

CHAPTER IV

THE NEW SCHOOL

The years 1924, 1925 and 1926 were to be years of great importance in the school's growth and development. The inspectors' report for 1925 constitutes a pleasant change from those of previous years. The headmaster's 'Active Guidance' is particularly praised, and no serious weakness is recorded; the third year suggests good prospects for the future, and this greatly improved future is marred only by frequent changes of staff which were still having an unsettling effect. The staff in 1924 consisted of Mr. Barry, eight secondary teachers, one of whom was the Senior Woman Adviser, and fourteen primary teachers, including an infants' mistress. There were in addition visiting teachers of cookery, commercial, art, music and physical education (referred to by Mr. Barry as 'drill'). The school roll was eight hundred and sixty seven, and in March, 1924, the third year class sat the Intermediate Examination in a variety of subjects; nineteen out of the twenty three pupils presented passed the examination. This success provided a valuable foundation for presentation in the Scottish leaving Certificate examination in 1926.

The report for 1924 reflects the same high standards as the previous report, save for the criticisms of the English department which had suffered from frequent staff changes. In March 1926, for the first time, the school presented pupils for the Scottish Leaving Certificate Examination at the higher level in English, Mathematics, French and Latin; in the month of June the results became known. There were eight passes in Higher English, two in Higher French, one in Higher Latin, one in Lower Latin, one in Higher Art and one in Higher Mathematics; one pupil gained three Higher passes and two Lower passes – which would probably have constituted a 'group' of passes as required for university entrance. Thus the school's first attempt at Scottish Leaving Certificate presentation, while on a modest scale, had been a considerable success. The numbers of pupils involved was not great, but nonetheless a start had been made, and a tradition of successful presentation had been begun.

Other beginnings of great future events were taking place; the education authority's property committee had been prevailed upon to purchase Westermains House, formerly a home for alcoholics, on March 31st, 1926, and the infants were transferred to this building in April, 1926; secondary pupils too went to Westermains for woodwork and cookery. The grounds of Westermains were in the future to be the site of the school's present building and its new extension; from 1926 great potential for expansion of all kinds was now established in what was by this time known as St. Ninian's R.C. High School, though not yet officially recognised as such.

The school, like most other organisations in Britain, was dislocated by the General Strike of May, 1926, particularly in two ways; since so many of the pupils were the children of miners, great hardship must have existed, and secondly the involvement of the transport workers in the strike prevented the attendance at school of many pupils relying on train and bus services. The Croy pupils and those from Stirlingshire were absent in large numbers as long as the transport workers were on strike. However, by May 10th, 1926, at least the Croy pupils were no doubt joyously being transported to school by bus.

The 1926 report suggests a good deal of room for improvement in several subjects, while admitting that progress was good. Probably the most significant comment is to the effect that the efforts of the school are once again hampered by lack of accommodation. The rapidly-growing school was outgrowing the Union Street

premises, and if progress was to be maintained in the secondary department, the possibility of new accommodation being needed was becoming a definite reality. Science, for example, was particularly restricted by lack of any laboratory accommodation. By August, 1927, the roll was 943, 348 of whom were in the secondary department. The 1927 report is more generous in its comments; 'this budding secondary school is developing in a very promising fashion... Management of the school is energetic, tactful and kindly'. These words obviously reflect the genuine dedication of Mr. Barry; as a disciplinarian and authoritarian he was well-known, but the real fruit of his work was to be a tradition of successful examination presentation and of a more open-minded and humane approach to education than that which had characterised the work of his predecessors who were, after all, working under more difficult conditions.

The immediate problem of inadequate accommodation had been alleviated but by no means solved by the acquisition of Westermains House, and in recognition of the difficulty, the Property Committee of the Education Authority, including Father Jansen, visited Westermains on May 3rd, 1928, regarding plans for a new school in the grounds of Westermains House; the plan for a complete new primary and Secondary school with accommodation for eleven hundred pupils had been passed by the Education Authority on the previous day, May 2nd. As an interim measure, reconstruction of Westermains House was underway and was to be completed by August 15th, 1928.

