

CHAPTER 1

EARLY DAYS

A school is not an island, but rather is a living part of the organism of society, and, as such, reflects the developments of society in its own growth and development. Thus the story of St. Ninian's High School over the first century of its existence must be seen against the ever-changing background of the past hundred years, a century of rapid and far-reaching changes in all aspects of life, social, political and economic. During the past century, the industrial revolution was completed, the world was convulsed by two great wars and numerous smaller ones, and in more recent years further industrial and economic change; as part of this scene, education has had to keep pace, and so education in general and this school in particular has seen many changes between 1874 and 1974. The social background of the 1870's was particularly complex; the worst conditions of the industrial revolution society were being remedied only gradually; working hours and conditions were still harsh and education was very much a hit or miss affair, depending on the attitude of employers, and on the co-operation of parents, before the passing of the Education Act of 1872, misleadingly termed the 'Scotch' Education Act. The gradual process of enfranchising the working class made necessary this expansion of the old Scottish education system dating back to the days of John Knox, whose pious hopes of a qualified master or dominie in every parish had hardly been fulfilled. Anyway, such a system was suitable only for a rural society and could hardly have survived the shift of population which accompanied the industrial revolution; further, the quality of dominie left something to be desired; contemporary accounts describe these worthies as people 'whom no gentleman would trust with the keys of his cellar' and 'whose only qualification for the job was unfitness for any other', and who frequently plied their trade of teaching in cowsheds amidst the cows and poultry.

The 1872 act centralised and standardised the system; education became compulsory for all between the ages of five and thirteen, parish school boards were to be elected to organise local education and to finance it from the rates, and an additional government grant was to be available subject to schools satisfying the inspectors as to standards of attendance and progress. The schools were to be, in theory, non-denominational, and herein lay the great flaw which made the 1872 act an instrument of oppression rather than enlightenment to many; Catholics and Episcopalians opted out of the system by retaining their own voluntary schools, considering that education could not be divorced from the teaching of Christian belief, and continued to operate their own voluntary schools; the school managers were responsible to the local school boards but received no financial help from them, although Catholics and others in like position paid local rates the same as everybody else; in other words, the Catholic population financed the non-denomination schools by rates, yet still had to contribute to the upkeep of its own voluntary schools; between 1872 and 1910 it is estimated that Catholics in Glasgow contributed one and a half million pounds to non-denominational education in the city.

Catholic schools were usually managed by the local parish priest who appears so often in the log books of the years 1872 to 1918 as 'the reverend manager', and who was responsible for wringing from his parishioners money to pay teachers and to provide text books and writing materials (usually slates); if the school could satisfy the inspectorate as to attendance and progress, it qualified for the relatively small government grant which generally was consumed in acquiring premises, often

unsuitable, as in the case of the Kirkintilloch (Town) R.C. school of the 1880's and 90's. Since the Catholic population in central Scotland consisted largely of landless labourers of Irish and Highland origin, the process of raising money could be difficult owing to the low wages of these people, and the driving force behind educational progress must often have been the gaining and keeping of the government grant which could easily be withdrawn. The parish priest, for his part, was called upon to be educationalist, attendance officer, disciplinarian and money-gatherer, as well as spiritual father to his people; fortunately for the future of Catholic education in Kirkintilloch, the pastors during these difficult years of 1872 to 1918 seem to have combined these roles with creditable success.

The Education Act of 1918 abolished the school boards, assimilated 226 Catholic schools into the new national system, and set up new education authorities under the aegis of the Scottish Education Department; Catholic schools retained what was religious in their character but enjoyed the same benefits of help from the local rates which everyone else had had since 1872. In examining and evaluating the growth of the Kirkintilloch Town R.C. school of 1874 into the modern St Ninian's High School, one must have constant regard to the difficulties of those first 46 years when the immediate aim of this and other such schools was survival rather than progress, and to the much-improved conditions of the years after 1918. Further and more detailed reference will be made to the efforts of those early priests, headmistresses and parents who made this survival possible. Nor should such an evaluation disregard the difficulties still to be faced by all concerned with local education in the years after 1918, a period in which education, as far as working class people were concerned, had to proceed against a background of years of economic depression, industrial strife, strikes and lock-outs, a period which did not encourage a great deal of interest in matters educational. The relief of the 1918 Act did not prevent the growth of this school from being a painful and often slow process, owing to the difficult economic conditions at the time, so faithfully reflected in the school's log books of the period. Thus the obvious success of St. Ninian's High School at the end of its first hundred years of existence is not a state which 'just happened' but is the product of a century of hard work and devotion on the part of a great many people, parents, pupils, staff and clergy, an idea at least of some of whose achievements in this building process this account of the school's history will try to give.

