

A Headmistress of a School. Eighty Years Ago

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By Eveline Lewis nee Griffiths c1954, writing about Miss Medina Sarah Griffiths

The school was a new one, called into being by the munificence of Sir Titus Salt who had created a new town, Saltaire, to meet the needs of the workers in his large new mills. He had provided them with model dwellings, a place of worship, swimming and Turkish baths, shops, a Park and allotments and schools. These last included separate High Schools for boys and girls - The Salt Schools, as they were called whose spacious accommodation, remarkable for those days, was supplemented by the use of the fine Mechanics' Institute opposite to them; this contained among other amenities a well-equipped Art School, a large Gymnasium and an impressive Public Hall with excellent stage and green rooms.

Both High Schools flourished, but that of the Girls had the advantage of a Head Mistress who brought with her a nucleus of boarders whose rapid growth in numbers soon obliged her to occupy 5 of the larger houses on the outer edge of the town.



This Head Mistress was Miss Medina S Griffiths, a woman of outstanding character and abilities whose father had been Principal of the Theological College at Brecon and whose brother later became Principal of the University College at Cardiff.
[Photo: Medina Sarah Griffiths]

It was my good fortune to become a boarder under her at the age of 12. I came from a school where we were governed by endless rules and received marks for every conceivable thing - conduct, punctuality, order, work; on all sides we were hedged in with a fence of marks - good or bad, one bad mark cancelled three good ones and the mere recording of them was a task; this was a system very common in those days I believe. Imagine the relief of entering a school where there were No Marks, good or bad, for anything. Rules, of course, there were and in recalling them I am struck by their negative quality - in this resembling the "Thou shalt not" of the (?)Ricalogue.

These were the laws that governed us:-

No Talking in the corridors of the school building.

No talking in bedrooms after lights out

No marks given for anything but terminal examinations

No prizes and hence no Prize-giving

No more time to be given to Home-work than the allotted time specified for each item

No punishments except the natural consequence of your own actions

No hiring of any costume, wig or other stage property for any of our frequent theatricals.

No present to be given to any of the mistresses, including the Head Mistress.

Some of these negative rules require comment. (a) No more time to be given to Home-work than the allotted time specified for each subject. Time-tables were drawn up as carefully for home-work as for class-room teaching and no mistress might set more than could be reasonably done in the allotted time. In any address to parents of day-scholars Miss Griffiths said "My idea is that with 5 hours work during the day one hour's preparation for school each evening is the utmost girls should have... Some of you are wondering how, if these are my ideas, it comes about that your girls have so much evening work. Because they make it. I have in my house boards from each of the classes. I allow but one hour for study". (This was later somewhat relaxed for girls in Form VI) "and yet they are never behindhand. Anyone who will insist upon lessons being put away, done or undone, after

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one hour has been conscientiously spent on them will do me a favour. Quickness in work needs cultivation as well as thoroughness”.

(b) No punishments except the natural consequence of your own misdeeds or negligencies. My chief memories of the working of this admirable law are two. Firstly, my own experience of having been sent to the cloak-room to practise putting on and taking off my boots because I was so slow that I had delayed the start for a walk (Oh those interminable lacings of my high boots!) - Secondly, the amusing sight of a friend clutching a mackintosh, an umbrella, a music portfolio and a pair of slippers as she made her way to meals or to class-room, it being assumed that she disapproved of the appointed places for these articles. We all regarded this as something of a joke, but it had its inconveniences and proved a very effective measure.

(c) No accessories, costume, wig or other stage property might be hired for our theatricals. Each girl subscribed 2/6d a term towards an Entertainment Fund which was used for the purchase of materials. The House Mistress helped and advised in the fashioning of costumes which then became the property of the Entertainment Society, ready to serve future occasions and greatly facilitating our frequent theatricals. Useful as this was, I think the training in ingenuity and handiwork was of even greater value. With the aid of the Art Mistress and a retired carpenter we produced wonderful bits of stage scenery, and no problem of costume was considered too tough to be tackled. A memorable occasion for me was my appearance as a young Greek hero when the masses of my long straight hair were painfully pinned into tight curls all over my head by a clever girl, who, unfortunately, liked neither me nor the job - doubtless good discipline for both of us! It fell to my lot in my last term at school to fill the role of Bottom. The ass's head was a problem and well do I remember the patience of the donkey that mowed the lawn and served as my model. I sat out with him and modelled a head from sheets of brown paper, pasted together, layer upon layer, and finally covered with swans-down calico, painted and then combed into hairiness; the hinged jaw, worked by a string inside my costume was the crowning triumph.