Several minor and unrelated facts throw a little additional light on the life of the school at this crucial period; for example the wearing of sandshoes in the heavy rain of November, 1928 serves as a reminder that the economic conditions of the late 1920's were poor. Cultural life, on the other hand, must have been reasonably healthy in that the 1929 report draws attention to the fact that one pupil had passed the S.L.C. (lower) examination in Greek. Again, Mr. Barry, not previously himself a graduate, had graduated B.A. in August, 1928 at Dublin University. He had been working externally for this degree, motivated by the fact that he no longer regarded his primary school qualifications as being adequate for the head of secondary school, particularly since during the 1920's he was gradually building up a staff of highly qualified teachers; indeed the presence of honours graduates on the staff suggests that there were far more teachers than posts for them, and that a secondary school could afford to choose only the best staff available.

In September, 1929, the Education Authority's plans to establish St. Ninian's as a centre for Catholic education serving a wide area were obviously complete in that the school's catchment area included not only all of east Dunbartonshire but also all Stirlingshire, with one hundred and seventy pupils travelling from as far away as Stirling, Larbert and Grangemouth. By standards of the time, the transportation arrangements must have been on a considerable scale; local transport was provided by David Lawson's, private bus operators in Kirkintilloch before their much later integration into the Scottish Bus Group as part of Alexander's (Midland) Limited. Transport from Stirlingshire was the province of W. Alexander & Sons whose nearest base to Kirkintilloch was at Kilsyth but who also of course operated from garages all over Stirlingshire. Incidentally, the first bus with pneumatic tyres to operate in Scotland, a 32-seater Leyland, was based at Kilsyth in 1924, and ran between Falkirk and Glasgow, taking the same time for the journey as do buses to-day. Obviously the problem of transportation of large numbers of pupils from such a wide area to Kirkintilloch was more apparent than real, for the bus service network seems to have been far from primitive, and, if anything was ahead of its period in organisation and

vehicles used. Even the best system, however, has its proverbial black sheet, and Mr. Barry records that on January 17th, 1930, following complaints from his staff regarding reckless driving in the East High Street, he ordered the janitor (of all people) to warn the driver of one of Alexander's double-deckers employed on the school contract. No account, however, of school transport can hope to be completely without some reference to the 'rebellion' of August 1938, when the Croy pupils en masse went on a so-called 'strike' and refused to attend school. The Education Authority paid W. Alexander & Sons five hundred pounds a year to carry the Croy pupils to and from St. Ninian's. However, in 1938 the Authority decided to give the contract for the new session to the railway company who were able to provide transport, though less convenient for the pupils, for £245.15.3d; in protest against the inconvenience, the Croy and Condorrat pupils took the no doubt agonizing step of abstaining from school attendance for several days. They won their point, and a compromise was reached. The contract finally went to John Carmichael of Greenfoot Garage, Glenboig, who was able to do the return journey for two pounds two shillings per day. This arrangement continued for many years until Carmichael's were taken over by Alexander's (Midland). By their obviously illegal action, the inhabitants of Croy and district had demonstrated that bureaucratic decisions cannot be made on a basis of cost alone where such decisions concern human beings, and the victorious Croy 'school strike' is still green in the memories of the inhabitants of that worthy village even to-day.

Another interesting aspect of local social history reflected in the school records lies in regular references throughout the 1920's to the closure of the school because of veto polls; apparently influential people considered that the working class population was wont to squander its money on drink, to the detriment of its children. Such influential people forgot the possible existence of other factors such as poor social conditions and wages which would hardly provide for a family anyway not to mention the question of personal freedom. Their solution was to use Scots Law's sledgehammer – the veto poll – to deprive the population of its right to drink, at least in the area. This curious tradition continued in both Kirkintilloch and Kilsyth until very recent years. Apart from the veto poll holiday however, life in September, October and November, 1929 was not without incident. In September the Town Clerk had the plans for the new school, in October the Westermains Bowling Green Pavilion was destroyed by fire (and the water supply found to be inadequate), and in November a window cleaner put his foot through a classroom roof.

