FROM THE ARCHIVES

GIRLS AT THE SCHOOL 1893-1938

In the School Magazine, Volume 1, No 7, June 1900 there is an interesting essay written by an “Old Girl” and headed A Day in ’96. Using a pseudonym, Una writes about a day she and the three other girls, enrolled at the School, one Monday in a summer term. In many respects what Una experienced was to be the norm under the three English educated headmasters at Grammar in Mr Hodges, Mr Miller and Mr Rowland. It was not until the appointment of Mr Whight as Headmaster from 1939 that the lot of girls at the School was to change.

On arriving at school Una writes that the girls had to wait at what she calls “our beloved room” which was situated in the garden of the Headmaster’s house. It was this room that the girls would later call the Dovecot. After a roll call for the boys a second bell would ring and the girls would walk across the quadrangle and join the boys in class. However, the girls would then have to be seated in the front row. The same would occur at recess and lunch when the girls would leave the class early and have to go to their “beloved room”. At the end of the day the girls would have to leave five minutes before the boys so that there could be no mixing of boys and girls after school. It should also be noted that during this period the girls had to be referred to as “Miss” by both staff and students.

In her essay Una writes about the furnishing of the Dovecot. To quote she writes: “Girls of 1900, I wonder if you love our dear little room over at the house as much as the girls of ’96 did! And our beloved chair. We all worshipped it, the more so because of its infirmity. True, it had four legs, but they refused to do their work unless backed up by the wall”. Una then goes on to describe how a debate developed as to whose turn it was to sit in the chair. For the three girls who lost out they had to calmly submit as Una writes “the goods that god’s provide” and sit in less comfortable chairs.

While the girls may have been disadvantaged in many facets of school life they were never held back academically. Although Miss Effie Hartley was the only girl to be Dux of the School until 1941, girls achieved excellent results at external examinations with many of them going on to worthwhile careers in teaching, pharmacy and the law. In fact, Mr Rowland in Chapter 5 of an unpublished book written in the 1930s stated: “There are several girls’ schools in Townsville, and we discouraged the attendance of girls who were not ready to work. The arrangement as a whole proved satisfactory. Discipline was easier and with a few exceptions. If boys are inclined to love affairs, the objects of their affections were usually girls at other schools. It is not easy for a boy to be in love with a girl who is beating you in the class places every fortnight.”

Among the girls who performed well academically were Mary Foley and Letitia Crowder the first two girls to enrol in 1893. Margaret McKenzie was the first girl to attend a university (in Sydney) and she was followed by Emma Reye who the first girl to follow a science course to leave five minutes before the boys so that there could be no mixing of boys and girls after school. It should also be noted that during this period the girls had to be referred to as “Miss” by both staff and students.

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