In the 1830's there had been no Catholic Churches or schools in the Kirkintilloch area, presumably because there was little demand for such; the Irish famine of 1845/46 and the subsequent influx of Irish Catholics was yet to come. However, once this immigration started it tended to continue sporadically throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, the attractions of the area being the chances of work in agriculture, in collieries and in a variety of other industries. Regarding education, the immigrant population brought its own problems; the village school system was inadequate to deal with such numbers and had never been intended to deal with industrial revolution conditions; further, it was non-denominational in theory, but frequently closely influenced by the Presbyterian Church, and, as such, was unacceptable to Catholic parents. Even the enlightened attempts of a few employers to provide education for their workers' children suffered from this difficulty; for example, before 1872, the Catholic workers of Shotts Iron Works were forced to contribute money for a works school to which they considered that they could not send their children because it was non-denominational. However, in 1871 the parish priest of Kirkintilloch, an Italian, Fr Magini, decided to end the practice prevailing there of sending Catholic children to the non-denominational schools, by opening a

school for 55 pupils in premises so appropriate for the purpose of education that they later reverted to use as a barn or hay loft for a local farmer. The increased pressures of the 1872 Education Act, and an almost 50% increase in numbers necessitated the finding of more suitable premises, and in 1874 the dual purpose 'chapel-school' was opened in the south side of Union Street. The building was 60 feet by 30, had an altar gifted by Archbishop Eyre of Glasgow at the east end, and could accommodate 219 pupils or 350 worshippers; a separate sacristy-cum classroom was attached to the main building, the premises stood in about half an acre of ground and cost around £800. The opening took place on Sunday January 11th, 1874 with Mass celebrated by Fr. Magini, and the proceedings presided over by Archbishop Eyre; thus the notoriously inadequate school opened. The 'Dame School' operated by a Miss Collins, and another Catholic seat of elementary learning above a smithy in Martin's Square were used no more, and the embryo St Ninian's High School was born as Kirkintilloch (Town) R.C. School with Fr. Magini as manager and Miss Mary O'Neill from the Liverpool R.C. Training College as headmistress.

The new school began to function on Monday, January 19th, 1874, with 75 pupils who, according to Miss O'Neill's entry for 26th January were 'more diligent this week'; no doubt the excitement had been too much for them the first week. However, the pattern of a school routine soon developed under the capable direction of Miss O'Neill, at that time the head and only mistress. Ecclesiastical reorganisation took the parish out of the hand of Fr. Magini, and St Ninian's as a new and separate parish enjoyed the services of no less than two Parish Priests in the year 1874-75, Frs. P.H. Dunne and J.J. Dyer. In view of the essential part played in Catholic schools by the priest as 'reverend manager', these changes must have hampered the growth of the new school and caused some lack of continuity. Yet work continued; by September 1874, the pupils were being taught reading, writing, singing, 'Notation of figures', dictation and arithmetic; certain highlights must have broken, if not always dispelled the monotony; bad weather in February, 1874 and smallpox in May lowered the attendance, as did harvest work in October. The 4th August of that first year was a momentous date for community as well as for pupils – 'To-day being the bringing of the water to Kirkintilloch, gave the children half a holiday' – as the school log states.

Early difficulties are soon reflected in the day to day life of the school; the local school board which gave no financial help to the 'voluntary' schools was nevertheless responsible for attendance, and made visits to the school regarding attendance, or rather a frequent lack of it. The government grant depended on attendance and progress, hence the visit of Messrs. Ogilvie and Whyte, inspectors. Their first report is enigmatic – 'Instruction is faithfully given as far as it goes'. With only one qualified teacher and one individual room for all primary ages, it probably did not go very far. There were pupil teachers, themselves merely older pupils in charge of teaching their juniors, documentary evidence suggests that while some of these were hard-working and reliable, going ultimately to college and qualifying as teachers, quite a few others were pretty poor material and little asset to the school or the system of education.

With 'holidays of obligation', public 'fasts', 'feasts' and fairs, and even time off for harvesting, in addition to four weeks' holidays in summer and nearly three at Christmas and New Year, the pupil of a century ago was hardly underprivileged in this respect at least. The harvest holiday seems to have developed with official blessing because pupils took it anyway with or without such. In addition the Christmas/New Year holiday was substantially longer than it is to-day. Finally early closing of the school seems to have been not infrequent owing to extremely wet or

cold weather; this may perhaps reflect the difficulties which resulted from the fact that a considerable number of the children were ill-clad and lacking in footwear adequate for such weather conditions.

By the end of 1874, a new Parish Priest, Rev. J. Bonnyman, was appointed, and assumed amongst other duties that of manager of the school. Father Bonnyman contributed substantially to the growth of the new school, bringing with him great enthusiasm and a family tradition of Scottish Catholicism from his native Banffshire. Between 1874 and 1890 with parish and school expanding, a presbytery was built and the school extended, and the idea of building a new church was for the first time considered; Father Bonnyman died in 1890 and was buried in the ancient pre-reformation cemetery of the Auld Aisle, the first priest to be interred there since the Reformation. As before, the parish priest's duties had included regular if not daily visits to the school, examination of pupils, progress and attendance, and the disciplining of wrongdoers. Yet these visits did not always bring fear of retribution; occasionally, as on 25th August, 1876, the reverend manager 'distributed prizes and a variety of sweetmeats'; in September of the same year, the former parish priest, Father Dunne, 'gave 5/6 towards sweeties'; a few days later, incidentally, the school was visited by an unnamed 'young lady' who donated '6/- towards sweeties'. Even in the 1870's, school life apparently had its lighter and sweeter side.

