It was brought. They examined it. Gaped. Exchanged guilty whispers.

‘How can this have happened?’ Betsy demanded as though I had done it to myself.

‘Since you and Odora made it up, I suggest you ask yourselves,’ I retorted, victory running warm in my veins.

The result was that I was freed of all the odd jobs and the two extra periods I had, and given time to produce the school play.

In all, our object at high school was supposedly to make thinking, independent women. I am not sure how far we succeeded in a community that is still entirely male-orientated and aimed at keeping them decorative, second-class citizens (see women’s magazines in 1975). As late as 1967 I was horrified to hear a group of young university girls discussing a colleague’s right to keep an expensive engagement ring when the engagement was broken off. They were entirely unimpressed by my comments. After all, I was an ‘oldie’ quite out of touch with modern ideas. I retorted that in my old days at least a decent girl did not make a profit from a failed romance. They laughed at me.
Since my teaching career in girls' schools was nearing its close, I should like to sum up my opinion of the whole departmental muddle as I knew it. It can be best expressed by an outsider's view of it, since I may be said to be biased.

In London eight years later I wrote to H.C. Dent, editor of the 'Educational Supplement' of The Times, London, to agree with him when after a visit to Australia he complained that the majority of Australian children were being given not only a predominantly bookish education, but one in which there was an extensive emphasis on verbalism. Education seemed to him to be authoritarian in all its parts, its structure rigidly hierarchical, the content of its curriculum concentrated upon the accumulation of stereotyped detail, and its pupils taught by mass methods. The effect of the examination system upon teaching methods in all subjects he regarded as most baneful. 'For this state of affairs,' he wrote, 'there are I think four main causes: the prestige of the academic school, the obsession with examinations, the system of appointing teachers, and the failure on the part of administrators, and also teachers, to realise what extraordinary efforts must be made to establish new forms of education.'

I quote his excellent criticisms here because my next experience showed me another and more intelligent kind of school.

At the beginning of 1943, I, along with four other women, was transferred to the Newcastle Boys' Technical High School, since there was a shortage of men teachers owing to recruitment for the war. We were chosen because we had the reputation of being able to manage boys. A fine new school, as yet unfinished, which the BHP helped to build. Since we were considered a training ground for their recruits, they expected to dictate the curricula.

I'm glad to say there was an immediate protest. As one of the men said, if they wanted workers educated sufficiently only to take orders, we did not have to conform to their ideas. I'm proud to say that the whole staff, irrespective of their position or their politics, fought against their wishes and won.

As inevitable, I arrived with a reputation of being intractable at least. As the district inspector had his office in the building and continued to ignore me for the next year, no doubt he added lurid tit-bits to the general gossip.

I count what was to be my last year of teaching as one of the best in my career. A good head, Tommy Clyne, in every sense of the term: as teacher, as staff-leader, as disciplinarian. Intelligent, humane, firm. Frank Beard, his deputy head, whom I had originally known at Broken Hill, was just as admirable. It was expected that the five women would have to fight for their rights in a predominantly male staff, but there were no obvious injustices.

The men were astonished when I made no claims for superior classes which my mark and teaching achievements would have justified. But if I had ceased to have any ambition three years ago when I was sent to Bathurst, by now I had begun to like my lowly status. There, free from exam pressures, I could really teach; open that 'window in the dark' I still saw as a good metaphor for our work.
There was one particularly tough class everybody tried to dodge, a bottom fourth year that had carried its reputation for vice and unteachability right through the previous three years. When it was being discussed at the staff meeting, I astonished everybody by saying I would take it as my roll-class if no-one else wanted it. Wanted it? They exclaimed: 'Do you realise they’re bushrangers?' I said I didn’t mind. Even the head, in words of one syllable, had to explain to me that it had such a bad reputation that if after a month I wished to give it up, he would consider it no reflection on my ability as a teacher. I still said I would take it on my shoulders, whereupon some of the men insisted that in compensation I should be spared from such things as playground duty, the implication being that I wouldn’t be able to stand after a few weeks of the outlaws I was voluntarily taking on. They looked at me with expressions mixed between compassion and relief. The martyr who sacrifices herself for the corps!

I must admit I had no such feeling myself. I had taught boys in all kinds of places and situations and didn’t believe that I could strike irremediable trouble in a city I loved with citizens I liked.

Came the day of the Great Encounter. I walked into the Fourth Year of the Damned, as one of the men called it, wearing my nicest frock and my friendliest expression. They were answered by a low appreciative whistle I ignored. I sat on the desk, as I usually did, considering that broke down the appallingly stiff atmosphere of the teacher prowling like a keeper in front of the class. The class eyed me distrustfully. They had learned to distrust everyone and everything in their three years of secondary education. Not the fault of their teachers who in the main were as competent and humane as could be wished. Just incompatibility of boy and subject matter taught.

