

# SCHOOL

BILL CONNELL AND ANDREW SPAULL

JUST AS THE CARE of very young children was being directed more and more by professionals, the classrooms of Australian schools were falling increasingly under the control of education specialists. It was possible to get a teaching job in some private schools without formal teacher training, but to become a teacher in a state Education department it was now necessary to pass a teacher training course at a college or university. Increasing professionalism was being accompanied by a growing interest in educational theory, and in 1937 many teachers had attended a series of conferences organised in all state capitals by an education reform group, the New Education Fellowship.

The fellowship had brought 21 leading educators from the United States, England and several European countries to Australia to advance its case for new teaching methods. The educators had talked of community schools, project work, unit teaching, individualised programs, small group experience, the use of film as a teaching medium, and a new kind of curriculum designed to teach social responsibilities and encourage pupil initiative in learning. By 1938 fellowship branches were established in all states and the national body was planning a journal called *New horizons in education* to promote its program. In Victoria an Education Reform Association had been established to campaign for similar changes.

These reformers believed that the modernisation of education had scarcely begun, yet overseas influences were already transforming schooling in Australia. Intelligence testing had been adopted in several states as an aid to determining students' ability, and parents and teachers talked with apparent familiarity about their children's intelligence quotient, or IQ. Since 1931 Tasmania had used IQ scores to stream children for high school entry. New South Wales had graded its secondary schools into highly selective, less selective and non-selective, and was streaming upper grade primary school students towards one of these according to measured ability. During 1938 the New South Wales Department of Education set up a research and counselling service to help teachers make better use of intelligence, achievement and vocational testing. Queensland continued to stress



the traditional subjects of arithmetic and grammar. In 1937 the Australian Council for Educational Research had tested the arithmetic skills of 40 000 children from third to eighth grade throughout Australia. Educational reformers saw the results, in which Queensland pupils achieved the highest scores on every single test, as proof that Queensland schools overtaught traditional subjects.

In practice, in all states half-yearly and yearly examinations prevented much deviation from the syllabus. In Victoria, for example, an external statewide exam, the Merit Certificate at grade eight, dominated teaching in the upper years of the primary school. In all states, too, classes were too large: the average for metropolitan schools was about forty-five pupils, but some classes had more than sixty. In country schools the average was only thirty, but the children might range from infants to grade eight, and teachers often had the added responsibility of supervising several older students studying by correspondence. Experienced teachers were in short supply. In all states teacher training had been curtailed for financial reasons during the depression, with Victoria closing two of its three teachers' colleges. Spending on education remained insufficient to combat regional inequalities or to supply schools still seriously underequipped. Yet there was some ground for optimism. In particular teachers welcomed two initiatives by the federal government, which announced plans in March to establish a National Fitness Council to encourage physical education, health and fitness among school children, and in April to help fund preschool education.

A typical primary school day in Melbourne began officially at 9 am. Most of the children arrived on foot, a few came by bicycle or tram. Many turned up early to play with friends before the bell rang, while teachers had either stayed behind on the previous afternoon or signed on up to an hour early to fill their blackboards with the day's work. Morning assembly, heralded by the school bell, was brief, except on Mondays, when either the Australian blue ensign or the Union Jack was raised, and children, hats or caps off, hands on hearts, recited a prescribed loyal oath: 'I love my God and my country; I honour the flag; I will serve the King, and cheerfully obey my parents, teachers and the laws'.

