

The Schoolgirls of Alexandra

Mary Manning - playwright, journalist, critic, hostess, who has lived much of her life in America - looks back to her Dublin schooldays in the Twenties and to a world much of which has vanished physically as well as socially.

LEFT: the school as it stood until a few years ago in Earlsfort Terrace, facing UCD. A handsome red-bricked Victorian building, it has been one more landmark to vanish recently.

RIGHT: production of Yeats's "Countess Cathleen," Alexandra College, summer 1921. Lydia Sheehan played the Countess Cathleen. The Rossetti Angel is centre back; Helga Burgess played the poet.

FOR SOME YEARS now, a snabby wooden fence has enclosed six acres of vacant ground on Earlsfort Terrace. Here, on this pile of rubble, once stood Alexandra College and school, and in a very short time from now that impressive red-brick building would have been one hundred years old—if it had been allowed to survive.

As I stood there, trying to peer through the dismal fencing, memories crowded me round. I could see the backs of the houses on Hatch Street where most of Dublin was hatched in that famous nursing home, and far on the other side the backs of the houses on Lower Leeson Street. In fact it was the backside of everything which faced me after nearly half-a-century—no decent frontage remained.

Yes, here stood Alexandra, a handsome solid late-Victorian building, standing, as the saying is, in its own grounds and presenting to the world of Dublin a serene dignity. It lacked the Protestant despondency of the Molesworth Hall (that other sad bomb site), because Alexandra was fully integrated. Protestants, Catholics, and Jews were welcome to enjoy the higher learning for young ladies, and nobody in those dear dead days cared a damn about it!

TOP WOMEN

WHEN I WAS there in the early Twenties the Principal was Miss White, a woman so majestic one never even heard her first name nor imagined she had one. She was, I believe, one of the first women graduates of Girton College, Cambridge. All the teachers at the college were graduates of universities and wore their gowns during college hours and had distinguished careers. Alexandra was actually modelled on Cheltenham College for young women, which was then one of the best, if not the best educational establishment in Europe.

Miss White was reputed to be immensely learned but her face, which was exceptionally large, did not reveal much; it resembled rather a map of the desert. Mrs Preston, the second-in-command, was a widow who wore black and fitted unseamly here, there and everywhere like a restless crow. Betty Chancellor, who was at Alexandra after me, says Mrs P. was a Ruskinite, but that shouldn't have made her a secret agent, "but after all, poor thing, she lost both her sons in World War I." Mrs Preston was given to appearing suddenly, as if from under a table, during study hours in the Jellicio Hall and quelling illicit talkers.

The Hall was the very heart and soul of the college. It was very large, rather dark, very stately, lined with bookcases and decorated with busts and portraits of distinguished persons.

Amongst the more prominent portraits was Queen Alexandra, looking as if she was strangled in her own pearls, and the lovely Hermione, Duchess of Leinster. As well as study hours, the Jellicio was used for lectures and dramatic performances and of course, the Christmas dance. For the latter, you were allowed to bring one boy; a great many brothers appeared but most of the girls, for weeks before the event, ran around like tigresses trying to entrap boys. Needless to say, it was chaperoned very thoroughly by Mrs Preston and assisting spies.

The Hermione lectures were very important, dealing with some aspect of the Fine Arts, and usually a distinguished person was brought over from England. A pro was also brought in to run the lantern slides so that they shouldn't be upside down or out of sequence, as often happened on less important occasions.

Eileen Ganly, who was at college with me, reminded me that we were never called by our christian names; "We were always Miss This or Miss That. It was much more dignified and even if you were only fifteen, it made you feel sort of mature."

ENG. LIT.

DURING my two years in the College, the two outstanding teachers were Lorna MacDonald and Dorothy Macardie. Both taught English Literature but their "attack" was very different. MacDonald was Scottish, with blonde hair scraped back from her face and worn in a bun low on her neck. She had blue eyes and a snub nose and there was absolutely no nonsense about her. She was a first-rate teacher and made us read Shakespeare aloud in class, each taking different roles, switching them so that everyone had a chance.

"Miss Brown, you read Lear," snapped Miss MacDonald, pointing at a pale, hopeless-looking fat girl at the back of the room. I still remember the start we all got when Miss Brown suddenly shouted in the most stentorian voice: "Attend the Lords of France and Burgundy, Gloucester." The astonished class shouted back: "I shall, my liege."