I looked over their untidy heads, hair generally to the shoulders long before it was fashionable. I began by saying that I had asked to have them as my roll-class so I felt it would be a good idea if we spent this lesson with them telling me their names and special hobbies. Slightly mollified, they began, each recital accompanied by jeers as the class supplied some of the more hilarious bits the individual omitted. It was a revealing experience and we parted better friends than we had begun. As they filed out (they had no room of their own) I noticed that each one wore his shirt-tails out flapping in the wind and his trouser legs in bike-clips.

The next lesson, I asked what they would like to study that year since there was no set course for them, so I’d like their opinion. They goggled at me. No-one had asked their opinion in their lives. 'These are the books available,' I began: 'One: Shakespeare's *As You Like It*.' 'Boo, boo,' came the response. 'No Shakespeare!' They hated Shakespeare (poor old Bill!).

'All right, no Shakespeare. How about Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*? Mind you, we’d have to buy the Penguins ourselves and that would cost money.'

'*Pygmalion*? *Pygmalion*!' they yelled. It had been a film, so it *must* be good. The money didn’t matter. They all had out-of-school jobs. So off I went and
bought enough books so that three could read from one, an inconvenience they 
would previously have bitterly resented. It was an immediate success. 'Gee, Miss,' 
said one, 'I never knew plays could be interesting.' The class reading of the play 
brought out unexpected dramatic abilities. Each night in turn they took the 
books home to read them for pleasure!

The next thing to be decided was what poetry they would study. They 
pooh-poohed the idea of poetry. 'Cissy stuff.' They hated it. 'All right,' I said with 
the last word in reasonableness, 'I'll read you some poetry and you can decide.' So 
I collected all the war poetry I could find and they listened absorbed. That was not 
cissy! I made our own collection, typed it and got it duplicated. They were delighted 
to find poems themselves and add them to the collection. They even read Wilfrid 
Owen's war poems with the comment that the bloke could write!

After a fortnight feeling my way, I began to realise that I was on the verge of 
the kind of educational experiment I had always wanted to make. This was bigger 
than anything I had struck or read about. I began to take notes for my own interest. 
So far as the head and the deputy were concerned I could do as I liked provided I 
removed a trouble-making centre from its bad influence on the school. Not that all 
the rest were models of what high school boys should be. I remember standing with 
the head at the bottom of the fine curving staircase, when to our astonishment, a 
boy landed at our feet. 'How dare you slide down the bannisters, Smith!' the head 
demanded in his sternest voice. Smith looked us in the eye and explained, 'There's 
nothing in the rules against it, Sir.' Neither there was.

My fourth year's first attempts at composition were brief essays for which 
we prepared in vocabulary and tone in the way I had devised. Essays on Newcastle 
in wartime. The changes they noticed. It was remarkable what these boys wrote, 
who had the reputation of not being able to write at all. The technique of writing 
required a lot of attention and I had to be careful. They were very touchy about 
the defects they had brought with them from the lower school. I used my 
brother's letters from the RAAF in England, which the local Herald published, 
as models they loved. When I myself wrote an article for the paper, it was read 
and criticised so that I too became more careful.

After about a month I thought it was time to do something about their 
appalling untidiness. I began by asking did they think I came to class in a fashion 
they were ashamed of? A loud and enthusiastic 'No' with a few appreciative, 'Gee, 
Miss, you look beaut's, reassured me. 'Then,' I asked again with that sweet 
reasonableness, 'How do you think I feel about my class looking like tramps?' They admitted I had something there.

'Do you think you could possibly put your shirt-tails in? It would make 
such a difference to your appearance and I wouldn't be ashamed when someone 
made sneering remarks about you.'

Next day I arrived to find a scuffle taking place on the floor. Four boys 
untangled themselves from 'Doc' (called from his namesake in Treasure Island)
who was flattened beneath them. ‘He’s got his shirt in now Miss,’ they said triumphantly. Doc was the last to yield under mass pressure.

I then suggested they should get their hair cut, not short back and sides as was the fashion at the time; just enough to keep it out of their eyes. Personally I had nothing against long hair. After all, Christ had long hair if we are to believe the pictures of him. Heads tidied up remarkably, but not enough to interfere with their rights as independent, free-thinking, etc., etc.

