

A Young Teacher in Perspective by Terence Steinmetz

I am an old man now, but I cannot forget that day I came upon Canberra High School, after a year in the hot country of NSW. It was the day before school was to resume after the long, lazy days of summer. Nor could I have believed that a public school of the NSW variety could look like this with its art-deco features; squarish, dominating clock tower with wings right and left; and at right angles to these, two more extensions causing the whole building to look like the Sphinx of Cairo with gaze focussed on a spot beside Civic.

It was 1949 and on the morrow, not merely would the building have won affection by its very openness, but I would have learned that it was a selective high school with great emphasis on the academic and requiring much vital work for staff and children. Through this day, I became friendly with a female appointee, new like me to such a posting. We gave our answers to the Acting Headmaster because the new superior had not yet arrived and from the outset we glimpsed the working of an institution that stood for efficiency, law and order. Yes, Dear Reader, this was to be a place of uniforms, prefects, school assemblies, house spirit, football teams, net-ball and the rest. Though small, it was known to have the cream of students from public primary schools in Canberra and to be a likely spot for children of Foreign Affairs officers, academia and overseas appointees to Australia. Truly a haven for the conservative and painstaking teacher.

I know that there are good reasons for children to have most of their freedoms while growing up and that a common uniform can create an impression of a gaol. I realise that there are good reasons for criticising the prefect system and I know a democratic society should foster student opinions rather than the flagrant views of an autocrat. However, in those faraway times, I found the majority of students accepted the uniform, the assemblies and the selective system rendering critics' views of a just form of education powerless - at least for the moment.

So, the place existed; a haunting cauldron of mixed emotions before a tapestry of multi-cultural flavours and features, buzzing classrooms with the excitement of discovery, cookery classes conjuring delectable aromas of cakes and casseroles, the quiet rooms of technology and the exciting excursions to *Hamlet* and Parramatta.

Standing on the parquet floor on the main entrance, I glimpse the long corridor polished like a door-knob with the sunshine gashing the many windows; here I appreciate the creamy walls, the two staircases rising to the top floor, and as I ponder, I cannot but believe that some good fairy has got me through the key-hole into the place and I am but dreaming. Can it be untrue, though, that the beautiful wooden desk is not mine nor its very comfortable swinging chair. *No! No! No! You are not dreaming. See! As I push this pin in, you bleed!*

Coming down to Hotel Acton, where again I was extremely lucky to board, I was amazed at the efficiency of Mrs Dixon, who at all times proved to be dictatorial in her methods as she guarded her standards and tried to please the upper echelons and rank and file of the Public Service, as they made overnight stays travelling as Trade Commissioners, Public Service Officers and diplomats of all kinds.

I have not told you, Dear Reader, though, that I was appointed to teach History and English but that I had no teaching experience in teaching History. Had those good people at the top of the school known this, I would have been parcelled up in newspaper and tied with a string before being put on a slow train to Broken Hill, I am sure. As it was, with at least one History class, I had to read and organise my material every night I could. Besides that, the returned men and women were seeking under-graduate

A Young Teacher in Perspective by Terence Steinmetz

status at universities and so the school building accommodated a night school where five nights of the week students could study for the Intermediate and Leaving Certificate. I gave my name for a job there as it was run by the same headmaster.

All this change could do nothing but stir the emotions and after all I was not married nor likely to be. But strangely the classes at the school, quiet and good humoured, allowed me to teach as I dreamed I should have liked to teach. Children spoke up frankly and boldly expressing the truth as perceived by them. For a time it was *Treasure Island* and *Long John Silver* that entertained us; then it was *Shylock* and his mastery over villainy; at others *Brutus* and *Caesar*, while still later, *Hamlet*, *Lear*, *Othello* with the *Dubliners*, *Lord Jim* and *Gerard Manley Hopkins* not far away.

I began to lose my tensions as the day loses light; I began to socialise with card-players and celebrate Friday's committal of the week to the garbage bin. I played tennis till the winter grabbed me, went on cycling trips along the dusty roads of the city's outskirts and enjoyed many a moment just holding a glass of beer in my hands. I learnt to entertain in a bedroom, for you must remember we were poor without motor cars, second suits or bank balances of any size. I would set up a methylated spirits burner and cook something that suited my guest's palate. I always feared that the naked flame would explode the contents on which it depended; I also knew that we would be boiled in oil if Mrs Dixon caught us; but neither happened and at seventy-seven, I live to tell the tale.

