

TEACHERS

By Allen Walsh (2006)

NORTH-WEST BRUNSWICK PRIMARY SCHOOL

My first six years of school were spent at North-West Brunswick State School No. 4399, just across the road from our house.

Grade 1: My first teacher was Miss Bird. She was young, of average size, with fair hair. I can remember nothing else about her.

On my first day at school we had been lined up in the quadrangle and were then moving in groups into the building. As we went up the brick steps at the east end of the school I was savagely pinched on the back of my leg by a kid behind me. I had never seen him before, of course, and had done nothing to offend him. His name was Arthur. He had thick lips and black hair trimmed in a 'basin cut'. Luckily he didn't stay at the school very long.

For a short time we must have had a relieving teacher – possibly what was known as a student teacher. Her name was Miss Dunn and Dad said she was distantly related to our family – in what way I never heard. 'Bub' Heagney must have known her, because he said to us one day that he was sure he knew the nick-name the kids would give her! I was stunned, because how could an adult understand the thinking of 5 year-olds. He was right, of course.

I think it was in Grade 1 that we were issued with slates to write on – or rather letter, because it was capitals and lower-case lettering that we were using.

The slates were thin slabs of natural grey slate finished with a smooth matt surface, set in a narrow wooden frame. We would write with a thin stick of slightly softer slate which would produce a whitish grey line. At the end of the session all the writing could be removed by wiping with a damp cloth – the origin of the term 'wiping the slate clean'.

Grade 2: Miss Webber was the first teacher to leave a lasting impression. She was tall and thin with prematurely graying hair which would have originally been dark.

Miss Webber may not have been more than 40 years of age, but to small kids like us, she looked quite old.

I think we started to use pencils in Grade 2.

Grade 3: Miss Rolland was about the same age as Miss Webber, also tall and thin, but she had freckles and red hair tied back in a bun. They lived together in a house or flat in Hawthorn and drove to school each day in a small Vauxhall car, which was left parked in Culloden Street, outside the school.

Nancy, Brian and I were in consecutive grades at school and Mum got to know these two teachers very well. I was always struck by the similarity in height, build and clothes the three of them wore – lightweight dresses finishing six inches above the ankle, cardigans (often called ‘golfers’) and black shoes with pointed toes.

Miss Rolland was a very effective teacher who stood for no nonsense, but appeared to treat the kids fairly.

In Grade 3 we would have started to use pens. The pens had a tapered wooden handle a little thinner than a pencil with a metal nib-holder jammed on one end. The nib was of steel, stamped ‘Mitchell’ and ‘Sheffield’, tapering almost to a point and split down the middle. The split finished at a narrow hole at the upper end.

We were taught how to hold the pen when writing – “Sit up straight, shoulders square, with the end of the pen pointing over the right shoulder”. This was all right for right-handers, but what about left-handers like me?

I quickly realized that the swing of the hand from the wrist, which gave the desired forward slope to the writing, would result in a backward slope for a left-hander. I got over this by bringing my hand above the line of words I was writing rather than below, and turning the page at an angle.

Most of the good teachers would prepare their blackboards before the school year started, and Miss Rolland had all letters of the alphabet, upper and lower case, beautifully written in copperplate style across the top of the board. Copperplate was designed to be done naturally by right-handers with extra pressure on the down-stroke spreading the nib slightly and producing a wider line. I could never achieve this and my ink writing was always done with a fine line.

There was one unintended advantage in using my style of writing with the left hand moving above the writing – the ink had time to dry before my hand brushed over it.

When Brian (also a left-hander) started to use ink a year later his hand rubbed across the still-wet ink and made such a mess that he was made to write with his right hand.

Ink was a blue/black colour kept in open ‘Ink wells’, two to each double desk. The wells were of white china about the size of an over-large thimble with a wide flange around the top. They would sit in holes drilled in the top of the desk, with the flange finishing flush. The ink came in large square bottles, and ‘Ink Monitors’ would be appointed to regularly re-fill the ink wells at the wash troughs in the cloakrooms located on each floor.

Grade 4: Mrs. Morrison was the only married woman teacher I can remember. She may have been a widow because I think that the Education Department did not normally employ married women. She was in her forties, short and serious, with short brown hair. I don’t think I ever saw her smile.

There was a rather spoilt girl in the class called Margaret Bertram. Early in the year the subject of fairies cropped up – possibly in a poem – and the tough Mrs. Morrison said “Of course there are no fairies”. Everybody in the class would have agreed with her, except Margaret Bertram, who jumped up and squawked “There are! There are!” and started to cry. With tears pouring down her face and shaking her head so that her complaints shot out sideways, she shouted that her mother had told her that there are fairies.