At a staff meeting to arrange the time various classes could occupy the library for reading and research, I was indignant to find that my class had no such period. When I protested, the head explained that it was punishment for bad behaviour in some previous year. Finally I guaranteed that if allowed a library period, I would be responsible for their behaviour and their treatment of the books. I explained to the class that I had succeeded in getting the old ban lifted on my personal guarantee. ‘We won’t let you down, Miss,’ they assured me. They didn’t. Indeed, occasionally they brought books to me that had been badly treated by other classes. I duly reported it.

About this time the local municipal library sent two free subscription cards to be distributed. One of my boys, Jim W, was one of the most enthusiastic readers I had ever known, and I duly suggested him. To the astonishment of the school, he was given a free subscription and I’m sure Newcastle Library never had a better and more careful reader on its lists. The whole class was proud of him and of the notebook he kept—at my suggestion—to show what he was reading. They began doing the same on a much lower scale. But read they did. To train their taste, I read them stories that captured their imagination, from Rudyard Kipling and Henry Lawson, Brett Hart and any newly-written war stories from young Australians in the services. The Bulletin (a very different paper in those days) provided a wealth of those. Jim W even began reading Barbusse’s account of the First World War, the first to expose the utter stupidity of war, all war. The class decided they would like to produce a magazine such as my very good second and first years were producing, putting in it not only what they wrote themselves but things they found specially interesting. I wish I had it today, for it revealed that the bushrangers had keen minds and sensitive hearts.

I was much helped by Lydia, a young teacher who was superb with all classes. One of the rewards for good work was to ride to sport on the back of her motor bike with her. She was a musician as well and started a school orchestra for which some of my ‘toughs’ showed real ability. She no more than I had trouble with the boys, which only goes to prove that teaching is a matter of temperament as much as technique. We were both very happy at the school and it was reflected in our classes. A lifelong friendship began. She recently visited me on a trip from the USA.

Of course my bushrangers were not the only class I had. A good slap at sentimentality was given me when one of my first years lost an eye in an accident
in the metalworking shop. When he was returning to school, I lectured the class on what their behaviour to him was to be. No undue curiosity, etc. etc. During the first lesson after his return I wondered what the giggling behind me was when I was writing on the board. I turned suddenly and found Jack's eye sitting in the inkwell in mock supervision. I gave up an unequal battle.

Only the top fourth and fifth year were potential academics, and very few of them. I taught the fourth history and proved my own theory of exams by the boy with the best memory and little else coming top in the yearly examinations. It was tragic that if you complained about a boy not working, he just shrugged his shoulders and said, 'I'll be eighteen next year and in the army. I should worry.'

The school devised a scheme of social studies which taught them about the political and municipal basis of their society. It was an excellent plan. One of the teachers later wrote the textbook for it, in which he asked me to collaborate, but Fate intervened. I explained preferential voting to the class by following the election results for a dear friend of mine, Jessie Street, one of the great Australian women of our generation. She stood for the Labor Party (though coming from a rich, completely conservative family), and Labor, typically so far as women in parliament were concerned, preselected her for a seat she couldn't possibly win; a rich, snob suburb against standing member Eric Harrison, soon to be a High Commissioner in London. So widespread was Jessie's fame as a fighter for women's rights that she nearly won. That long drawn-out fight concerning the allocation of preferential and postal votes was a lesson to the young Australians. Their disappointment when Jessie was beaten by a head was as deep as my own.

Looking through the history set for the Leaving Certificate, it was ridiculous to see that it all stopped at the end of the First World War.

Young people were taught nothing of the circumstances that led to the next one in which we were already involved. Indeed, when I returned after eighteen months in China the best part of twenty years later, I discovered that my nephew, thirsty for information about the country, had studied it for his Leaving Certificate only to 1919. Asia, for us, did not exist. We were oriented only to Europe.

Will Durant, the American philosopher wrote:

Europe and America [he might have added Australia] are the spoiled child and grandchild [of Asia] and have never quite realised the wealth of their pre-classical inheritance. We shall be surprised to learn how much of our indispensable inventions and our economic and our political organisations go back to the Orient.

11 Jessie Street (1889-1970) feminist and founding president of the United Associations of Women; she contested the highly conservative federal seat of Wentworth.

12 Will Durant (b. 1885), published many books on history and philosophy, including the ten-volume Story of Civilization (1935-67).
‘Indeed in Asia began all the world’s religions,’ wrote Alberto da Cruz, Senior Information Officer of the Hong Kong Government:

The art of cultivating the soil, the oldest irrigation system, the production of tea and wine, handicrafts, structures of brick, linen, glass, silk, gun-powder and the compass. The idea of the village community, notions of courtesy and etiquette, the cry for social justice and the plea for human brotherhood are all Asian in origin.

