

CHAPTER 2

THE LAST HEADMISTRESS

Yet the beginning of a new era was imminent; in October 1904 the headmistress, Miss Bradley, resigned, and was succeeded on the 11th November by the German Ciara Martens, a strong and dominant character who was to be the school's last female head and who was to work a transformation before her resignation in 1918. With characteristic insight she insisted that weekly records of work be kept by all staff, that all staff have fixed classes, and that the pupils be given more books. She obviously decided that the study of geometry in the Supplementary class, that is, the post-primary, junior secondary, or non-certificate class, be discontinued and replaced by 'nature' knowledge. Yet all could not be remedied immediately; Miss Martens' early efforts received a set-back in that the school was closed again, this time for three weeks, owing to measles in October 1905. The 1905 report is not encouraging: the supplementary class is not progressing enough to merit the special grant which it makes necessary; the hall used for the junior class with its adult chairs and 'so-called desks' is unsuitable, and general progress is still poor. Absences owing to 'measles, mumps and ringworm' impede progress in January, 1906, and in the 1906 report, while recognising the efforts of Miss Martens, suggests that she is 'inadequately supported'. Autumn of 1906 did little to help, as it brought whooping cough, diphtheria and general skin disease. Thus the low standard of living of the parents helped to retard the progress of the school in general and of each pupil in particular, in that such a low standard made the community the more susceptible to disease of all kinds and to the financial temptations of illegally sending children to work instead of to school.

The 1907 report informs the reverend manager that he must find more adequate premises, acquire more permanent and better qualified teachers, and improve the attendance. By September 1907, Father Delbeke with characteristic initiative had put under way the building of an extension to meet the first criticism, and, significantly, in May 1908 more thorough punishment of truants began. However, ill-fortune still dogged the school and the community it served, with further widespread measles outbreaks during the year 1908. Despite the disinfecting of the school in August of that year, no less than one hundred and twenty four pupils were absent on account of measles on September 23rd 1908: the infant school was closed again for a further week, and attendance continued to be poor; this situation continued, and by summer 1911 the inspectors were instructing the reverend manager specifically to seek the aid of the District School Board in enforcing attendance. The grim spectre of disease still lurked in the background, and in December 1910 there were two deaths from measles. The opening of a partly volunteer soup kitchen to help feed the poorest children, in February 1909, reflects the desperate circumstances of at least some parents at this time. Apparently the social reforms of the least great Liberal administration were more apparent than real in their effects as far as some of the parents and children of Kirkintilloch were concerned.

Further evidence of deplorable social conditions is to be found in the letter to the Clerk of the School Board dated 18th January, 1910, to the effect that appreciable numbers of children were attending Kirkintilloch R.C. (Town) School with neither shoes, boots or stockings; this situation was described as 'little short of inhuman' owing to the severity of the winter weather at that particular time. Once again the conclusion to be drawn is obviously that extreme poverty was not uncommon. The

School Board was directed to Section six of the Education (Scotland) Act of 1908 which empowered them to 'meet the necessities of the cases'. This was duly done, with the result that no further complaints of this kind are recorded.

The reports of the inspectorate in these years reflect the usual difficulties; teaching was generally lacking in co-ordination owing to frequent changes of staff, even more frequent staff absences, and cases of incompetence amongst the staff. Pupils are still reported absent in unnecessarily large numbers, and too few pupils are attaining the academic heights of the supplementary class; in other words a great many pupils beyond primary school age were still sitting in primary classes owing to their lack of progress. Despite these constant difficulties, the school continued, owing, no doubt, to the enthusiasm and energy of Miss Martens and Father Delbeke. By November 13th, 1914, three classes were entirely without teachers, and the time-table could not be followed. Significant too is the fact that the three classes amounted to one hundred and eighty five pupils, a figure which suggests an average class size of $61\frac{2}{3}$ pupils. Small wonder the turnover of staff was so great. On the credit side, the gardening class inspired by Father Delbeke was thriving during this period, and in January, 1916 it was hoped to present twenty pupils for the qualifying examination, the purpose of which was to select those capable of benefiting from a course of senior secondary education. At this time, such pupils would have to travel at their own expense to Glasgow, to St. Mungo's Academy or Our Lady & St. Francis Secondary School in order to pursue a senior secondary course. As yet Kirkintilloch R.C. (Town) School was not in a position to provide such courses.

By 1916 it would appear that a stronger line was being taken regarding irregular attendance, and Miss Martens went on May 16th to Dumbarton Sheriff Court as a witness in two prosecutions for failure to send children to school regularly. Significant too at this period is the almost complete ignoring by the headmistress of the fact that Europe, and by 1918 the world, was at war; a few entries in the log make any reference to this unpleasant, but, one would have thought, all-pervading and inescapable fact. Admittedly the school logs deal with internal school business rather than with international events, yet the approach of World War II is closely reflected in the entries by Dr. Barry for the late 1930's. Perhaps Miss Martens, as a German who had never become a naturalised British Citizen preferred to ignore as far as possible the holocaust into which her own country and the Austro-Hungarian Empire had helped to plunge Europe; no reference, for example, exist to any events marking either particular joy or sorrow at any of the outstanding victories or defeats of this long and bloody war, nor is reference made to former pupils on active service or killed in action. However, even Miss Martens is forced to record the lighting restrictions and early darkness light-saving regulations imposed in November 1916, since these caused changes in the school time-table; owing to early winter darkness the children had no afternoon interval and were dismissed early, infants at 3 p.m., juniors at 3.25 p.m. and seniors at 3.30 p.m. Also in November, 1916, the senior girls became involved in knitting socks and scarves for soldiers, and in October, 1917 the school was closed by reverend manager and Board to free pupils for work at the potato harvest, a ghastly reminder of the shortage of manpower owing to military service; conscription had been introduced in 1916 with little real need and little thought for the essential nature of some occupations from which unwillingly conscripts were dragged, only to be thrown raw and untrained and led by incompetents, before the German machine guns. School records predictably fail to mention the end of the war, a significant date, November 11th, 1918, for most people in the world; they do, however, record the resignation, apparently without reason, of

Miss Martens in January of 1919. Some sources suggest that the headmistress found her position as a German citizen in the camp of the victorious enemy a difficult one; since no documentary evidence appears to exist to support this theory, and since other sources emphatically deny it, this question will perhaps remain forever unsolved.

Yet there can be little doubt that the efficiency of the school had increased under the capable leadership of Miss Martens; the supplementary class had been formed and also courses in domestic science and gardening; even the reports of the inspectorate suggest that the difficulties experienced by the school during the period of office of Miss Martens were due to factors beyond her control and that despite these problems she was laying the foundations of an efficient school. Reverend Canon Delbeke had, as school manager, worked hard to keep the school alive; to him had fallen the duty of maintaining attendances under difficult conditions by persuading parents to send their children to school for an education the value of which was probably not very obvious to them, of helping to preserve discipline in school, and of wringing out of his parishioners enough money to pay the teachers and provide books and stationery for the children. Thanks to him the Catholic community had a new church and a new school. With the Education (Scotland) Act of 1918, the school was taken out of his jurisdiction, and in June, 1919 the Belgian Canon was transferred to St Patrick's, Wishaw, where he died ten years later. To him must go a great deal of the credit for the continued existence of Catholic education in Kirkintilloch.