On January 17, 1930, the Clyde Valley Electricity Company laid a new cable to Westermains; the building itself, however, was described in October of the same year as being in bad condition. The report for 1930 emphasises that the Union Street premises were in such bad state as to be completely obsolete, and notes with satisfaction that the new (present) school on Westermains Estate was near completion. In August, 1931, the school had twenty two secondary and sixteen primary teachers; these figures reflect a curious decline in primary entrants. The roll was as follows: Primary – 518 pupils, Secondary – 540 including no less than two hundred and seventy pupils from Stirlingshire; the total roll was 1058, a figure which made the need for the new school obvious and urgent. Intimations in September, 1931 were that the new building would be ready for opening before Christmas of that year, and on October 13th, the process of painting was begun. The date for the formal opening was fixed – Friday, November 27th, 1931, and numerous preparations were still to be made. Road access for example, was to be improved, with wider roads to allow buses to approach the school; within the school itself, a choir of pupils was to be trained for

the opening ceremonies. November 1931 saw a series of visits to the school by a great variety of people; Mr. Burdon, Director of Education, visited on November 2nd, and arrangements were made for the opening ceremony to be performed by Mr. McKechnie, the Secretary of the Scottish Education Department. Dr. Stewart, H.M.I., paid a visit, as did the Provost and Dean of Guild of the town. On November 20th, the water supply was connected.

St. Ninian's had now reached the most significant milestone in its career; without the new building the future of the school would be doubtful. It must have been obvious at the time that the claims of St. Ninian's to a new building and indeed to continued existence as a secondary school depended to some extent on the numbers of Stirlingshire pupils attending, and that pupils from that area would not be without Catholic secondary education within their own county forever. Fortunately, St. Modan's High School in Stirling did not open until 1933, and even then this meant a minor crisis in the history of St. Ninian's.

The opening of the new St. Ninian's was not to be allowed to pass without all due ceremony; authorities, educational, ecclesiastical and civil were to be well-represented. There were to be many distinguished guests, one hundred and fifty pupils, and a school choir; the weather, predictably, did not co-operate in that November 27th was a wet day. The school was dismissed at 12.30 p.m. and the opening ceremony began at 2.30 p.m. The opening was performed by Mr. McKechnie, Secretary to the S.E.D., as stated above, and the chairman of proceedings was Captain Allan Burns, Convenor of the Dunbartonshire County Council. The platform party was as follows: Archbishop Mackintosh, D.D., Rt. Rev. Monsignor Kelly, Canon Mullin, D.D., the Catholic Chaplain of Glasgow University, Rev. Mr. Morrison, parish minister of Kirkintilloch, representatives of the architects, Mr. Rutherford, Provost of Kirkintilloch, the headmaster, Mr. Barry, and a considerable number of neighbouring headmasters.

In his lengthy remarks, Captain Burns let it be known that the new building had cost fifty two thousand pounds, a sum which to-day could hardly provide a very modest extension to a school least of all build a new one, but by standards of the 1930's it was a great deal of money. Apart from admonishing the pupils to work hard, Captain Burns proceeded to advise the staff of the school as to the conduct of their duties. He begged them not to be harsh, and suggests that corporal punishment be used very little, if at all, and that a record be kept of such occasions on which it might be used, a remarkably enlightened, if also impractical attitude for that period. He goes on to warn against overworking the pupils, and reaches the conclusion that pupils should not attempt more than two subjects at Higher level and two at lower level in any one year; this advice would appear to take no account of the different capabilities of different individual pupils, and would appear to advocate the restriction of all pupils to the rate of progress of the average. The Chairman concluded, predictably, by encouraging the pupils to participate actively in games.

Archbishop Mackintosh thanked the Scottish Education Department as represented by Mr. McKechnie for the provision of the school, and emphasised its importance to the Catholic community; he was followed by Mr. Rutherford and Canon Kelly, and Canon Jansen proposed the vote of thanks. The Archbishop was presented with a Missal by the school; this he accepted promising to use it frequently and to remember the school and its pupils every time he did so. The guests were then treated to tea and a tour of inspection of the new building. The pupils were given a holiday on the following Monday, 30th November, which was, of course St. Andrew's Day. Thereafter the infants classes were transferred to the new school while

everybody else was doing term examinations. Thereafter transfer of equipment and materials from the old school was carried out next. Heavier items were transported on a lorry provided by the County Council, but all books, stationery and smaller items were carried by relays of pupils; wet winter weather conditions must have made this a hazardous undertaking.