Out of the East came the calendar, medicine, music and simple numerals. It was in the East that the subtleties of hypnotism, psychology and metaphysics first stirred the imagination and fancy [and] created the basis for most of the world’s fables.

Here we were involved in a war that was going to emphasise our position as a south Asian country and, except for a few well-informed specialists, knowing nothing whatever about it. Not strange that for another quarter of a century our schools refused to teach anything about it and our government to admit that it existed until well into the seventies.

That war was painfully close to me with letters from my brother and cousins, the deaths of boys I had taught who were dear to me, and the horrible massacre of nine nurses in New Guinea, most of whom I had known in some capacity or another. When, oh when, will our history courses include lessons on the means of keeping the peace instead of endlessly emphasising the terrible wars that have destroyed countries and people and the civilisations so painfully wrung from barbarism? And the unquestionable facts that the great heroes and heroines are those who contributed to the peace and well-being of the world.

As the year went on I was delighted when other teachers came to tell how my bushrangers had improved in all the subjects they took. So far as we were concerned, our relationship grew warmer. I found myself discussing how to write a love-letter; advising on whether one could ask a girl to meet them inside the picture-show, since she was working and earned more than he did. Parents came to the school to thank me for the first good year their sons had had. ‘I thought I had a delinquent on my hands till you came,’ was a common comment. A tram driver got out of his cabin to thank me for the general improvement in his son’s behaviour, at home as well as at school.

The second year entrusted to me was very bright, intended, I think, as compensation from what everyone expected me to suffer from the bushrangers. Bright indeed and, what often goes with it, little devils. There’s a particular kind of devilry which accompanies puberty, going along with sprouting hairs, pimples and breaking voices. Girls go through that period earlier so by the time they have come into high school they are in their ‘be good, sweet maid’ stage—temporarily at least. I can still see one of the boy seconds who had a sadistic streak in addition to his talents. As most of his classmates were still in short pants, he gave vent to it by stealthily flipping the boy in front of him with a strong rubber band. This
taken on the sensitive skin at the back of the knee sent the victim leaping into
the air while the criminal looked innocent. Their peculiar sense of honour didn’t
allow them to expose him. But with careful attention I found that the one
common denominator in all these upsets was X. Some boy, any boy, in front of
X was always the victim.

I caught X in the act one day. I found that my detective capacity in tracking
him down was much appreciated. I didn’t believe in the principle of sending
him to the head for caning, so I brought him out in front of the class, selected
the latest victim, armed him with X’s thick rubber band, and invited him to pay
X in his own coin.

So here was X waiting apprehensively as Y bent down, stretched the rubber
to its limit, and prepared to fire. At that moment X gave an almost automatic
leap forward; this was repeated several times. He had nearly reached the  wall
when the door opened and the head walked in. “The punishment fitting the
crime, eh?” he commented as I explained, and stood and watched till X stood
flat against the wall and his executioner crept up behind him. As the rubber
flipped against his leg, his yell of agony was accompanied by cheers from the
whole class. We had no more trouble from him.

I don’t know whose idea it was (I suspect Hig and an excellent teacher from
the YMCA), but we found ourselves involved in a conference on sex education.
No doubt the number of young soldiers found to be suffering from VD helped
undermine the Council’s distaste for anything revolutionary. The number of
unwanted pregnancies and their corollaries, illicit abortions, had its part, but
VD for men and pregnancy for women are part of the occupational risk normal
in wartime.

The conference was largely attended (Hazel and I were there in semi-official
capacity), and the speakers were conflicting in their views. Dr Norman Haire, a
famous and brilliant man who might have been best described as a sexologist,
was there to shock the conservatives with his outrageous outspokenness. The
editor of a Catholic newspaper had travelled all the way from Melbourne to
assure us that God, in his infinite mercy, would protect the innocent. Nothing
was said about the non-innocent. Religion and Science continued to bash each
other for two hours. Protestants as narrow as Catholics. Commonsense was
ignored. The only result was the election of a committee to discuss the matter.
I, as a notorious trouble-maker, found myself on it.

I shall never forget those incredibly stupid meetings at the hospital, since our
president was also head of the hospital. So narrow, so bigoted (he was a Catholic)
that it was impossible to get anything discussed since the non-conformist ministers
backed him in all his negativness. Goaded to fury, I cried one night, ‘When I think

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13 Dr Norman Haire MD (1892-1952), psychologist, returned to Australia during the war years, publishing a
regular column in Woman under the pseudonym ‘Wykeham Terris’. In London he became famous for, among
other things, his free clinics for child welfare and contraception advice for the poor.
of the abysmal ignorance with which I left my boarding school! ...’ The doctor leaned over the table and said, ‘And were you any the worse for it?’