The rest of us were quite entertained, but Mrs. M. was not impressed.

Mrs. Morrison didn't seem to enjoy her job and gave the strap more than any of the other teachers. Two incidents that stick in my mind during my year under her occurred to friends of mine who were normally well-behaved.

One day Mrs. Morrison heard somebody talking and threatened to keep the whole class in until the culprit owned up. Shortly afterwards Johnnie Edwards said he had spoken. He was a Cub Scout and couldn't tell a lie.

Most classrooms had a picture hanging at an angle directly above the blackboard and I think that the experienced teachers would use the glass in the picture frame as a mirror to check any movement in the class while they were writing on the board.

Another day Mrs. Morrison claimed Ben Ogle had spoken, and called him forward to get the ‘cuts’. Ben was hardly ever in trouble and as he got to the front of the desks he suddenly turned right and shot out the door. We could hear his boots on the floor of the upstairs corridor and then the stairs as he headed for home!

After a moment's hesitation Mrs. Morrison took off after him. Ben was a pretty good runner and most of the class would have put their money on him, but five minutes later Mrs. M. arrived back, dragging Ben behind her.

I never learned whether Ben had tripped over or the teacher was a secret Olympic distance runner, but perhaps he suddenly realized that he would have to return to school some day.

Grade 5: By the time I got to Grade 5, Miss Rolland had been switched from Grad 3 and I was quite pleased to have her teaching us again.

There was, however, a big interruption for all Victorian school students that year, 1937. A terrible epidemic of infantile paralysis, later know as polio, spread rapidly throughout Victoria and some other states. It affected children of all ages, and sometimes adults, causing deformed limbs, respiratory problems and even death in many cases. Many people had to spend the remainder of their lives in ‘Iron Lungs’ in hospitals.

All schools were closed for several months, and we did our school work through the State Correspondence Schools system. This seemed to be well organized and I can remember the lessons being carefully clearly set out by the Government Printer. We would have to

send back in the mail our essays and answers to questions set for various subjects, to be corrected.

Eventually we went back to school and life returned to normal. One day Miss Rolland announced that she would give prizes for the best results in some work she had set. She gave me sixpence and sent me to buy six 'Silver Sticks' from the lolly shop on the corner of Melville Road and Zeal Street. Silver Sticks were a favourite of mine. They were made of brittle toffee, about five inches long and slightly thicker than a lead pencil. They were coated in chocolate, with one-third wrapped in silver paper holding in the fingers.

During the year we were given the chance to start learning to play the violin. Classes were conducted every week by teachers sent out by Allan's, the music publishers and musical instrument sellers in Collins Street, Melbourne.

Students would pay two shillings per week, and this also covered the hire of a good-quality violin and bow, complete with case.

I had always liked the idea of being able to play a musical instrument and a couple of years earlier had bought a toy violin made out of tin and played with a small bow, which produced a dreadful squeaky sound.

I must have pressured Mum to let me learn and I found out a little later that Nin and Grandpa Matthews had volunteered to pay for my lessons. Grandpa said that he had often wished he could play an instrument as he might have been able to earn some money playing at Dances in the Depression, when he was out of work.

Only a few kids from my grade were learning, but we were joined by some from other grades to make a total of ten or twelve. The lessons followed immediately after school hours and were held in one of the classrooms.

I must have learned for nearly a year, but I soon realized that I was not a musician. While I could learn and play the notes all right, my music was mechanical and did not flow naturally. One of the hardest things I had to do in those years was to tell Nin and Grandpa that I was giving up violin lessons, as I realized what sacrifices they would have made to find the money from Grandpa's wages as a labourer.

Grade 6: Mr Seers (Alan G.) must have arrived only a year or two before he taught my grade. He was tall and erect with neatly cut pale red hair, and usually wore light grey well-cut double-breasted suits and black shoes. He would have been in his mid-thirties at the time.

Mr. Seers was very strict, but I found him quite fair, with a quiet sense of humour. His good humour didn't extend as far as Jack Pullen. Pullen was an oversized bully and was always getting into real trouble. He was rebellious and seemed to be a criminal in the making. The following year I think he was kept down and finished in Brian's class.

Mr. Seers was always given the job of organizing the whole school for functions like the School Picnic and the Sports. He one was arranging tunnel-ball games and for some reason had a 'run-off' between two of the slowest runners – Gordon Webster and Allen Walsh. This was over about 40 yards on the asphalt quadrangle on the north of the school. Gordon and I were always the same height (I was skinnier) and we both wore heavy leather boots extending above the ankles. I don't know who won, but 'Seersy' said after wards that it looked like a race between a couple of draught-horses.