Again, Eileen Ganly, whose memory was and is phenomenal, reminded me that MacDonald and Macardie took their classes to the Charles Doran Shakespearean company which was playing that winter at the Gaiety; "I'm sure by modern standards the productions would be considered dreary and shoddy, but for us it opened up a new world. Doran's Hamlet must have been regrettable. He was then at least fifty-five and dragging one leg, and Ophelia was terribly fat, but we didn't care. Shakespeare came alive for us!"

MacDonald also helped to run the

Drama Club and her choice of plays, as might be expected, was conventional. "The Scarlet Pimpernel" was chosen for her production. I was thrilled by being given the glamorous role of Lord Tony; the "demmitis," the "harkees," the "gads" and the fixing of the fake monocle in the eye and remembering the immortal Baroness Orczy lines, proved quite a challenge. The bad moment came when my tight eighteenth-century trousers burst with a terrible tearing sound during the Dress Rehearsal. As usual, Mrs Preston darted hither and thither stifling the obscene laughter.

Dorothy Macardie was a most intriguing and fascinating personality. It was greatly to Miss White's honour that she valued a fine teacher and endured Dorothy's involvement with the IRA (she had already served a short prison term for handing out subversive literature) because Miss White herself was deeply loyal to the British Crown. Indeed the word went round the College that her drawers were made out of a Union Jack. Macardie was tall and thin, with a pale bony face, heavy-lidded eyes and an expression of burning intensity. She was rumoured to be hopelessly in love with de Valera and could never look at another man.

She taught English like an angel: "Now today we will begin our course on Keats. Keats, I will remind you, is a child of the English Renaissance; an Elizabethan, born too late, as Matthew Arnold says. We will read 'Isabella or the Pot of Basil,' a story from Boccaccio. I'm holding up to you a mediaeval tapestry worked in muted colours. It is a sad and bloodstained story. There. You see the beautiful young Isabella seated by the window and below in the garden, looking joyously up at her, is her lover Lorenzo. I'll explain more about the Unicorn later. Those two figures hidden behind the trees are Isabella's brothers. They plan to murder Lorenzo." Thirty-five pairs of eyes were riveted on Macardie, and thirty-five pairs of eyes actually saw that imaginary tapestry.

YEATS

FOR HER DRAMA offering that year she chose Yeats's "Countess Cathleen." It was a daring choice and must have been viewed with some misgivings by Miss White. By hanging round with obsequious offers of help—"Anything, Miss Macardie, I'll do anything!"—I acquired the part of the whiney old peasant who is the first to sell his soul to the Devil. We rehearsed frequently in Miss Macardie's flat, which was at the top of Mme. MacBride's house in Stephen's Green, just around the corner from the College. We had to keep quiet about this, because some of the girls' parents would have been

norried if they had known: "All that crowd, very close to the Sein Feiners you know!"

The day of epic triumph came when Mr Yeats himself came to give us some hints on our acting. For this unique occasion Madame MacBride brought up a large plum cake and tea was brewed in Macardie's little kitchenette, while Madame poured tea with an enigmatic smile. Meanwhile, the poet himself concentrated on the girl who was playing the Angel. She was a beautiful girl, with Rossetti hair parted in the middle and a sensuous Rossetti face. It was the wings, it seemed, which worried Mr Yeats; "Just a gentle flapping should do it," he suggested. He then demonstrated and knocked two flower-pots off the windowsill. "Oh Willie, Willie," sighed Madame. Then we all sat round on the floor in a semicircle, munching cake and staring bemused at the poet who was generous enough to read some of the more difficult passages aloud and interpret them for us. Lucky girls! We didn't know then how honoured we were. There were those who would have given all their molars for such an opportunity.

Politically the College was British—well, Anglo-British to the core—though there were small pockets of rebellion, mostly around Macardie. The world outside consisted of ghastly people called "shinners" but the truth was we were innocently non-political. We went on living through those troubled years as if history still centred round the Tudors and Stuarts. We rode our bicycles through ambushes and got pushed into shelters when the bullets were flying, and heard the British tanks patrolling the streets at night and paid no need. My brother was rather disturbed to see these dead bodies on Baggot Street Bridge after an ambush, but he quickly forgot about it. Opposite to the college history was being made; the first Dail was held in what was then the National University and we were allowed to watch the notables arriving from the windows over the great staircase outside Jellicio Hall.