I left the committee, which never achieved anything. It is a depressing fact that in 1975 we are still arguing about it, though a final report on the place of sex education was published in April 1974. It stated that ‘Sex education should be concerned with human sexuality and the total personality of the individual.’ It should be

integrated as part of health and personal development programmes, into the total education of the pupils ... It would recognize and make proper provision for physiological, social, ethical and psychological components. Sex should be seen as a major aspect of personality and sex education as a process to which the home and community can contribute.

Human sexuality rather than human reproduction should be the concern of sex education. Personal development rather than biology should define its scope ...

The range of relationships between men and women and the responsibilities towards members of the same and the opposite sex should be traversed. A desirable outcome of the programme would be an appreciation of the need for the moral values that are necessary to provide rational bases for decision-making ...

Young people are acquiring sexual knowledge and attitudes through a network of informal influences on them and will continue to do so — no matter what schools or parents may do or say. They [pupils] will always be under powerful formative pressures — the peer groups, the mass media, ‘pop’ culture, the influences of the streets and places where young people gather, the commercial sex-manuals, the advocacy of social pressure groups, and the work of self-appointed educators.

The communications revolution has thrust explicit sexual knowledge and controversies into homes in a way unknown to earlier generations. Young people cannot be entirely insulated from its effects ...

Because students need guidance the school must be involved ... Sex education is not a separate entity but a vital part of the development of all youngsters. It is difficult to grow up in a society or to accept the credibility of an institution such as the school in which one’s important problems are dismissed or regarded as strictly taboo. It is patent that, apart from the parents, the teacher is one to whom the child turns for guidance, advice and support in a whole range of matters including developing sexuality. For the child’s sake and the school’s sake, this guidance and help should be honestly and readily available ... [from] responsible adults who are not too emotionally involved with him ... The school has the great advantage of the peer group influences. Discussions and debates about these matters in the school group is the best way of achieving living situations in which a sense of real and moral obligation is fostered ...

Research shows that this is the most effective way for youngsters to gain insight and achieve positive, behavioural changes.

I am doubtful about the ability of most parents to take on the job themselves. My eldest sister, a trained nurse, delegated to me the job of telling her daughter about menstruation and all the attendant facts of reproduction, etc.

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14 The report, *Personal Development in Secondary Schools: The Place of Sex Education*, was published by the New South Wales Department of Education in 1974. Cusack is quoting from pages 5 to 8 passim.
Allowing for a number of vague generalisations in the effort of coming to task with what is an enormous problem, considering the ignorance of teachers and parents alike, the report offers no difficulties for informed parents or teachers. But how many of them are adequately informed? The objection of the Deputy Director of Education in New South Wales to the introduction of specialists in the subject from outside the schools, seems to me quite uncalled-for. It is all right for him to say that ‘our profession would not wish to abdicate from this responsibility’. Though he does go on to say that ‘there is no doubt that teachers active in the comprehensive sex education program envisaged in the report, would need special help and training ... No task a teacher faces could be more challenging and none more rewarding.’

With which I agree.

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Nineteen forty-three went on with the usual ‘alerts’ of various colours, its alarms, its rumours. Tragic sinking of ships off the coast. Stories of rape—mass and otherwise. Seductions. Scandal-mongering. Romances made and broken. All the turmoil, the stupidity and the heroism of a city in wartime.

I went through it all in a state bordering on hypersensitiveness, in spite of my personal worries for my various relatives in the firing line in Europe or the Middle East or New Guinea. At this distance I have no doubt that my heightened emotions were due to the fact that my disease was insidiously creeping up on me. I had experienced this physical phenomenon before I succumbed to it ten years before.

All this time I was storing in my mind the conditions that were typically Newcastle, the people—of all strata—who made up Newcastle.

Never having been so closely bound with any community I had worked in, known it so thoroughly from one end to the other. My subconscious was putting down the compost out of which would grow the novel that was eventually to be published as *Southern Steel*.

Everybody took it for granted that I would write a novel about it, and all kinds of people came to see me bringing me stories; an engineer whose ship was torpedoed off the south coast: women with hilarious, yet depressing, stories of their work as munition-makers. I had a notebook crammed with them. Wharf labourers complaining that they had no facilities for eating during their long shifts on the wind-driven wharves.