Grades 7 and 8: The Primary Schools (known as State Schools) went to the end of Eighth Grade, when students who passed would be awarded to Merit Certificate and could look for a job if they had turned fourteen.

Many students, including me, left the local school at the end of Grade 6 and went to Technical Schools or High Schools for their 'Secondary' education.

A senior teacher who arrived in my later years and taught Grade 7 or 8 was Mr. McLeod (Campbell). I never had any direct contact with Mr. McLeod at school, but got to know him and his family very well in later years at St. David's Church, where he was an Elder and at one time, Session Clerk.

Campbell McLeod was a big, solidly built man who was a Major in the Army during the war. He had grown up in Colac as a boy in the time of David Munro's ministry and his father had been a leading Elder there.

Mr. Munro told the story of a meeting of St. Andrew's Young Men's Club when Campbell McLeod was Secretary. Campbell stood up, opened the Minute Book, and 'read' the minutes of the previous meeting then passed the book across to the Chairman, Mr. Munro, to sign. The page was blank!

Campbell had apparently not written up the minutes, but had 'read' them from memory and no-one had noticed. Mr. Munro thought it was a great joke.

Mr. McLeod must have risen in the Education Department after the war, because during the late 1950's he was made head of the Victorian Teachers' Training College at 'Stonnington' in Glenferrie Road, Toorak. The job took a toll of his health and he eventually had a serious stroke which affected his walking and his speech. I found that I could not talk to him because I just couldn't understand what he was trying to say. It seemed a terrible way for such a capable man to finish up.

Mr. Maher: The only other member of the school staff whom I remember was the man in charge. He was Mr. Maher, the Headmaster. His office was just inside the main entrance off Culloden Street. He was a small, neat man with smoothly brushed silver hair.

Mr. Maher must have attended the Monday morning school assemblies in the quadrangle where we stood at attention for the raising of the flag and made the solemn declaration of

loyalty with hand on breast. He would have been responsible for the smooth running of the school, but we didn't see a great deal of him.

BRUNSWICK JUNIOR TECHNICAL SCHOOL

In 1939 I started at the Brunswick Technical School which was in Dawson Street on the corner of Fallon Street.

Mr. Ross: The Principal was John L. Ross, an ANZAC who had fought at Gallipoli. He was short, stocky and business-like and expected everybody to do the right thing as a matter of course. And most did. When war broke out in September 1939 he arranged for a flagpole to be installed above the highest wall overlooking the quadrangle and said that the Australian flag would fly there until the war was won. When I left school the flag was still flying – but not the original. As soon as a flag showed signs of wear it would be replaced.

The quadrangle was enclosed by 2-storey buildings on three sides and the whole six hundred boys and staff members would line up for Assembly every morning. Mr. Ross would give a short pep talk from the first floor verandah every day, usually finishing with a maxim such as his favourite – ‘Good enough is not good enough’. Mr. Ross died before the war ended.

Mr. Jordan: We also had a Headmaster, Mr. Jordan. He was tall, thin sad and serious-looking and he always wore a brown dust coat. He looked very like John Kennedy the Hawthorn footballer who became coach of North Melbourne and always seemed to wear a gabardine raincoat. Mr. Jordan's job seemed to be similar to a Chief of Staff.

Mr. Noonan: Our Form Teacher in First Year was John Noonan who was given the nickname ‘Johnnie’. He was of average height and built with slightly wavy hair and always wore glasses. He would have been about forty at that time. Forms 1A and 1B (25 students in each) would be brought together for subjects like English, Maths and Geography but would be separated for Science, Lab. Work Drawing, Clay Modelling and the various trades where more space was required for each student.

Mr. Noonan was strict, but would occasionally stop to tell the class a schoolboy-type joke. When Brian was in his class in the following year, he could not understand something in Maths that had been demonstrated on the blackboard and must have said so. Brian was always the smallest kid in his Form and Mr. Noonan came down to Brian's desk, picked him up by the seat of his pants and the back of his collar, took him to the blackboard with his nose touching the chalk and said “Now do you see it?”

Mr. Green: Our English Teacher was Mr. Green. He was based in the new Library which was built in the previous year, 1938. Mr. Green was always impeccably dressed in fine pin-striped suits and looked like a slightly heavier-built version of Ray Milland, the Hollywood actor. He had dark hair starting to go grey, parted in the centre and brushed smoothly back. He could have passed for a successful city businessman.

Like all good English teachers, Mr. Green was a good actor and I remember him pointing out that Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* could be seen in a sympathetic light.