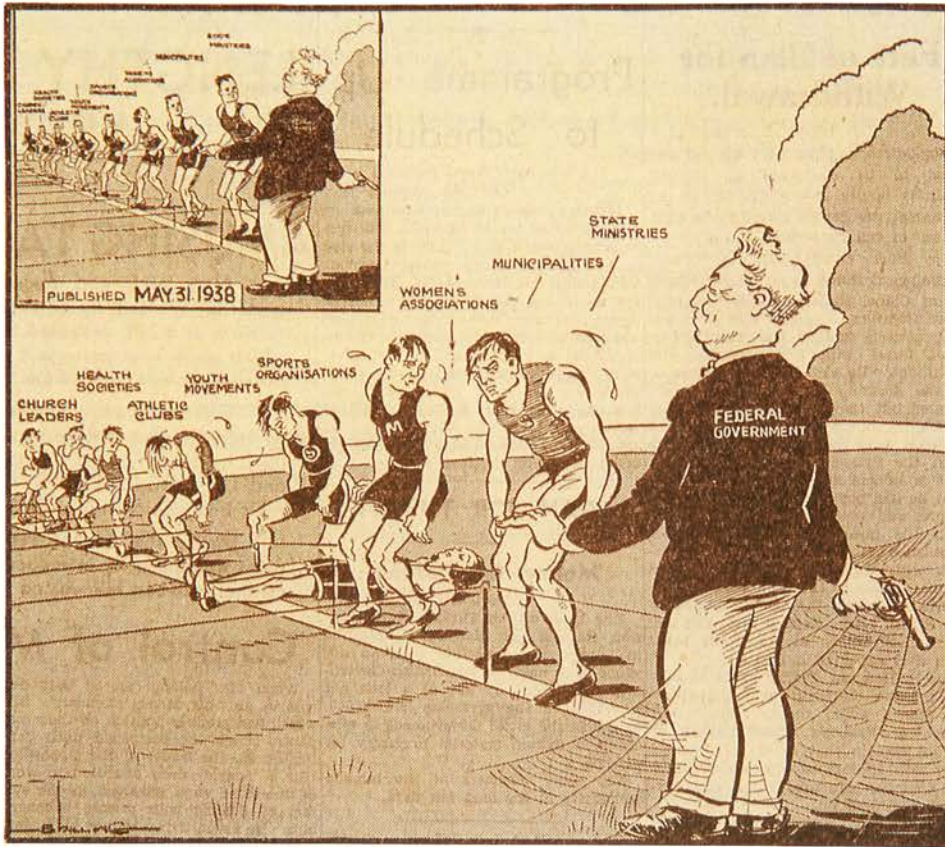
*Jean Vincent supervises her 59 children at Nedlands Primary School marching into their classroom on the first morning of the school year. Children in this well-to-do area in Perth did not usually go to school barefoot but the P & C had provided a grassed oval on which the children were allowed to play only in bare feet. At country schools many children went barefoot all year round, some out of necessity, some out of choice.*

J. VINCENT, 1938 COLLECTION





# NATIONAL FITNESS CAMPAIGN



**Still Waiting For the Starter !!**

Early in the year a number of organisations lobbied the federal government to develop a national fitness strategy. By Health Week in August, as the Age cartoonist recorded, nothing had been done. *Melbourne Age, 12 Aug 1938.*

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Most classes began the day with fifteen minutes of relative enjoyment. Grades one to three, the junior classes, often sang songs, an activity which some teachers repeated later in the day to lift flagging spirits or to bring a class to order. Older classes might begin the day with fifteen minutes discussing weather reports or recent local events. In March, heavy rains which caused flooding along the Yarra offered an opportunity for informal instruction in news, weather and current affairs.

Serious learning began about 9.15. The curriculum required teachers to spend time every day teaching reading, spelling, writing, arithmetic and written expression. Teachers worked on the principle that students were most alert at the beginning of the day, so mental arithmetic commonly followed the first, informal fifteen minutes. Then came spelling, ten to twenty words from graded lists in the *School paper*, a dictation test and writing from the blackboard into exercise books. English grammar was next; pupils were given sentences to analyse, or asked to write a composition on a topic such as 'My school holidays', 'My pets' or 'My room'.

Morning recess relieved this solid work. Pupils had time for a snack brought from home, and some schools served hot cocoa distributed by the mothers' club. The cocoa, using boiled milk, was a new idea, introduced into schools which previously had served free fresh milk. The poliomyelitis epidemic which began during the previous year had been so severe that schools could not reopen on time in 1938, and parents kept children away from swimming pools, halls and other public places. The epidemic was abating, but fresh milk still seemed risky.

*The beginning of the table of contents for the South Australian progressive English course for primary schools, grade VII shows the emphasis placed on formal grammar in English teaching. Melbourne 1938.*



After recess, most of the school commonly assembled for vigorous physical exercise. A new state director of physical education, Dr Fritz Duras, had arrived from Germany during 1937. His ideas had received much publicity, and many teachers welcomed his goal of promoting children's general health through scientifically designed exercise. From early in 1938, exercise programs in many Victorian schools were being used to prepare children for displays of prowess during Health Week in August.