The school motto, 'In Necessariis Unitas, In Dubis Libertas, In Omnibus Caritas' was selected by Father Jansen. It was regarded as having been a saying of St. Augustine of Hippo in the 5th century, but is now considered to have been originally of earlier date than this. It means, approximately 'Unity in essentials; freedom in what is uncertain (i.e. freedom of belief); love in all things'. In the entrance hall of the new school were two large statues, one of the Sacred Heart, the other of Our Lady. Every room was supplied with a crucifix presented by the Archdiocese of Glasgow; the Education Committee supplied all other furniture and equipment. Probably the most significant consequence of the opening of the new school came on the 16th February, 1932 when Mr. Burdon, Director of Education, let it be known that the Scottish Education Department had at last decided to grant the school official status and title as a secondary school; such recognition had formerly been withheld not on any shortcoming regarding results but because of lack of suitable premises. The new building amply filled this need. The school was now officially a secondary school, and its title was likewise recognised; no longer was it to be known as Kirkintilloch (Town) R.C. School, but as St. Ninian's R.C. High School, Kirkintilloch; in fact the title 'St Ninian's' was being used and accepted unofficially for some years before this official recognition was granted. The recognition was made applicable as from January 1st, 1932. The roll was now 1070 pupils, of whom five hundred and sixty eight were in the secondary department, and two hundred and seventy were from Stirlingshire. The importance of the inclusion of these pupils from outwith Dunbartonshire was soon to become obvious.

After the new building had been opened and equipment and pupils moved into it, school life very soon resumed its established routine, with several new departures; in summer 1932 exchange visits with pupils in Lille were arranged for the first time; visits to the town council's spray baths were now a thing of the past, since the new building had facilities for physical education which included showers and were generally ahead of their time. Two early dismissals were granted in September, 1932 to mark entirely unconnected events; on September 16th, the fifteenth centenary of the death of St. Ninian, the patron of the parish and one of the earliest Christian missionaries to Scotland was celebrated; on the 21st September, the first centenary of the death of less saintly, more worldly figure, Sir Walter Scott. In November, 1932 came the origin of morning and afternoon intervals, oases of rest for weary pupils, and havens of sanity for even wearier teachers. An event of greater importance to all concerned was the opening on 5th September, 1933 of St. Modan's High School, Stirling, a full secondary school to serve all of Stirlingshire; the consequences could have been far-reaching. The loss of at least two hundred pupils could and did raise doubts in certain quarters as to the need for the new school in Kirkintilloch, at least as a Catholic School. By November 1933, the roll had dropped to 907 pupils, and by February 9th, 1934, was below nine hundred; the new building had been intended to accommodate more than eleven hundred pupils. The transfer of the Stirlingshire pupils resulted in empty classrooms; on the other hand, Townhead Public School was grossly overcrowded. The matter came to a head in a letter dated July 31st, 1934 from the Education Authority to the headmaster of St. Ninian's High School, Mr. William Barry.

The plan contained in this letter was that four St. Ninian's classrooms were to be put at the disposal of Townhead Public School pupils; the latter were to have their own teachers and be under the general authority of their own headmaster. Mr. Barry is urged to co-operate with the Townhead headmaster, which he did, although obviously this 'imperium in imperio' could hardly have been desirable to him. He is further instructed for some unstated reason, to ensure that the Townhead pupils had separate intervals and lunch breaks from the St. Ninian's pupils. Finally he is told that he is in charge of the Townhead pupils within his school in case of 'any difficulties'. The St. Ninian's headmaster was here being called upon to accept and co-operate in a situation which called for endless tact and care on his part. This set-up should not be regarded as an early and enlightened attempt at integration of Catholic and non-Catholic pupils; any chance of integration was effectively quashed by the separate intervals and lunch break arrangements. In August, 1934, the new arrangement came into effect, with rooms ten to thirteen amongst those to-day used by the Department of History and Modern Studies, being allocated to four first year classes, 1a, b, c and d, one hundred and twelve pupils and four teachers, from Townhead Public School. Presumably this arrangement was not regarded as desirable by all the Townhead pupils, parents and staff any more than it was by the Catholic community. The time had not come in the 'thirties for integration, and anyway, as suggested above, this was not meant to be integration; it was merely an expedient, and a poor one at that, to obviate the need to provide a new school for the non-Catholic population who were obviously in need of one. To look ahead, by 1935 the Townhead qualifying class had arrived in St. Ninian's also, and some Catholic parents were beginning to see the whole issue in dangerously sectarian terms more reminiscent of modern Ulster than of Scotland. To such people this arrangement was the thin end of a sectarian wedge which would force the Catholic school out of its new building and hand it over to the 'public' school pupils. Events, however, in early 1937 were to suggest that these fears were not ill-founded. The idea of using part of St. Ninian's for the Townhead pupils had originally been opposed on the grounds that the school leaving age was to be raised to fifteen years of age in 1936, and that under these circumstances the accommodation available in St. Ninian's would be adequate but not excessive for the Catholic pupils of Kirkintilloch and the rest of East Dunbartonshire. Yet the Townhead pupils had come, as stated above, and the move to raise the leaving age had been defeated. Thus the situation in the eyes of the Catholic community was more grave by the end of 1936. Fears were further exacerbated by the publication in the local press in January, 1937 of reports headed 'Fate of St. Ninian's School', which reports suggested darkly not to say mysteriously that the Catholic pupils be moved to some place 'elsewhere in the Burgh'. Further details suggested that the plan was, in view of the empty places left in St. Ninian's by the opening of St. Modan's High School and by the rejection of the raising of the leaving age, that the Catholic pupils be transferred to the old Townhead School, and the pupils from the latter be accommodated permanently in the new St. Ninian's building. Reaction was swift, and loud, and the message clear. On January 17th, 1937 a meeting of parents, former pupils and parishioners generally, was held in the old Union Street building, a meeting presided over by Father D. Quigley in the absence through illness of Father Jansen. This assembly passed two resolutions; these were that the Diocesan Board request the Education Committee to remove at the earliest opportunity all the non-Catholic pupils from St. Ninian's on the grounds that their presence was resented by the Catholic community; exit ecumenical toleration. They further set up a committee and made representations to Walter Elliott, Secretary of