Mr. McIntosh: In Second Year our Maths and Geography teacher was a big heavily-built man with a head bald on top surrounded by dark hair, and a bushy black moustache. Mr. McIntosh was always called 'Black Mac' by the boys. He was a genial bloke who was always prepared to interrupt his lesson to reminisce. He once told of a hair-raising experience he had on an overseas trip some years earlier (when he had hair). He was touring in a car in Italy and was chased by bandits on narrow winding roads in a wild mountainous area.

Mr. Brown: Most of the teaching staff didn't change in my three years at Brunswick Tech, but 'Tichy' Brown arrived during Second Year. As can be guessed from his nickname, Mr. Brown was quite small. Like 'Black Mac' he was bald on top, and he had a moustache and brown, lively eyes. He must have taught History, because one day he gave us the life of Garibaldi the Italian patriot of the 1800's who brought a lot of warring states together to form the modern Italy.

Years later, a mate of mine at Melbourne Tech, Gordon Thomas, who had come from Geelong, was telling me about a teacher they had at the Gordon Tech who was so keen to talk about Garibaldi that they gave him the nickname 'Garibaldi'. I asked whether his name was Brown. Yes, it was the same 'Tichy' Brown!

Much later again our brother Geoff whose schoolboy mate was 'Porky' McLeod, son of Campbell McLeod, got to know "Tichy" Brown who was living in Walhalla Street on Coonan's Hill, across the road from the McLeods and next door to Mr. Seers our former sixth grade teacher.

Mr. Heard: Our Free Drawing teacher was Mr. Heard. He was a neatly-built, average-sized chap with light brown hair, aged about thirty. We heard that he had played League Football, but nobody seemed to know any details.

He was a painter of landscapes in water colour and a couple I can remember seeing were first-class with pale blue Australian mountains in the distance – just the right shade of blue, and old eucalypts in the foreground.

For Free Drawing our desks were arranged in a hollow square and often an item to be drawn would be placed on a box in the middle. One day a subject had been set up and we were to spend most of the one-hour period drawing it in pencil. I set to work, and as I always do, blotted out my surroundings in concentrating on the drawing. About half-way through, I looked up and nearly all the other kids were looking at me with the ends of their tongues sticking out of the corner of their mouths in imitation of me! I had been concentrating hard of course, and must have been getting extra expression into the job with the help of my tongue. Luckily I got on pretty well with the whole of the Form, and anyway I thought I could 'outdraw' them all!

Mr. Heard also helped coach kicking the football at times during the Phys. Ed. Periods.

Mr Iverson: was short and neatly built. In fact everything about him was neat – his clothes, his work and his house. He lived in a Spanish Mission style house built high above the road in Brunswick Road, not far from where my best pal, Bert Young, lived. ‘Ticky’ Iverson taught Solid Geometry and Clay Modelling, and ran the ‘Social Hour’ on Wednesdays.

After a shorter lunch hour on Wednesdays in whole school would squeeze into a makeshift assembly hall formed below the library by knocking out dividing walls, and have ‘Social Hour’. This consisted of items by the small school orchestra and sometimes solo items by a boy singing or Bart McDiarmid playing the cornet. We would enthusiastically sing Land of Hope and Glory (often as Land of Soap and Borax) and other rousing patriotic songs, Forty Years On, and songs from musicals, such as ‘Goodbye’ from Whitehorse Inn. The words of the songs were beautifully lettered on large sheets of white paper by Social Hour leader and conductor ‘Tichy’ Iverson, and set up on an easel so that they could be turned over by a tall student delegated to the job.

‘Tichy’ told us in one of his Solid Geom. classes that a former student (probably an engineer) had come back to him for help in developing the tricky lines of intersection in a structure being built at Melbourne Zoo. This was a great bird aviary which had the form of a modern cathedral, wholly built of galvanized steel. A long nave, parabolic in cross section linked up with a taller parabolic dome. The aviary, with interior aerial walkways added in recent years, is still in use after nearly 70 years.

Clay Modelling was held in one-half of a large room divided by a partition, with the Free Drawing studio on the other side. The partition stopped about 4 feet short of the ceiling and some of the wilder kids were tempted to throw lumps of clay into the adjoining room. But they never did, in my time. We had been warned at the start and everybody knew that they would be in real trouble if they tried it! Most of the modeling we did was in low relief, based on classical designs such as the fleur-de-lis. After the clay model had dried we would erect four sides around it with timber and pour plaster of Paris over the clay. When the plaster was dry it was painted with shellac to prevent sticking, and plaster of Paris would be poured into the mould. A loop of wire would be inserted in the wet plaster and a few hours later the plaster cast would be ready to hang on a wall.