Back in the classroom, pupils did mental arithmetic or reading, usually aloud. Education reformers were revising the primary school arithmetic syllabus, but it was too early to evaluate the changes. The morning session ended with geography, nature study or health and hygiene. The latter was taught in a novel way in the minority of schools which had a wireless, for on Mondays a health and hygiene lesson was broadcast by the ABC.

Lunchtime lasted an hour. Many pupils went home for lunch, a few could buy pies, the rest brought sandwiches. White slices, sometimes buttered, were spread with peanut butter, cheese, hundreds and thousands, raisins or dripping. Pupils ate sitting in the schoolyard or a shelter shed, in most schools under teacher supervision.

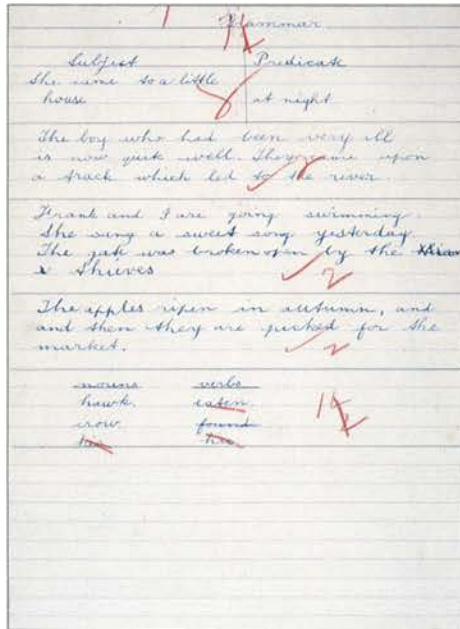
In the afternoon, senior grades studied cultural and practical subjects, interspersed with bursts of mental arithmetic or arithmetic drills. The afternoon program had sport, games, dancing, singing and manual arts on one or two days a week, and history, geography, nature study, art, poetry and literature on the others.

The teacher was at the centre of every lesson. Some teachers still acted as if children should be seen and not heard, even in class, but syllabuses encouraged 'activity methods'. In nature study, for example, excursions were arranged to study such topics as ant colonies, the riverbank or the woodshed. Most pupils welcomed these outings, and enjoyed making discoveries in small groups, reporting to the class and writing up the results.

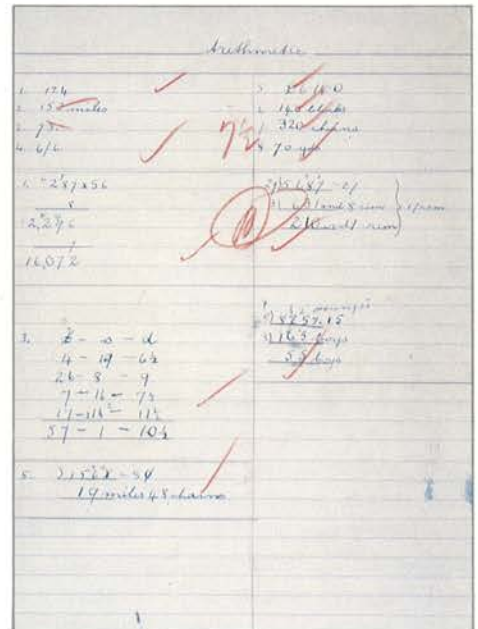
Order depended on the teacher having the children's respect, and where necessary most teachers used physical force to get this. Occasionally parents or children objected to corporal punishment. Children from one class at Williamstown Primary School in Melbourne stole the teacher's strap; and Pat Woodruff, a

Keith McCance went to East Kew Central School in Melbourne. He was nine in 1938 and in Grade IVa. 'Arithmetic was my favourite subject . . . and I was guided a bit by the fact that my father was a maths and science teacher. He . . . saw things like arithmetic and science as being essential in the world that we were going to move into whereas . . . the other stuff was perhaps more suitable to girls.'

K. McCANCE, 1938 COLLECTION



Keith managed only 7½ out of 10 in arithmetic and 7 out of 10 in grammar.





convent school pupil, remembers being embarrassed when her mother confronted strict nuns on the issue. Most people, adults and children, accepted the need for the cane or strap, but some education reformers listened with approval when Dr Duras reported that in the civilised world only some English-speaking nations had not yet banned corporal punishment.