EASY-GOING

THE GENERAL atmosphere of the College was very relaxed. One could get away with as little work as possible, just edging through exams, or one could be encouraged and helped to aim for Trinity or some English university. The system was extraordinarily modern. If you were hopeless at maths or languages, you didn't have to break your heart attempting the impossible; you could do what most of my friends did—choose history and English and some French. There was also a secre-



tarial school and a domestic science department. Everything was geared to equip young women for the rigours of life before and after marriage. Family planning, or indeed sex, was never touched upon.

How did so many of us manage to tear across the Green during the mornings and have coffee with whipped cream in Mitchells, or Switzers, and get back in time for a twelve o'clock lecture? Another group of us used to skedaddle down to Dawson Street in the afternoons and have tea at "The Sod of Turf," which was then run by my mother. Tea and hot homemade buttered scones, seated in front of the turf fire, was a delicious treat. The "Sod" was well-known to be a haunt of "Shinners" at night and was constantly being raided by British troops. My mother used to leave food out for "the poor boys on the run"; it was always eaten. The cook said it was stray cats, assisted by mice—we will never know.

One afternoon, six of us arrived for tea on the day of the Great Horror under the grating. A version of what happened that morning. The cook's rage was to leave beautifully arranged plates of salad and cold meat out on the basement kitchen window, which was only protected by an iron grating. Just before the lunchers were due to arrive, a shower of liquid descended through the grating on to the salad: a well-known poet had urinated through the grating. The cook's rage was still burning: "Seen it with me own two livin' eyes. That pissin' old poet from Galway should be clapped into gaol, so he should." It was the first time we'd heard the verb to piss, and we couldn't wait to get to College the next morning and tell the story.

The pride and joy of Alexandra College were the beautiful gardens where in fine weather we were able to sit through the trees and either study or talk, talk, talk. There was a charming goldfish pond with waterlilies and a grand old beech tree with a wooden seat around it, which was a favourite spot for intimate confidences—the only fear being that Mrs Preston might be overhead concealed in the branches. listening. In the spring, the gardens were brilliant with many coloured tulips and it was delightful to lie on the grass and look through the apple blossom to the blue sky overhead.

Of course, even in this paradise there was the snake. One of the elderly gardeners was given to exposing himself quite blatantly when there were only a few of us in the garden. It was months before anyone had the courage to report this unfortunate situation. At last one of the more strong-minded of the older girls volunteered to tell

Mrs Preston: "Excuse me, Mrs Preston, but Moriarty the gardener, you know Mrs Preston, well he does seem to have his trousers open quite often Mrs Preston—in front, Mrs Preston." In no time at all the poor man was mabbed by Mrs P. and her flying squad. The rest was silence.

HAPPY YEARS

THE SCHOOL for younger girls was run by the terrifying Dr Mulvaney. It was very disciplined and thoroughly policed and its scholastic achievements were first rate, which was what most parents cared about then. I spent two happy years at the College, and so indeed did most of my friends. Maybe the solid old building and the charming grounds had something to do with it. A place of learning should be enclosed in its own private world in which, for a few precious years, you are free to live within those walls and allow your mind to flower. Also, a feeling of the Past is infinitely valuable; it's a feeling which you are instantly conscious of when you enter the gates of Trinity College. A set of dismal buildings resembling Long Kesh can hardly provide these inspirations.

Nobody can give me a convincing answer as to why the old college was torn down, or why it couldn't have been modernised at a reasonable cost, and left standing where it was. So here I stand, peering through the fence so madly decorated with graffiti, and see the laughing faces of young girls rushing from hall to gym, or lying on the grass, or hear Macardie: "Open your Keats, girls, at the 'Ode to a Grecian Urn.' Pay particular attention to the four last lines, often quoted, but seldom understood:

*When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom
'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,
—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know'*

The voices fade; the speaker is long since dead, as are many of her young listeners. I turn away from the shabby fence murmuring "Thou shalt remain in midst of other woe than ours." Not any more. Nothing remains. The greedy sons of Gomben men who are tearing this city apart would not understand, even if they heard it, the message given to the world by a dying young poet of twenty-three. Six acres of rubble is their answer. And a dusty answer it is too.