

PARAPHRASE OF 'EDUCATING BLODWEN'

A paper given by Mary MacGregor at the 2013 WAW Conference.

I deposited my mother's papers with Glamorgan Archives via the Women's Archives in 2004, accompanying them with notes of what my mother had told me about her school days, a double memory which raises interesting questions about history. Her papers will be useful to anyone researching girls' education in Wales at the beginning of the C20 and its attendant themes of attitudes to discipline, to single sex schools, to travelling to school and also to the language. Often it is no more than a name, a title, the phrasing of a letter or just the incidental that can illuminate in unexpected ways. I hope to show the value of the unconsidered trifles of an ordinary woman. Glamorgan Archives, Ref DAWW 12/2 – 6.

My mother Blodwen Davies was born on 14 July 1900 in a miner's cottage, 4 Windsor St. Troedyrhiw. She was one of 13 children, coming fourth from the end. She went to Troedyrhiw Infants' and Junior schools after which she and her friend, also called Blodwen Davies were among the first entrants to Cyfarthfa Castle Municipal School which celebrates its centenary this year. It remained a source of wonder all her life that she should have gone to a school in a castle surrounded by parkland with a lake and needlework classes in a round room in a turret. One of the movers in setting up the school was Councillor Enoch Morrell who declared that miners' children deserved the best and that secondary education should be free including free travel to school and text books paid for. I still have some of these books. She was learning French (French was exotic. Welsh was the language of home and taken for granted) and Latin and all about the properties of coal tar in chemistry and there was Palgrave's Golden Treasury and the glories of English literature. Her battered copy of Palgrave is heavily annotated, especially Milton. She could recite reams by heart. I can see her at the stove and quoting L'Allegro : 'Quips and cranks and wanton wiles/Nods and becks and wreathed smiles/such as hang on Hebe's cheek.' 'Fat danced and sang in the pan: the gas was too high/'Arglwydd Mawr', my mother said./The words sprang from deep caverns of her brain/and flowed through the courses of her blood,/the words of hearth and home and chapel involuntarily came out. And then/the voice of her blessed education./She quoted Milton and turned down the gas.'

2) My mother wrote a list of names of the staff on the back of an envelope. It is worth noting that two members were married. The headmistress Miss Evans chose to leave teaching when she married.

The two Blodwens travelled by train every day from Troedyrhiw halt to Merthyr. On one occasion, Blodwen made the noted Welsh poet Sarnicol incandescent with rage because she had let out a 'damn you' against one of the boys in the carriage who had tripped her up. Sarnicol reported her to Miss Newton, Miss Evans's successor as headmistress. Blodwen was in disgrace before the whole school. My mother always said it was because a girl had uttered an obscenity that had infuriated Sarnicol. No boy was ever questioned.

Miss Newton soon put an end to the practice of the train girls sharing a penn'orth of chips on their long walk from Cyfarthfa to Merthyr station. The impression the school made on the town was a prime concern in view of the opposition there had been to turning the castle into a school.

Back to the schoolroom and to Shakespeare. Her copy of The Complete Works show 11 plays heavily annotated. One homework was to learn the sleep walking scene from Macbeth. She and a younger sister, Matty, took a candle upstairs – there was gas light downstairs but no light upstairs except when the bedrooms were lit by the light from the furnaces of Dowlais ironworks. Matty was thrilled by 'Out damned spot'. 'I hope Mam can't hear.' There was that damned word again.

Mam, my grandmother had little education. She always had difficulty with English and she marked her marriage certificate with a cross. Yet she knew that education was a key to a fuller life. When Sir Frank Benson and his travelling Shakespeare Players came to Merthyr, she encouraged my mother to go to see them. I was shocked when my mother said that if her father had been alive, she would not have allowed her to go. Actors were of dubious reputation. Her father had been strict chapel. Strange that he was the educated one but his outlook was limited. My mother and aunt used to say that he could read and write fluently in Welsh and English. However, the census for 1901 shows that he had Welsh only. Whatever the truth, the family had the perception of his having two languages.