Teachers were also expected to give moral training. Victoria's *Education gazette* advised,

Exercise books with pictures on the covers of film stars, sporting champions and the like are sometimes sold to pupils for school use. Head Teachers are asked to keep a watchful eye upon these illustrated covers and to exercise, when necessary, judicious but firm censorship to ensure that nothing which offends against the canons of good taste or tends to false hero-worship will be sanctioned for use by their scholars.

Clearly modern trends were not always acceptable.

In state schools the school week finished at 3.30 or 4 pm on Fridays, but some

## ATTENDANCE

State Schools  
1937–38

	%
NSW	87
VIC	87
QLD	83
SA	92
WA	92
TAS	90
NT	91
AUSTRALIA	87

## 'WAGGING IT'

A number of children under 14 attended school irregularly. They 'wagged it' for pleasure, profit or the upkeep of the family home. Bert Hayward, in Form 2 at Fitzroy Central School, had never been keen on schooling because 'I could always go out and earn a quid. Even when I was in the 6th grade I used to buy light wood at 3d a bag and sell it round the back lanes to people using coppers on washing day.' Thirteen-year-old Terry Meehan's father had recently had an accident. One Wednesday afternoon Terry walked down from St Ignatius School on the hill at Richmond, and next morning he started work at a ribbon factory. 'That was my education . . . a lot of the boys here left when they were in sixth grade, just left and got jobs, no reason than their parents wanted them working. If you couldn't get a job, you'd stay on [at school].'

B. HAYWARD, T. MEEHAN, SPAULL COLLECTION

*The Commonwealth year book noted that 'recurring epidemics of contagious diseases, minor illnesses, bad weather and long distances' were the main factors limiting full attendance. The figure for Queensland is not comparable due to differences in calculation. Commonwealth Year Book 1940, 178–9.*

Catholic schools held classes on Saturday mornings. Most parents took the education of their children seriously, although education reformers said that the educational system was 30 years behind the world's best. A few parents, some through hardship, others through lack of interest, ignored laws requiring children to stay at school at least until they were fourteen. Teachers worried about irregular attendance by children under fourteen, but many understood that in poorer families they needed work to support the household. This was certainly the case in the country, where schools might close during harvest, fruit picking or other busy times of the year.

Outside towns, most primary school children were taught in a one-teacher school, a single classroom building with toilets out the back, a small horse paddock, a dusty playground, and a small garden or a row of sugar gums separating it from the surrounding paddocks or bush. A school generally had ten to thirty pupils ranging from infants to senior primary, plus sometimes several older students studying by correspondence. Jack Hicks, who taught at Wyuna South Rural School, a one-teacher school northwest of Shepparton in Victoria, remembers organisation as the key to running a rural school:

If you didn't organise your school you'd go batty. You trained, during lunchtime, the fourteen-year-old girls to become monitors. This was the main



*Pupils at the state school in Derby, Western Australia, in 1938 were 'a mixture of whites and half castes', the government photographer observed.*

WESTERN AUSTRALIAN  
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*Thirteen-year-old Heather Thomas (front, left) attended typing classes at Perth Central Girls School. 'I loved all my schooldays. I cried the day I left. We did history, geography, English, shorthand, typing and bookkeeping, a commercial course. You had to study hard because you knew at the end of it if you didn't you wouldn't get a job. We were too much in awe of the teachers to really misbehave badly.' Photograph by school photographer.*

H. COLLERAN,  
1938 COLLECTION

way you overcame the impossible task of keeping little people busy while teaching grades six to eight. These girls—girls from a farm—more mature than I was, did a magnificent job. You'd take a monitor from the class you were teaching to teach the younger class.

Although some teachers enjoyed such teaching, others found it demoralising, especially when they did not fit into the close-knit local community. 'A small group of teachers', conceded the Victorian Education department's chief medical officer,

seem quite unable to adapt themselves to country life . . . The loneliness of the bush appals them, the restricted society of the little community stifles them, the monotonous meals nauseate them. The enthusiasm for their work flickers and dies down and is replaced by discontent and apathy . . . They cannot eat, they cannot sleep, they become introspective and wretched. Finally they are ill . . . in the pale and dull faces we see only a ghost of the pretty, gay students of a year ago.