State for Scotland, and to Sir James Peck, Secretary of the Scottish Education Department. As a result of this action, making up in unanimity of voice what it may have lacked in tolerance, the transfer plans fell through. Alternative proposals such as the withdrawal of Twechar pupils from Townhead to a new school were considered, and the Townhead school was altered and extended. By summer 1937 the Townhead pupils had been withdrawn from St. Ninian's, and the incident was concluded, save for a certain atmosphere of suspicion which must have persisted for a time at least.

Overshadowed in our eyes but probably more real to people at the time, be they pupils, teachers or parents, were the day to day events of the mid-nineteen thirties, domestic, local and national. To the historian of the school, the background controversy regarding the school's future, outlined in the previous chapter, tends to exclude other events, such as celebrations to mark the launching of the Queen Mary at Clydebank on September 26th, 1934, the demands, adequately met, by Dr. Barry, that the parents of certain Croy pupils should guarantee their sons' future good behaviour and an end of their truanting adventures, and the free chocolate, films in the Black Bull Cinema, and early dismissal for all pupils on 6th May, 1935 to mark the silver jubilee of King George V and Queen Mary. Pupils were sitting bursary examinations for Glasgow University, pupils were getting apples at Hallowe'en; pupils were attending (compulsorily) armistice day services in the school every 11th November, and pupils were on holiday on the 14th of November, 1935 for the General Election. Dr. Barry was still examining 'repetition' in the primary school and 'speaking to' the parents of boys caught 'pilfering'. In addition he records with scrupulous care the death on the 29th January, 1936 at 11.55 p.m. of King George V; on the 22nd all pupils were assembled to hear the broadcast of the accession of his successor to the throne.

National events still made themselves felt when all pupils got a free hand-out of the maiden voyage of the ship Queen Mary from Southampton. Later in 1936, the illicit removal of other people's apples from gardens in Bellevue Road by some pupils occasioned police intervention. A persistent reflection of the poor economic conditions of the time is found in the report of October 1936 to the School Management Committee regarding the attendance of pupils in light sandshoes during wet, cold weather; national problems are reflected too; on the 10th December, 1936, the teachers, with perhaps surprising interest, assembled in Dr. Barry's room to hear a broadcast intimating the abdication of Edward VIII. On the 16th, George VI was proclaimed king from the Town Hall. As climax to these events, sports were held on the 12th May, 1937 to mark the event of the coronation of George VI; the pupils were given lemonade, pastry, medallions, cups, pencils, handkerchiefs and a 'Punch and Judy' show in honour of 'their majesties'.

When the new session opened in August, 1937, the Townhead pupils no longer attended St. Ninian's, and the threat of the school being taken over by the whole of the 'public' school had faded away completely. However, the September of 1937 was overshadowed for all in Kirkintilloch and district, and for the Catholic population in particular by the burning to death in a bothy in Eastside of ten Irish workers from Achill Sound; the men had been employed on the potato harvest. A collection in St. Ninian's School provided a wreath.