They were great days, these, if one had a friend, a good cook, and I had one. Thus each Sunday evening we feasted, tired somewhat of the hostel fare, and created some privacy in a world at all time devoted to school. The swapping of opinions on teachers and pupils made oneself marvel at such involvement, using the house system or prefects as a topic for debate. But above all this, there was a security about things as the men and women, returned from the war symbolized: our retreat for the moment from the pursuit of violence as a solution to our problems.

I could tap away at this typewriter and bore you with the remarkable talents of the staff, but perhaps you knew some of them: Frank Jones, Joe Grimsley, Russ Rix, Harry Reid, Frances Dunncliff, Thelma Smythe, Johnnie Walton, Arthur Martin, Bill Jessop, Mary Zelenka. If you did, please understand that I respected them and the many others, who contributed so proudly to a school's achievements.

I know that the place had many free-masons and that it was rumoured that free-masons had a secret word at the foot of the promotional ladder. Anyway, one might well ask what was a genuine Catholic like me doing in the corridors of the public school system. I was never a lover of inspectors and with exquisite shyness shunned the offices of the Sydney establishment. Thus, I was long in taking promotion seriously but when I did and it really mattered, I know that certain members of the group of which I have spoken, went out of their way to speak up for me and I never did hear one argument in which the issue of religion ever raised its head.

One of those colleagues, I have mentioned, was a little man with a bald pate. For some reason he was called *Peanuts* and in the corridors, when this good gentleman would stand with back to window, little hands would rub his bald head and he would become furious. Arthur Martin I can still see showing a budding cricketer the right grip of the bat and his patience, his warmth of interest made me marvel again at where I had come. Johnnie Walton saw that Drama was becoming a strong element in the school's curriculum with make-up more and more a feature of annual festivals. He went home and made excellent wooden carrying cases so that one could be used for the girls' room and one for the

A Young Teacher in Perspective by Terence Steinmetz

boys'. I remember the principal's assemblies with the academic gown reminding everybody of what mattered; and with great affection I remember the two school ovals where carnivals, football matches were held. The children at play, the streamers, the barracking, the competitiveness, the endeavour, the uniforms; these were as evocative of a youth full of energy and resolve as any board meeting of a corporate organisation.

Thus the days went by and we all grew up except those too sensitive to meet life full on. Gone were the thoughts of not belonging anywhere; of a bit of streamer floating with the wind. And we became hard-working zealots both at the Acton and at school where life purified itself through dedication and the seasons were a joy to anticipate. Summer was glorious in its freedom but autumn lit up the land with elms and oaks and claret ash becoming beacons of light and colours; winter froze us to the bone, for we had no heaters at the Acton and the hoar-frost covered the ovals and sparkled half-way up small trees. We waited, thus, for the spring when the camellias, the tulips and the blossoms consolidated our belief that there was happiness this side of the grave.

Niel Madsen used swim at the Olympic Pool every morning after its seasonal opening and covered a mile with flippers in unheated water. At this my mind boggled, for the water felt like ice. But gradually I used also strip down and take the plunge but to swim a mile? No! I think at first I barely crossed the pool.

Neil was a great person, our Deputy, who used show us hospitality every school dance night. Neil was unassuming, a workaholic and a devotee of hockey. Through him and Ian Collier, I ended up playing for *Old Canberrans* as a back, not ever having played a team game in my life. It was a bumble-footed team with me in it but Neil was still centre-forward and at least I learnt the rules.

In all this insistence on the decrees of the school far outshining educational reforms, I heard one day the voice of a later Secondary Education Director saying to me, *But wouldn't you agree Mr Steinmetz, that some liberalism is needed in a school such as this: after all you are teaching human beings, not automatons.* Of course the man was right; we were too inflexible, and I knew it; indeed anybody with a grain of sense knew it. But I didn't want to be sent to Timbuctoo as others were after my first year there; and anyway my control was so good that this authority down the corridor only made me look better.

Then I began to look back over the first few years that I had been there and I found that with the Shakespeare texts, I had made my classes into groups who would elect a producer and nominate roles for students. Innovation was the name of the game as they devised ways for Ophelia's grave; brought their own costumes and prepared their own interpretations. Then to rehearse, I said they could use the classrooms unsupervised. The plan worked wonders; the texts began to come to life; students became aware of the playwright's problems and the whole programme climaxed with a workshop performance.