Even teachers who liked country life might find few long-term rewards in running a one-teacher school. Most country districts were losing population, so the one-teacher school system was in retreat. Jack Hicks recalls that teachers in one-teacher schools were given low salaries and no promotion, and he worried, too, about whether he was teaching his pupils much of value. 'Where were they going to go when they left me?' he wondered,

We knew all the people; we lived with them and enjoyed all their social events. I ran the sports association and the tennis club, and we couldn't recall one pupil that had gone from that school to secondary school and yet they were very good children . . .

Partly in response to this problem, primary schools with two- or three-year secondary 'tops' were established in country towns. These were called rural schools in New South Wales and Queensland, and area schools in Tasmania and South Australia, where they were begun in 1938. Each state paid for or subsidised a school bus system to bring country children into these schools, while Tasmania also paid children who had their own bicycles 25s a year subsidy and, in recognition of the frequently adverse weather, sold children with bicycles weatherproof capes at 7s 6d each. Although new bicycles cost £5 to £8, the subsidies gave children a powerful argument for getting a bike, and by 1938 rows of laden bike racks guarded the playgrounds of Tasmanian area schools.

In northern Tasmania, one area school was formed by moving four one-teacher schools into Hagley, a prosperous town in a mixed farming district west of Launceston. Children from infants to third year in secondary school came in by bus or bike to study a curriculum designed to meet the needs of the area. They learnt English, mathematics, social studies, art, music, health and physical training. In addition boys took agriculture, blacksmithing, elementary mechanics and practical trade courses in sheetmetal, wood, leather and concrete, while girls took various craft courses and domestic science, which included cooking, needlework and home management. A school farm, carrying local crops, cattle, pigs, fowls, vegetables and fruit, was run by the pupils with some full-time staff and help from local farmers, and pupils did fencing, draining, shed building, concreting and maintenance as part of their school program. The girls also ran a school canteen.

A good school library helped carry the spirit of this activity work from the practical to the academic subjects. In social studies pupils were given projects to do, and mathematics was tied as far as possible to such practical work as buying materials, costing, balancing accounts, writing business letters, measuring timber,





elementary surveying and drawing up plans for new buildings. The school had a parents' advisory council which also set practical work.

John Gammage taught at a similar school at Orange, in central western New South Wales:

Orange District Rural School ... was a primary school with a three-year secondary top ... our pupils were those who, it was thought, could not benefit from the high school education ... The Rural School emphasised ... business principles and practice, metal work, woodwork and agriculture for boys, and business principles, typing and shorthand, and domestic science which included needlework, cooking and physiology and hygiene for girls. I taught agriculture ... in which the policy ... was that everybody ... should get a brief resumé of every significant crop and breed grown in New South Wales ..., but there should be detailed work done on those crops and animals which were significant in the district ... So at Orange I would deal particularly with fruit crops, oats, peas and tomatoes ..., the significant crops of the region ... as a matter of interest more rural school pupils got jobs in the town than high school pupils did. They were trained for the sort of jobs that were available.

Yet ambitious parents with academically bright children preferred high schools. High schools were more traditional in their teaching and their curricula were more likely to reflect urban middle-class interests. But success in them offered the prospect of a good job at a decent salary, and the chance to rise above the threat of poverty and insecurity which the depression hung over almost all children who spent 1938 at school.



*The image of Australia as a rural producer was promoted both here and overseas. This poster, produced by a British publishing house in 1933, found its way into classrooms all over the empire, including Australia. Pictorial education quarterly, London, Summer 1933.*





## IT'S UP TO THE TOFFS

*Frank Kellaway was born in 1922 and educated at Wardhurst, a junior school of Melbourne Grammar, until he was sixteen. In 1938 he entered Geelong Grammar where his attitude to learning was soon changed. Here, Frank writes about his school days.*

*Frank Kellaway in 1938.*  
GEELONG GRAMMAR SCHOOL

AT 7 AM at Geelong Grammar, the bell, tolling from the rectangular brick tower in the main school complex, would wake us in our dormitory on the second floor of Manifold House. Then, perhaps on the famous Baden Powell recipe for curbing sexual desire, prefects made sure that every boy took a cold shower. Frank interest was taken in genitals in the communal bathroom and boys speculated as to who had been masturbating. Some were taunted on this account, though one senior from another house, known as 'the Gentleman Waster of Corio' was shamelessly proud of his paganism and would often announce cheerfully, 'I've just umped meself'. This was unusual: shame, guilt and contempt were the prevailing attitudes.