3) There were aspects of chapel that my mother deplored. She witnessed the disgrace of a young girl being thrown out for becoming pregnant. But Chapel was the social centre of their lives and educated in the wider sense. There were the picnics at Ponsarn and Pontsticill and the annual outing to Barry Island. There were the chapel teas and the magic lantern shows. And there was the music. The Blodwens knew all the Welsh hymns, of course, but every year there was a major work, Handel's Messiah being the most popular.

Included in my mother's papers is the School Magazine for July 1914 which shows the active life of the Castle School outside the classroom. My mother, however, never spoke of any of this. It wasn't easy for the train girls to take part after school or on Saturdays. My mother loved hockey and netball. She was athletic but she was never in a school team. The magazine records debates, lectures and accounts of school parties. The lower school party didn't finish until 10.00pm with the singing of Auld Lang Syne and Mae Hen Wlad fy Nhadau. The magazine tells of Nurse Davies speaking of the dangers of drinking too much coffee and tea. There were debates on 'Are school expeditions worthwhile?' and 'The modern girl versus her grandmother'. There were 25 votes to 13 in favour of the modern girl who, according to one speaker was no greenhouse plant as was her grandmother but a hardy, healthy one as was shown in an account of a geography expedition by the 6th form under the guidance of their geography mistress. They went by train to Torpantau and then set off to find the source of the River Taff. One group went down the wrong valley. They became hungry, their food was over the mountain at Torpantau. They managed to find a wayside inn. They were so famished they offered to help the hostess get their tea ready 'and would even have finished washing the baby who was in her bath had that brought tea sooner.' The gooseberry tart was delicious. They made it back to the gates of the Castle and agreed that the wrong turning had given them a better idea of their watershed and had added to their enjoyment.

One thing I noticed was that the natural world features strongly throughout the articles and poems in English and Welsh. Merthyr might have been the industrial heartland of Wales but the countryside was only a heartbeat away.

The magazine carried sports results, a list of gifts to the school, including a portrait of Robert Burns donated by their MP, Keir Hardie and lists of exam

4) successes of those who qualified for university and those who had passed the preliminary certificate, the exam for those going to training college. It was this exam which the two Blodwens passed after which they became pupil teachers, my mother in Troedyrhiw Infants and Blodwen in Troedyrhiw Junior School.

For 5 years, my mother learned her craft as a pupil teacher. She was a natural teacher. The headmistress, Kate Jones urged her to go to college. This seemed impossible. My mother's father had been killed in an accident in Nixon's colliery Merthyr Vale when she was 6 years old. She remembered their bringing his body back on a gambo. Her brother's spine had been shattered in the same accident. There was no insurance. The only income came sporadically from a farm my grandfather had owned in Mydroilyn in Cardiganshire. My grandmother decided to sell the farm so that my mother could go to college. I now see that it was a remarkable thing to do. The sale was handled by a solicitor but my aunt Ellen supervised the sale. She taught herself conveyancing, getting books from Merthyr Library on the subject. The letter addressed to her shows a balance of £354 for the sale of The Spite farm. Spite is a corruption of 'ysbyty'.

In 1921 my mother went to Sheffield Training College for the 2 years of the course. She never applied to a Welsh college. Although happy with her Welsh identity, she wanted to see what was beyond Wales. It was important to have testimonials from someone of standing in the community. The testimonial she had from the Minister of her chapel says that he had 'known Miss Blodwen Davies from the cradle. She is of respectable parents.'

She had a testimonial from Enoch Morrell when she finished college in 1923 but she never needed it. She was one of two students her year to gain an 'A' grade for teaching practice. She was told she need not apply anywhere else : there was a job for her in Sheffield. There is a letter from Kate Jones saying that she would strike when the time was right to get her back to Wales but for 12 years she taught at the Lancasterian Infants School in Sheffield. Rarely did the number of children in the class fall below 60. In her last year she was the acting head and would have been confirmed as headmistress but she left to marry my father. This was 1934 when married teachers had no option but to leave teaching. And so she returned to live in Wales. 12 : 10 : 2013