Mr. Oakley taught Mechanical Drawing (sometimes call Engineering Drawing). This was a bit like Solid Geometry but involved the scale drawing of cast metal of the type used in engineering works for making machine components and the detailing of bolts and nuts etc.

Mr. Oakley spent most of one period warning the class that if we finished up going to Melbourne Tech we should avoid making the mistakes he and his mates made when they found there was less control by staff in a Senior Tech. This included skipping classes

when it suited, going to the pictures, and smoking. When the time came, I don't think we remembered his advice.

Mr. Barberis was a Chemistry and Science teacher occasionally called 'Tichy', but more often known as 'Joey'. He was in his forties, small with a very shiny face and bright pink cheeks. He wore gold coloured wire-framed glasses and had centre-parted black hair brushed flat on his head. He usually wore grey trousers and a shiny black silk jacket.

'Joey' was fairly strict and usually had control of his classes, but he seemed to have it in for 'Nuts' Boulter. Forms 2a and 2b would be combined for Chemistry theory, and 'Nuts' was in 2b. He was the biggest kid in the class – close to 6 feet tall at the age of fourteen and although not over-bright, he was generally harmless. Time and again 'Joey' would call 'Nuts' out to the front to get the strap. He would stand on the edge of the platform and beckon with the index finger of his outstretched hand as he called to 'Nuts' "Come out here, little man!" He was six inches shorter than 'Nuts', but the platform raised him enough to be face-to-face. He used a narrower strap than all the other teachers – his knowledge of Science would have told him that the narrower the strap, the more pain. Joey's strapping style was rather impressive – he would rise on his toes for the backswing and put everything into his delivery. All to no avail. It seemed to make no impression on 'Nuts' and would leave 'Joey' red-faced and irritated.

.....? We had a Science teacher with a German-sounding name which I have forgotten. He was older than the other teachers, wore a light brown dust coat and had the air of an absent-minded professor. Once each term he would bring his collection of about five watches – wrist and pocket type – into the Lab. And clean them by boiling in petrol! He had a trick that prevented him blowing himself up and burning the school down. I think that he boiled the beaker of petrol with a sheet of wire gauze over the Bunsen burner to prevent the flame getting through to the petrol, but I wouldn't try it myself!

Mr. Long was a tall well-dressed quiet man who taught Solid Geometry. I only remember him because of one incident.

One lunch-time I was standing talking to four or five mates near the edge of the Quadrangle. Without warning, a kid called Keith Digby bowled up and started talking to me in a belligerent voice. I knew who he was, but had never had anything to do with him. He was a little shorter than me, lightly built, and had a thick top lip that generally seemed to be curled in a sneer. I knew he was a bit of a fighter.

This day he had a grouch about my father. At the time Dad had a competition running in the Sun newspaper. He was working at the Herald Office and this competition was one of his many side-line ideas. Each week he would get half a dozen sporting photos from the Herald-Sun photo library, arrange with staff artists and photographers to change or modify them ask Sun readers to identify the mistakes or changes when a group was published. A prize was offered. By reversing a picture a right-handed batsman could be turned into a left-hander, or a well-known footballer's number could be altered by an artist.

The previous week one of Dad's photos had been reversed to show horses in a race in Sydney running anti-clockwise, as they did in Melbourne. We Walsh kids had known from an early age that Sydney races ran in the opposite direction from Melbourne, but without television, the average person in Melbourne would not know.

Dad's name was on the page of competition photos each week and this kid must have learned that he was my father.

He claimed that Dad didn't know what he was talking about and said the Sydney races were run in the same direction as Melbourne. His Uncle lived in Sydney and he had told him so! If there was no difference from Melbourne why would the subject be discussed?

I tried to ignore hi but he was spoiling for a fight. He pushed his face almost into mine and shouted several times "Your old man's up the pole!" My mates were still standing around expectantly and I could see that this kid was not going to let up.

I swung a half-hearted right hand punch at him, but before it had landed his right hand shot straight forward and landed on my nose. Blood spurted everywhere and my nosed started running like a tap.

Digby disappeared, but shortly afterwards, Mr. Long who must have been on yard duty, walked past. He took a neatly folded large white handkerchief from the top pocket of his suit and gave it to me to try to staunch the flow and mop up. It took a while to stop the bleeding, with my mates putting cold keys down my back in attempts to help, but eventually it was all right, with no real damage. Mum washed and ironed Mr. Long's handkerchief and sent it back to him immaculate in a clean brown paper bag.

I did not win the one and only fight in all my school years, but Keith Digby and I must hold the world record for the shortest fight!