A second bell called us to breakfast in the tall-windowed refectory where boys sat at long tables presided over at either end by a master or a prefect. The food, I suppose, was good though naturally we complained. Breakfast consisted of cereals, or porridge in winter, followed by toast and egg in some form or another—the scrambled egg was invariably watery and horrible. Midday dinner was usually a stew or a grill and once a week a roast—at regular intervals a repulsively spiced meatloaf, at other times beef or lamb. The evening meal was 'tea'—bread and jam, scones and food of that sort. We were waited on by maids, apart from a matron to each house and one female teacher, almost the only females we saw at close range. Many of the seniors lusted after one or other of the maids. Several were reputed to have satisfied this impulse.

A third bell summoned us to the school chapel where a short Anglican service was conducted by the school padre, who also taught English and Latin. There was a hymn and a lesson, usually read by a prefect. Boys were then considered in a fit frame of mind for learning, and filed out to suffer the treatment described by Montaigne in the sixteenth century: 'Most tutors never stop bawling into our ears, as though they were pouring water into a funnel; and our task is only to repeat what has been told us'. In three hundred and seventy odd years little had changed.

The 'learning' day was broken into 40-minute periods. At the end of a period boys usually stayed in the classroom until another teacher came to take the next lesson, but for physics, chemistry, biology and physical education, classes went to their teacher. There were recess breaks morning and afternoon and an hour off for



dinner, during which, after feeding, boys would kick a football end to end or practise cricket.

Until this time most of my education had consisted of being drilled in mathematics and languages and having information funnelled into me. No teacher gave me the idea that it is exciting to learn to think problems out for yourself. In 1938, however, there were changes. I was taught Latin by Col Gordon and with him I actually learned to enjoy poems by Horace, though by this time I had such a resistance to the language as a result of being habitually caned in front of my classmates at Wadhurst, a junior school of Melbourne Grammar, and hit on the head with a gumnut-helmeted finger by the padre at Geelong that I never became a proficient Latinist.

Russel Ward, a junior teacher and witty minor poet, conducted an extra-curricular class in literature. He was the first radical I had met. When James Darling, our English headmaster, told us that 'Socialism is a temptation to be resisted', Ward commented that a headmaster's salary must be a considerable help in keeping the devil at bay. From Ward I learned that if you are trying to help or encourage young writers or artists you must be prepared to have your own work criticised.

C.R. Bull, who taught me English, came closest to my ideal of provoking students to think. He never expressed his political opinions. He would invite us to dig for meanings and assumptions and then ask us to explain what we thought of them; it was a Socratic question and answer method. I discovered, for example, that Sir Henry Newbolt's polished verses had mesmerised me into accepting their offensively British upper-class smugness. It was still the custom for boys to rise to their feet when a teacher came into the room. It was pleasing to sense that Charlie accepted this performance with some irony.

We were organised into four houses for sleeping, homework and sport, which was compulsory after school—football in winter and a choice of cricket or rowing in summer, with athletics sandwiched between. The athletics competition between houses included a system of points for qualifying in various events. The qualifying time for the mile was six minutes, the only point I scored. In rowing younger boys raced in fours and pairs, older youths in eights, of which there were six crews. There was also boxing, tennis, fives, cross-country running and swimming. We swam in saltwater baths built of wooden stakes and boards, presumably to keep in the seaweed and jellyfish, in Corio Bay. There we competed in interhouse swimming contests, qualified for our bronze medallions for lifesaving and caught 'songhies' (immature salmon trout) on the jetty that led to the bathing enclosure.

Montaigne also remarked that, 'It is not a mind, it is not a body that is being trained; it is a man; these parts must not be separated'. Compulsory organised sport had a lot to be said for it on these grounds, but it was not to the taste of all schoolboys. I did not like the competitive element and, although I enjoyed playing football and rowing (quite badly), I was bored and irritated by talks about team spirit. I never cared greatly who won.