Would you believe it? No authority took me to task for the innovation: instead with a play performed on Speech Night each year by me, the music teacher, a very musical person, requested of the Headmaster, the right to stage *The Mikado* in the next few months. The Principal, who obviously had faith in this teacher, pointed out that no study of seniors must be lost and all rehearsing be done outside the school's teaching hours. She could ask me to direct.

A Young Teacher in Perspective by Terence Steinmetz

That teacher was able to do much of the music inside the time-table but I needs must find time after school hours to coach the singers in acting, bring ensembles together and gradually include the chorus, particularly in the two finales.

It all worked well except for the nomination of *Koko*. The boy was right in size and maturity but I felt without the acumen to learn lines and keep the show rolling. I requested her to think again but she was adamant. He would do the role.

For months, then, before the end of the year we all toiled, making the after-school hours resound with the popular tunes Sullivan devised. Came the Christmas holidays and we all stopped until the return to the classrooms in early February. Finally the comic opera was staged at the Childers Street Hall, the most uncomfortable theatre in town.

One night only we were granted for all our hours of work, but never have I been more satisfied, with a work of Theatre of my own direction than that night's when *Nanki-Poo*, *Yum-Yum*, *Pooh-Bah* and *Ko-Ko* and company rode into town. The finale of Act II over, the applause was deafening with everyone wanting an encore of the main chorus. Not to be though; the evening was rosy as it was; my heart was submerged in gratitude and I was wrong about John Notaras for he made the warmest and most memorable of *Ko-Kos*.

From such gems of dramatic sowing greater things were to come for in the nineteen sixties the school held a drama festival every year with a full Gilbert and Sullivan production. It could be that this seminal interest shown at Canberra High ensured an interest in the theatre in schools that exists to-day.

In contrast with these happy associations, there was the night of the farewell of sixth form. From memory, the farewell was held at a nearby hotel, where we would assemble: principal and deputy and other interested teachers. Yes, grog was to be bought and enjoyed. Because I had taught these kids, I turned up to enjoy their company on the final fling of the dice. I was never given authority to take responsibility, so I am not sure what happened. But eighteen-year olds around the bar suddenly became the focus of everyone and despite tuxedos, dinner suits and long evening dresses, there were a number of students discredibly lounging, semi-intoxicated with nowhere any teacher in charge.

Eventually the bar-manager could be heard say, *I am closing the bar. It is quite obvious that you don't know how to drink.*

Never have I been more saddened because those students were some of the most remarkable I have known. Those who were not drunk, filed out dismally; others who could stand were helped out; the ones left, inarticulate and soporific, were made to feel the bite of the hotel manager who vowed that this would be last time any school would hold a farewell there. I must point out that this last incident came with the changes in the seventies. But citing of a dismal student celebration reminds me of a real tragedy.

My fourth form English class had but recently been introduced to *Hamlet* by me and we were engaged with reading the play, scene by scene, with analysis of plot development and character growth. We may even have covered the famous soliloquy *To be or not to be*. Whatever the influences of environment - and they can be many - two of the most intelligent girls took themselves to Red Hill, then a mere grassy area, with some eucalypts, intent on keeping a suicide pact. I believe that a pistol was

A Young Teacher in Perspective by Terence Steinmetz

involved and one actually pulled the trigger. The other too terrified to stay, plunged down the embankment and fled to her home nearby, there to acquaint her mother and sister with the graphic, awful picture that she had only recently witnessed. Unlike the drinking episode related before this paragraph, this was during the period of systemic discipline. I have no idea of the motives but hope that nothing in the school environment was to blame. The girl who survived was charged with murder. I cannot recall the coronial inquiry, but I made it clear to the survivor's mother that tragedy was a part of life.

Perspective of a Young Teacher or ...an Old. You can call it what you will as Shakespeare did. But there is no doubt that for some life is a fairy tale; for others a tale told by an idiot. One thing I know, that with Daryl Dawson, Don Whitbread, Robin Brown, Kathy White, Lorraine Livingston, the Barnards there is a frequent reminder that we did not fail completely. These with a help keep alive that gentle suggestion *Una Mente, Uno Consilio.*