Elsewhere, Cusack writes: ‘Sitting in the train each morning on my way to Parramatta, I would have the sense of my hands swelling up like footballs and floating in the air, my head no longer being mine due neither to psychological nor philosophical reasons but to the brutal fact that I was suffering from the disease that had begun to show itself in Broken Hill and now diagnosed as pernicious anaemia’. From ‘The Uncorrected Transcription Of Notes Done for an Autobiography I Shall Never Write’, [1968], Dymphna Cusack Papers, National Library of Australia, MS 4621, series 9.
It wasn't entirely strange then that the manager of the BHP should invite me to look over the steelworks, something forbidden to civilians in wartime. I stayed back in the city during my next holidays and was duly collected and guided through the works by a very nice man, Tom Griffiths. From end to end of that vast enterprise we trudged. I saw all the processes of steel making: fascinating, awe-inspiring. Felt the intense heat off the tapped steel sizzling my hair though I was a safe distance from it. Heard the pride and arrogance of the men who made it. Went through the wire-making works, the munition-making sector, where I was horrified to find the workers eating their lunch out of paper packets parked between the machines. 'Too far to walk to the lunch-room. Takes half the break.' I appreciated the fact when I walked to it—a large, hygienically spare room with hot water to make their own tea. No luxuries here for the men who kept Australia's war effort at maximum.

In his luxurious office the manager, Keith Butler, greeted me over a sherry from his refrigerator. Made me welcome with that subtle charm for which top BHP employees were and are famous. Led me into a large, gracious dining-room for the staff where we ate an excellent three-course meal.

'We do our staff well, don't we?' he asked smilingly.

'Yes,' I agreed. 'Much better than the men in the rolling-mill.'

The smiling face closed up. It closed tighter when I commented that our shelling by a Japanese submarine the year before had only sent back to us the scrap-iron his company had sent them, till the seamen and wharfies struck because of it. He had explanations for everything.

Altogether not the circumstances in which I would expect to be asked to write a book about the BHP in Newcastle. I gaped when he put the question to me. 'Hearing that you are going to write a book about Newcastle, would you like to do it for us about the steelworks which have made the city? You can name your own price.'

Oh, the temptation! Here was I, hard-up because of the dishonesty in a business with a woman in which I had been unwillingly thrust, knowing in my bones that I was facing another crack-up, and wanting more than anything in the world to write a novel about Newcastle!

I countered, 'I do intend to write a novel about Newcastle but I don't think it's the book you would want published under your imprimatur.'

His eyes bored into mine. His voice grew more persuasive. 'Think over it and we'll discuss it next time you come. As I said, you can name your own price.'

'You can buy any journalist for that,' I said.

He dismissed it and leaned closer, bringing to bear on me all the force of his outstanding personality. 'That's not what we want' (always the royal plural). 'What we want is the warmth, the humanity, the feeling for Newcastle that is inherent in everything you write about it. It would make you famous.'
I murmured that I didn’t know if I wanted that kind of fame—or money. We met over lunch several times again but never reached even a compromise.

But I had what I wanted. When I came to start *Southern Steel* and wrote to him asking him for all the documentary material they could provide, he sent me a pile of gorgeously illustrated stuff and a gracious note saying that even if I was not going to write their book, they shared with me the desire that it should be as correct as possible. I never heard from them when it was eventually published. Perhaps they’d like to know that it has recently been serialised by the largest magazine in Berlin, under the title *Clouds Over Newcastle*.16

In our day they were very real!

* * *

When the date for the school play came, the head said tentatively, ‘Your fourths have never yet played in the school festival. Do you think …?’

Did I think! So they set to work to produce a play set in a radio studio, chosen because I wasn’t too sure of their ability to memorise whole parts and in this they had the excuse of carrying their parts with them. Strange how things stay in one’s mind. I can still see Doc as the announcer, which he did very well. Newman was the heroine, delighted to be encouraged to let his curly hair grow for the part. Still more excited when I lent him my fur coat over his sister’s dress. Came the day, it was such a success that they were chosen with five other plays for the evening performance. When the adjudicator placed them second, their excitement knew no bounds. They even took me to supper in a café near by!

The end of the year came. It was a school tradition for the fourth years to give a farewell party for the fifths. The possibility of my fourth doing so never occurred to the head. ‘Give a dog a bad name’ was true of them, and even a year’s relative civilising of them had not really penetrated his mind. I had tamed them, perhaps, so they were no longer a thorn in the school’s side. But could they do something requiring organising ability and initiative? I said, ‘Yes.’ My fourths yelled it. This was their big test.