During this early period, changes of headmistresses were too frequent; the original headmistress, Mary O'Neill resigned in 1876 and was succeeded by Margaret Gallagher, another product of the Liverpool Training College, who lasted only one year. This unsettled regime is reflected in the poor progress reported; the 1876 report, compiled by the inspectors, sent to the reverend manager and copied out and signed by him, states 'Results of instruction continue to be unsatisfactory' and a deduction of the government grant was the consequence. The situation was gradually improved by a new headmistress, Mary Ferns, who took up office in January, 1877 and remained for fifteen years; her first comment regarding order and discipline in her new school is 'rather poor'. However, by February, 1877, the reverend manager is noting his pleasure at the 'order and discipline into which the children are gradually subsiding'; the verb used conjures up a remarkable picture. The 1877 report emphasises this gradual improvement owing to the greater efficiency and competence of Miss Ferns.

The late 1870's and early 1880's were to be a period of reasonably steady progress despite numerous difficulties; bad weather each winter resulted in a high absentee rate; harvest and such temptations as a 'magic lantern in the town' and later (in August, 1881) a travelling circus, all supplied the children with what little incentive was needed to be elsewhere but at school. Despite the work of Miss Ferns and support of Father Bonnyman, new difficulties replaced the old; while reasonable progress was maintained, the school building was becoming unable to cope with the numbers using it. By 1888 the roll had reached approximately 180, but as early as 1883 certain serious defects had been noted; desks were in poor condition, and windows needed to be re-hung. The floor was not washed often enough, toilet accommodation was inadequate, and lack of any cloakroom facilities necessitated the bringing of coats into the classroom. However, nothing could be done at this time, and the school's life seems to have continued as a running battle against the lack of progress which could at any time result in severe and dislocating cuts in the government grant. This period was further interrupted by the death of Father Bonnyman in March 1890, and the resignation in 1891 of Miss Ferns. The late reverend manager was replaced temporarily by John Chrysostom Coleman, O.S.F. and then on the 23rd May, 1890 by the Rev. A. Beyaert, a hardworking Belgian priest

whose initiative was to lead in time to the opening of St. Ninian's Church and to the building of a new school adjacent to it on the north side of Union Street, a building now used as a Parish Hall.

Miss Ferns was succeeded by Margaret Payne who held office for nineteen months, then by Joyce Whyte for nearly six years, and by Sarah A. Bradley till November, 1904. Once again changes of headmistress were rather too frequent for the good of the growing school. Staff absences, according to the school logs, were commonplace and must have adversely affected the education of the children; the failure of the pupil-teacher system is obvious from the not infrequent criticisms of these people and their work. However, the basic difficulty was one of accommodation; by 1891 the roll was approaching 300, and the inspectorate were blaming lack of progress on this inadequacy. The situation was to some extent alleviated by the opening of St. Ninian's church in 1893, and the subsequent use of the old church-school as a school only; the report of 1893 suggest partitioning the building into separate classrooms to circumvent the difficulties of pupils of all ages and stages being taught in the one room finally on Wednesday, April 23rd, 1894, the old building was closed, and the school was accommodated in the Oswald Street School which the Kirkintilloch School Board permitted to be used at the nominal cost of ten shillings per week. On July 15th, 1895, the children began occupation of the new building, that is, the present parochial hall in Union Street, in much more adequate accommodation; the future was soon to prove the need for such increased accommodation. By 1899 the roll had reached 340 and, by 1901, four hundred. However, in 1895 with the new facilities came new opportunities; physical education for the older classes became a regular feature of school life, and in December, 1895, the Scottish Education Department approved a new scheme for the tackling of geography and of elementary science.

May 1901 saw the arrival of one of the parish's most outstanding priests and one of the school's most energetic managers, the Rev. Fr. Delbeke, another Belgian. To his enthusiasm and initiative was to be owing the success of the school for some years to come. In November, 1901, the school was closed by order of the local medical authorities because of an outbreak of measles which had infected sixty-eight children, few of whom were near neighbours, and whose only contact therefore was in school. The building was fumigated by William Marshall the sanitary inspector, and redecoration and replacement of wallpaper was recommended; despite these precautions, April, 1902, brought further outbreaks of measles. Attendance, consequently, was poor, and the situation was further aggravated by the practice of some parents of allowing their children to go work illegally under the age of fourteen, yet another reflection of the poverty of the working class of the town. The 1902 report, indeed comments unfavourably on this high absence rate, and suggests that it is the direct cause of considerable backwardness amongst pupils. By August, 1904, it is stated that too many pupils were in classes 'much below what ought to be suitable for their age' a serious reflection on any school at that time, and a dangerous one in an age where financial survival depended on results.