

## CHAPTER IX

### END OF A CENTURY

In the new session, 1973-74 occurs on January 4<sup>th</sup>, 1974 the school's first centenary. Alongside the usual routine of academic work, guidance work, athletic activities, educational visits and extra-curricular activities, preparations continue for celebrating the centenary of the school. This is hardly the place to catalogue in detail the numerous events in the process of arrangement to mark the centenary. The purpose here has been to attempt for one thing to chronicle the day to day events of the school's hundred years against the ever-changing social, economic and political background of the times, and for another to present the overall picture of the development of St. Ninian's High School, Kirkintilloch from the old Kirkintilloch (Town) R.C. School in Union Street; from the ill-equipped nineteenth century elementary school to a large modern comprehensive secondary. We have traced this development through the regimes of a number of headmistresses and two long-serving Rectors, through two world wars with local repercussions, through times of economic hardship and industrial strife. The turning point was the Education Act of 1918; the initiative to see, appreciate and use this turning point for the future success of the school was William Barry's; without his years of wise and careful building, the foundations upon which his successor Dr. Griffin has so ably built since 1951 would not have been there, or would not have been strong enough. Again history must pay tribute to Dr. Griffin for maintaining and enhancing the high standards set by his predecessor.

Future conjecture is probably the least useful and least accurate of the historian's activities; however, it seems fair to observe that however many new schools are built, the steady growth and indeed urbanisation of the surrounding countryside will maintain the St. Ninian's roll at a high figure, and that St. Ninian's with its century of experience and tradition will perhaps meet the challenges of the last part of the second millennium with more confidence and success than the great soul-less examination-pass-factories of the future. Massive industrial and housing developments are already altering the characteristics of the landscape, and no doubt the grey town amid a patchwork of fields and woods under the timeless face of the Campsie will one day be swallowed up. It is more than a pious hope that our school, as well as meeting the challenges of a new age, will in its traditions be as timeless as its background hills.

As this account of the first century of the existence of St. Ninian's High School draws to an end, it is worth comparing and contrasting the school's social, economic and cultural background with that of the school a century ago. As previously indicated, the school opened to serve an essentially working class population whose living and working conditions were usually poor and squalid; despite numerous pieces of legislation throughout the nineteenth century, working hours were still long and wages low. Unemployment was always present as a background danger to all; houses were still in many cases overcrowded and insanitary. These conditions were probably more prevalent amongst people who sent their children to Catholic schools than amongst those who made use of the non-denominational schools; at that time, Catholics tended to find it difficult to be anything else but manual labourers, more often than not unskilled, in collieries, quarries, brickworks and ironworks; their own poor cultural background and

consequent lack of educational opportunity helped strengthen the forces of bigotry which closed so many better-paid occupations to Catholics. Even some years after the opening of Kirkintilloch (Town) R.C. school, the standards of equipment, premises and teaching staff left a great deal to be desired, and could hardly give the average and below-average pupil a great deal of help. In view of these circumstances, it is the more remarkable that a small but significant number of this school's earliest former pupils were to succeed in certain professions, notably medicine, teaching and the law.

As indicated in previous chapters, these conditions of life improved only gradually and economic depression and subsequent unemployment of the 1920's and 1930's hit the working class communities hardest. The history of our school has already reflected these conditions.

'Tempora mutantur' and it is patently obvious that modern conditions of social and economic life are very different. Gone for ever to 'the dust-heap of history' are the slates and slate pencils, the dual purpose church-cum-schools, the pupil-teacher system, and 'voluntary' schools for religious minorities. Never again will a hard-pressed parish priest wring from not always willing parishioners the price of an education the benefit of which may not have been entirely obvious. No more do school logs report complaints of pupils attending school in bare feet or in thin sandshoes in the cold and snowy weather. Generally speaking, pupils of to-day are well-clothed and have adequate footwear; housing is of a higher standard than ever before, and the poor domestic conditions are with us no longer. The frequent diseases of almost epidemic proportions are a thing of the past, and medical statistics will probably show that the school pupils of to-day are bigger, stronger and healthier than those of the past - obviously a reflection of the general trend towards a higher standard of living. Teaching equipment, and even text-books are indicative of more affluent conditions, and even methods of teaching and subjects taught have changed and developed; no longer is education confined to the four walls of the classroom, as the frequent educational outings previously dealt with, will prove. The modern examination system is changing too; more and more subjects are taught and examined in new ways, usually with the emphasis on more participation by the pupil himself and less emphasis on the formal lesson, though this still must have its place. An increasing number of subjects are taught on the basis of 'alternative' courses, with their own specialised types of examination. It is hoped that such courses will not only involve the pupil more in finding information for himself, but that he will as a result be more enthusiastic in his pursuit of learning.

In the past, pupils left school officially at the age of fourteen, and all too often unofficially considerably before this age; to-day the school leaving age stands at sixteen years. Obviously by no means all pupils are able to benefit from a course leading to the Scottish Certificate of Education examination, and 'non-certificate' courses of a widely varying nature are frequently produced; one of the problems involved, however, remains unsolved, that being the impossibility of using such courses with classes which might possibly contain one or two pupils who might tackle the S.C.E. Ordinary grade examination with success. The obvious answer of teaching such pupils in separate groups is not always possible in classes where the majority are indisputably 'non-certificate' material, and where full use of staff and efficient time-tabling make it impossible to absorb such pupils into what are recognised as 'certificate' classes. This is only one of the questions raised by such enlightened reforms as the raising of the school leaving age. Another such difficulty lies in the fact that a number of pupils have no desire to remain at school till the age of sixteen, and in every school at least a few react in an anti-social manner. This minority,

however, can waste the time of the other pupils, staff and administrators, the extent of time so wasted being out of all proportion to the value to society of such a minority.

Thus it is obvious that this, and any school in modern conditions, has its difficulties, and it would be untrue to paint the current education system in colours which glow too much; every system has its defects. Nonetheless, lack of teaching staff, and an unprecedented number of pupils can present problems to which no immediate and obvious answer exists. While social and economic progress is well-reflected in the history of our own school, at least some of the stresses of contemporary life are reflected too. It is a perhaps not unjustified boast, however, that the long existence of our school and the experience and tradition which this brings, can and does help to solve many difficulties.

On the credit side, it is undeniable that many pupils are benefiting from a level of education undreamt of in the early days of St. Ninian's, and that the social diversity which modern times have brought is a healthy feature, and one which could never have presented itself in the days when Catholics had little hope of progressing beyond the status of being underpaid manual workers.