The date was set. Then, just to make things more difficult, I got sick—a recurrence of my old disease plus the fumes—and had to stay in bed. But the bushrangers were not to be beaten. A deputation of five was selected to visit me and discuss the arrangements. They came, five great gawky louts, not the slightest bit embarrassed to be sitting on my bed since there weren’t enough chairs, unworried by me with my plaits swinging. So the whole programme was

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arranged. Pavel to be chairman. (Such a fine boy, Pavel!) So-and-so to bring tablecloths—we needed big tables for two classes and staff. So-and-so to bring plates and dishes. The tuck shop to cater at so much a head—they were prepared to be extravagant on that point—and lend cups and saucers. All this had been arranged before they came to visit me. I merely checked and suggested. What about flowers? You could not have a party without flowers. Flowers? Noses curled. Gosh! Flowers are cissy! But flowers there were, though they were brought to me surreptitiously in shoe boxes.

It was a party indeed. The tables were a credit to the mothers who had provided the cloths, the dishes and plates—their best. The flowers, as ever, gave the finishing touches. Pavel was an excellent chairman. The speeches brief and to the point. No-one stuttered. Nothing went wrong. I was in a state of euphoria. When the head and the deputy head made their speeches, we all were. And when at last it was all over and my bushrangers gathered round me and presented me with a gift I still cherish, I felt that my teaching career had reached its peak.

Of all my years in the Department of Education, the one I spent at Newcastle Boys’ Technical High School was the happiest and the most satisfactory. Largely I think because there was not the usual academic pressure to force on the students with little reference to the lives they were going to live. In addition there were metalwork and woodwork classes where the boys had the opportunity of expressing themselves with their hands. Lastly, competitive exam results did not hang over the school like a miasma. Fourth year boys did no final exam but received diplomas according to the year’s results in the classes. From that they went into the great industrial maw of the BHP, carrying with them, we hoped, some awareness of the wider world and its culture to make them useful citizens. Top grade matriculated to study engineering, frequently subsidised by the BHP, and then to the steelworks.

Though the technical college was not yet completed owing to the war, conditions were, on the whole, the best I have known in any school anywhere: less overcrowding, large, airy rooms (except for my poor 4D who were in that restless peripatetic condition of bad classes everywhere); the usual defect of no heating, though that wasn’t so bad in Newcastle; classes, though too big to be perfect, generally manageable; finally, the boys, having some clear idea of what they were working for, did not question the work they did.

* * *

Thirty years later, what is the position? It is so long since my personal involvement in the teaching profession that I am obliged to take my information second hand from experts whose principles and theory I admire, chief of them Henry
Schoenheimer. He tells us that today New South Wales is last in the number of pupils per teacher in government schools, though today the pressure on the teacher is much less since there is a large number of ancillary staff, plus guidance officers, psychologists and counsellors.

In 1974–75 the number of pupils who completed the secondary course had risen to one in three, and went up from one in four to nearly one in three for girls. Analysis of the figures shows that 27% of government school pupils stay on, 34% in Catholic schools and 96% from other non-government schools. That is, virtually all the non-government, non-Catholic pupils stay on, half the Catholic pupils and one in five of government school pupils. For all our boasted democracy it is still the elite who get the most, and the most expensive, education. One does not dare to think what would happen in Australia if all students decided they wanted full secondary education, or if 73%—as in the USA—went on to tertiary education. I always say there is not a generation between the children born before and after 1945 but a millennium. Probably, as inevitable in our system, the age of principals and deputies is about fifty. Schoenheimer says, ‘There is probably no greater barrier to needed change in schools than the advanced age of power-holders within the schools.’

The question we must all ask ourselves is whether the school is doing the job that today’s world needs, so utterly different from those on which we base our assumptions and our plans. Quoting the writings of the well-known educational revolutionaries of today, Schoenheimer sums up by saying that probably the rebels are correct in saying that the most important thing about schooling is the way in which school experiences affect students’ lives and self-concepts both while they are students and for the rest of their lives.

In Australia it is not, definitely not ‘free’ or ‘progressive’ or ‘alternative’ or ‘creative’ schools that have produced today’s under-literate, under-numerate, under-educated 18-year olds and 20-year olds and 30-year olds and 50-year olds. The new approaches are simply too new in this country, until six or eight years ago they were a quite minor strand in the classrooms and they are certainly not the major strand even now.

If schools are failing, as they have long done, to produce a literate, numerate, intelligent, aware, critical citizenry, able to think its way out of the crisis we and the world are in, then, so far as the schools can be blamed at all, the major culprit must be completely recognisable, it would have to be the conventional traditional, authoritarian skills-drills-and-grills schooling.