Miss Griffiths herself was an admirable designer of entertainments, tableaux and cantatas, much of the music for which she herself composed. She came of a musical family and it was related of her that before she could read words she could read notes and sing them with truly surprising correctness.

In the beautiful grounds of Caldecote Towers in Hertfordshire to which she moved in later years, she delighted to produce outdoor pageants which were especially appreciated by her neighbour and friend Sir W S Gilbert.

One of her wittiest successes was a skit on the Bacon-Shakespeare controversy. She assumed the discovery of Hittite tables proving that Ham had written Dickens and exhibited a series of tableaux as illustrations of them. These were all done in terra cotta colouring with a remarkably flat effect and showed in Assyrian dress such scenes as Mrs Squeers administering brimstone and treacle to the pupils of Dotheboys Hall.

This brings us to the last of our Headmistress's negative rules: No presents to be given to any of the mistresses, including the Head Mistress. Girls who had come on from schools where Birthday presents to Mistresses had been a frequent tax on pocket-money, welcomed this rule - but the great affection inspired by Miss Griffiths caused a revolt one year and she agreed to accept either a toy or a garment from anyone who wished to make her a present, the garment to be made by the donor, and all articles to be suitable as gifts to Hospitals or Homes. Ultimately it allowed to give both garment and toy and a goodly show was available each year for charitable purposes. The garments were made out of school hours and one poor needlewoman had such mishaps; with her garment that a kind friend came to her rescue and largely remade the article, which the donor then insisted on labelling "Norah's work with Flo's love". Perhaps this small incident is as typical as any that could be given of the spirit inspired in the school by this loved Head Mistress. Absolute sincerity and hard work were expected from all alike, but within the limits there was much liberty. Two small examination instances may be given.

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A Common-sense exam paper occasionally appears, each Mistress contributing one question to it. One year some such questions as this appeared:-

"Say what you would do if you were taking a walk with a friend and she (1) fell and cut her knee, (2) was stung by a wasp, (3) sprained her ankle, (4) got a fly in her eye."

One of my friends answered curtly, "Never again go for a walk with that friend", and received no reprimand.

The same girl when taking a University Local Examination in Botany, on being given a slightly decomposing lily of the valley and asked to "Describe and classify the specimen submitted to you" - wrote "Decayed vegetable matter" - of which again no notice was taken when work of it got abroad, and the girl passed in Botany.

Freedom in all but essentials was one of the watchwords of the school. All power of punishment was kept absolutely in the hands of the Headmistress and when transgressions arose the culprit herself was sent to confess her wrong-doing, a salutary measure, discipline enough in itself!

Every Friday afternoon school was closed by "Assembly" when the Head Mistress addressed the whole school. These were memorable occasions - Miss Griffiths was an eloquent speaker, often amusing, always interesting and always pressing home some lesson for life. Here are a few extracts from an end-of-the-term Assembly speech of which I have a copy.

"I long for you to be so obedient to the right that you will lose all thought of a Teacher's commands and govern yourselves, showing obedience to what you know to be right, rather than what you know will gain applause. That is my idea of Obedience, not the mere fulfilling of personal commands, but a reverence for what is true and makes for Righteousness, a yielding to the power and beauty of law divine, the willing sacrifice of self to that which is True". You cannot injure yourself without injuring the School, you cannot do mean things, speak wrong words without staining our record and lowering your own lives... Last year I tried to make you realise that holidays were to school-life something like the word 'Selah' in the Psalms, said to be a direction for the voices to cease while the musical instruments played; so our work is now to pause for the music of home joys and duties to sound in our lives... 'Holidays or 'Holy-days' were Saints' Days marked in the Calendar by red letters, hence 'Red-Letter Days' became the term for days that brought special happiness or good luck. Do not let them mean days of idleness, make them your holy-days, full of special blessing, full of care for others, of loving service, of opportunities of making home happier, of helping to lighten care of all kinds. Let your hosts and hostesses be the better for your presence, your parents the freer from anxiety, the nursery folk the fuller of laughter and contentment because you are there."

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Eveline went on to graduate from London University in 1892.

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