Fortunately there was an alternative. We were allowed to escape from school and go out into the country on 'Saturday Parties'. We could get on our bikes and spend the day in the bush, for example at the You Yangs, Anakie Gorge, Point Addis or Grub Lane. We had to go in parties of at least three, give notice on Thursday night of our going and where, and report back in time for tea. The cooks would put provisions into a sugar-bag for each party and the leader would pick it up on Friday night. We were allowed to leave as early as 4 am. I could wake myself within five minutes of a given time simply by concentrating when going to sleep and it was my job to wake my companions. A friend who lived on the second floor in another house would tie a piece of string to his big toe and dangle it out of the





*Schoolboys from Melbourne's exclusive Scotch College frolic at Yanchep, outside Perth. Parents of boys and girls attending state high schools could rarely afford to send their children on interstate excursions. Photograph by government photographer, Aug 1938.*

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window. A gentle tug would wake him. Our range was about 40 kilometres: we rode, walked, swam and climbed trees to photograph birds at the nest. We were fit and we learned a lot about wildlife, bushcraft and photography.

Our teachers seemed unaware that students often learned as much from one another as they did in other ways. Certainly they failed to exploit the fact. I learned as much by discussing literature and swapping poems with Geoffrey Dutton as I did in class. Geoff and I both sang in the choir and though I was not musically gifted the choir was an important part of my education. We sang anthems by Bach, Purcell, Handel, Beethoven and other great musicians, and several times, with the whole school participating, we sang the *Messiah* under the direction of Willie McKie, a dedicated musician with a gentle manner but an inflexible will.

Two afternoons a week we did not play sport. On Thursday we did compulsory military training. This included dressing up in cadet uniform, with puttees which I could never apply to my calves without leaving 'verandahs'; shining up our .303s; being inspected; and being drilled in marching, forming fours and all the rest of the parade ground nonsense. We also carried out manoeuvres, practised shooting on the rifle range and went on annual military camps. I found all this distasteful and thought it hypocritical in a school that claimed to be Christian. My pacifist leanings were encouraged by a fellow student, Don Baker, who fed me books and pamphlets and led me into discussions on the ethics of war and pacifist protest. He was the first to act out his beliefs. He went to our housemaster and said he was not



prepared to serve any longer in the cadet corps. They set him to breaking bricks for paths with a sledge-hammer. Two or three weeks later I joined him. I didn't stay the distance. Unduly sensitive to hypocrisy in others, I couldn't stand the finger being pointed at me because I was a keen boxer. It was no good telling schoolboys that there's a difference between hitting a man in sport and shooting him dead in a war.

The other afternoon when there was no sport was Tuesday. Charlie Bull had organised an educational program to try to broaden us beyond books, figures, experiments and sport. We were free to attend a variety of classes or to take part in various activities. One of these was building a dam with picks, shovels and crowbars. Others were bush cooking and survival skills, making pots, painting pictures, map reading in the field and rough building construction. I took part in the dam building but usually I spent these afternoons painting. I was a student of Mary Finnin, a Geelong painter who was also a gifted poet. Mary was a splendid teacher who, after demonstrating various techniques and showing pictures, sometimes her own, to illustrate her points, would leave you to explore and experiment. After you had been working for several hours she would assess what you had achieved. I remember her making many positive suggestions but never a negative criticism. She was comely, charming and intelligent, and her students loved her.

On Sundays we had to attend chapel twice, once at 11 am and once in the evening, the choir dressed in long red cassocks and white surplices. Parents were allowed to visit any two Sundays a term. They could take delivery of their boys after morning chapel. I always took mine to show them favourite Saturday Party sites. We would travel comfortably in a car, have a leisurely picnic, walk round to inspect nests, flowering plants and other sights, then drive back to school in time for me to report back for the evening meal.

Nearly all the students were boarders, though a few dayboys came from Geelong. Naturally they were not required to attend our weekend activities. This made them something of a group apart. They were often well enough liked and respected, but they seldom made close friends with the boarders.

The school was made up mainly of the sons of graziers and professional men. In spite of the efforts of Charlie Bull, a genuinely enlightened educationist, it was a monk-like community. The world 'out there' was a strange place, of which most of us were largely ignorant. One of the headmaster's favourite sayings was *Noblesse oblige*, which I liked to translate derisively as 'It's up to the toffs'.





*"Chuck it, dad . . . Maisy Mitchell taught me all that years ago."*

*Man, Jan 1938.*