I agree absolutely with Henry Schoenheimer that what we need are:

Concerned, sympathetic, professionally skilled teachers, able to adapt their teaching/learning styles to a wide variety of children; Very deep involvement of parents (and others in the community) in the teaching-learning process; A school system that is based on human relationships (which means among other things small schools—up to 100 or 200—and largely autonomous sub-schools within

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17 Henry Schoenheimer (1918–76), Senior Lecturer in Education at Monash University and author of many school textbooks.
larger schools, teachers remaining long in one school and teaching a relatively small number of students; The maximum freedom of choice for all parents and children; A heightened respect for knowledge, skills and insights relevant to the child’s present and future living in his neighbourhood, the nation and in the world; Awareness that the school child’s need for music, art, craft, drama and activity are as much factors in his learning to read, write, speak, calculate and think, as are his physical and emotional well-being and his stimulating and secure home setting; In the home, shared parenting, shared work and shared teaching; Excitingly educative media that stimulate to active response.

I agree with Schoenheimer that this can be achieved only by the cooperation of teacher and parent in schools in which the wider world is truly dedicated to sharing our riches and to peace.

In all this, the most important factor is the teacher. An American educational specialist concludes his book on *The Miseducation of Teachers* by saying that ‘teachers should be bright, well-balanced, well-educated, should like youngsters [a *sine qua non*!] and should be interested in cultural matters.’

We should ask ourselves whether we are getting them here?

* * *

At the end of 1943 the tribute the head and the deputy head gave me before I left convinced me that my teaching career had not been wasted. I was called to the head’s office and went a little apprehensively. Had my bushrangers’ success gone to their heads and set them rampaging through the school? But no. The head met me, holding a large typed sheet in his hands.

‘Mr Beard and I want to say, Miss Cusack, that we have been so impressed with the remarkable work you did with 4D that we have written a report to the department saying so. Will you please read it and sign here?’

I read and signed. And though I’m not a weeping kind, I’ll admit there were tears in my eyes as we said goodbye.

That was the last school I taught at, so it was goodbye in more ways than one. The next year I suffered the general crack-up that after a series of illnesses and long periods in hospital, caused me to be boarded out of the department as a ‘break-down pensioner’ (*sic*)

Before I come to that I should record here the last example of bureaucratic meanness I was to suffer at their hands. Because the local inspector did not believe that mine was a genuine illness (obviously all those medical certificates were forgeries) he refused his signature to the paper that would have given me my right to sick leave. So for nine whole months I existed on the kindness of my

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18 Cusack is quoting from Schoenheimer’s article, ‘Recipe for the Ideal School’, *Australian*, 5 September 1975, p. 9.
family and friends. On the thirteenth of October 1944, the whole medical staff
at the Department of Education (plus two Macquarie Street specialists) declared
that my three incurable diseases\(^{19}\) (one of them said to cause the ‘worst pain
known to human beings’) precluded me from ever working again. They shook
my hand pityingly and wished me the best possible, considering their prognosis,
and watched me go with real sympathy in their eyes. Stunned, I got into the lift
and found my companion was the Breast Stroke Champion from Newcastle.
Upheld by that last good report I stared him in the face. Once more, he did not
see me, but fastened his reptilian eyes on the paper I had in my hand to take to
the accountancy department. If looks would have shrivelled it would have curled
in my hand.

I got out at my floor neither recognising nor being recognised. I handed
the paper over the desk to a clerk who whistled and said, ‘I’ll call the accountant.’
He came, looked me over, and whispered, ‘I expected you to be six feet high.
And let me tell you I think it’s a disgrace what they’ve done to you this year.’

Wide-eyed, I stared at him unbelievingly. He bent lower and whispered,
‘It may cheer you up to know that everybody in the department is grateful to
you for your case against the minister. Lots of people have got their money back
through you.’

He smiled and I smiled. The other clerks gave me a scarcely audible clap.
I went out of the room with the cheque for my long-withheld sick leave in my
hand and the warm feeling that there are good as well as bad bureaucrats.

As I stepped out into Macquarie Place, I carried with me unforgettable
memories, mainly good, and the unwarranted feeling that they were going to
continue that way.

\(^{19}\) Pernicious anaemia, trigeminal neuralgia and suspected tuberculosis, of which she was later cleared.
Debra Adelaide is a writer and editor. Formerly a university tutor, her doctoral thesis has recently been published as *Bibliography of Australian Women's Literature* (1991). She is also the author of *Australian Women Writers, a Bibliographic Guide* (1988) and editor of *A Bright and Fiery Troop: Australian Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century* (1988). She is presently continuing research on Australian fiction.

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"There was a man named Ned Kelly and another named Dick Turpin," he intoned, "but they are both gentlemen compared with the Minister of Education and his treatment of this poor little woman."

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Published with the assistance of the Morris West Trust Fund