

Netta Syrett's Schooldays: The Late 19th-Century Educational System in England

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Abstract

To profit from the lessons of the past, we have to know the past. Netta Syrett (1865-1943) provides us with information about the English educational system during the vital, developmental period between 1880 and 1900. Syrett, as a girl, attended the North London Collegiate School for Girls, one of the most prominent of the new high schools for girls that developed in the 1880s. As a young woman she was among the first trained at the Cambridge Training College that provided higher education for female teachers. She taught school for several years and then dedicated herself to writing. Through her memoirs and novels, we learn much about the educational practices of that era. Knowing the practices of the past, often revolutionary and forward looking but also often inhumane and stultifying for students, the modern educator can more likely appreciate how far we have come in training our students and our teachers.

1. Introduction

When we think of girls' education in the early and mid-19th century, we probably think of governesses and female seminaries or academies run by gentle ladies who taught music, drawing, French, and needlework. Those who became governesses or taught in the academies were most often not in those positions out of vocational choice but because they found themselves in a situation with few other options. They had somehow been able to secure an education, either because their families had once had money to educate them but then had lost it or because they had been orphaned and left to the support of a well-to-do relative or family friend who paid to have them educated so they could make their own way as adults.

2. Background: Literary and Historical

Striking figures out of well-known realistic novels of the period give us some insight into the status of

the governess and teacher in the early and mid-19th century. When poor Jane Fairfax in Jane Austen's *Emma* seemingly has to accept the position as governess to the irritating Mrs. Elton's friend's children, her friends and family think of her as doomed. She has been educated as a "lady" by wealthy friends of her dead father but is pitied by the whole community because she has to make her living as a governess. Luckily Frank Churchill comes to the rescue just in time. The local girls' academy run by Mrs. Goddard where Harriet Smith gets her education gives us a look at that education option. Harriet may be sufficiently educated to be farmer Martin's wife, but certainly not Mr. Elton's or Mr. Knightley's [1]. In *Middlemarch* we see what training is to be had at an exclusive girls' seminary in the education of Rosamund Vincy, who can play the piano, draw, and dress well, but who cannot appreciate her doctor husband's intellectual ambitions. The young woman with the substantive education, Dorothea Brooke, with her "passionate desire to know and to think," has been largely self-taught [2]. Jane Eyre in Charlotte Bronte's novel is orphaned and educated at the horrendous Loworth boarding school at the expense of her wealthy aunt and expected to support herself as a governess. The bantering comments Blanche Ingraham makes about governesses in Jane's presence reflect the standard disdain as well as some of the trials governesses had to endure. Blanche says, "You should hear mama on the chapter of governesses: Mary and I have had, I should think, a dozen at least in our day; half of them detestable and the rest ridiculous ..." [3]. She proceeds to characterize them as a nuisance, incompetent, capricious, coarse, insensible, and ignorant and to report on the joy she and her siblings had in tormenting them. Jane, after fleeing Thornfield, goes on to teach at a rough country school under rather harsh conditions, but of course, in the end, she is reunited with Mr. Rochester and lives happily ever after. Such are the happy endings of fiction. The plight of real governesses and female teachers was

more often to live on what little savings they could accrue over their lives and to die in poverty. There were no pensions or retirement plans or Mr. Churchills or Mr. Rochesters.

Governesses and academies were for those who had the money to pay for them, and many didn't. The vast majority of the female population simply was not educated. A couple of years of basic reading and arithmetic were possible through church supported schools, but there was no systematic public education in England until very late in the 1800s. Only those young people whose parents could afford to pay for private schools or tutors were educated beyond the mere basics, and then it was most often the boys of the family who were sent off to school and perhaps on to university. However, with the Forster Act in 1870 public schools were mandated. Grammar schools, still mostly associated with the church (Anglican, Catholic, or Protestant), provided the basic elementary education for ages 5-10, and so-called "Board Schools" were created where church schools didn't exist. As more and more young people became literate and equipped for further education, the need for secondary education grew.

The idea persisted that it was most important for boys to get an education, but by the end of the century, girls were finding their way. Although in 1869 there were only thirteen secondary schools for girls in the country [4], after the Education Bill new secondary schools for girls began to crop up all over England, two of the best known being Cheltenham Academy, led by Miss Dorothea Beale, and North London Collegiate School for Girls, led by Miss Frances Mary Buss. In her history of women's education, Joyce Senders Pedersen argues that "the period 1850-1900 saw the development of a new type of girls' school; much larger than the small, traditional seminaries, and with a formal commitment to academic achievement and meritocratic values. There were also important changes in the status of women teachers. In particular, the headmistresses of the new kind of girls' school enjoyed a marked rise in social and professional status. Headmistresses like Miss Buss and Miss Beale were grand, remote, dignified public figures" [5]. A little ditty sung by the schoolgirls went "Miss Buss and Miss Beale,/ Cupid's darts do not feel./How different from us,/ Miss Beale and Miss Buss" [6]. Josephine Kamm in her history of girls' education in England with the very apt title *Hope Deferred* has this to say about Miss Buss: "... under her direction the school gained so high a reputation that it served as a model for all the high schools for girls which were opened after that date. It was indeed the pioneer institution for secondary education for the people and, as such, helped to transform the whole educational scene" [7].

3. North London Collegiate School for Girls

Two memoirs by ex-students of Miss Buss tell of their experiences at North London Collegiate School for Girls. Vivian Hughes published a multi-volume memoir arranged by decades, and in *A London Girl of the 'Eighties* she relates her experiences at North London. Netta Syrett in her single volume memoir, *The Sheltering Tree*, and in her novel *Rose Cottingham: The Development of a Modern Woman* also records her experiences at the school. The memories that Hughes and Syrett have of Miss Buss and North London provide an interesting contrast. Vivian Hughes entered Miss Buss's North London School at age 16 and experienced the upper forms under the tutelage of Miss Sophie Bryant. She loved her school days and was a star pupil and a favorite of Miss Buss. Syrett, upon reading Hughes's reminiscences of the school, wrote:

Some while ago I came across a book called *A London Girl of the 'Eighties*, in which the "North London" school and all the teachers in it, including Miss Buss herself, are described. I have since met its author, Mrs. Vivian Hughes, who entered the school at the same age as I left it, and a talk with her made me realize, even more clearly than I already knew it, how far too young, by young and inexperienced parents, my sister and I were sent to a school in which little real value was taught till one reached the Fifth and Sixth Forms. Except in the upper classes the lessons on the whole, at their best, were uninspiring, and at their worst, actually bad [8].

Syrett went as a boarding student at age 11 and left at age 15, never experiencing the upper forms, only the rigid discipline and deadening lessons of the lower grades. As an adult, she recognized Miss Buss "As one of the foremost educationists of her time, [who] by her zeal and untiring energy ... raised the standard of education for women to heights undreamed of in early Victorian days," but as a child she knew Miss Buss as a "dictator" and bad tempered disciplinarian. They clashed often and she reflects many years later that "Miss Buss was the last woman on earth who should have come into intimate relationship with children, or even with any but the most placid and docile of young girls" [8]. And Syrett could never have been described as "placid and docile." She went on to become an active member of the *Yellow Book* circle of *fin de siècle* fame and eventually to publish novels, short stories, and plays, some with "shocking" New Woman themes. She was friends

with Somerset Maugham, Ella D'Arcy, Henry Harland, and May Sinclair and records meeting such luminaries as Oscar Wilde, Thomas Hardy, George Meredith, Arnold Bennett, and Max Beerbohm, among others.

Syrett's firsthand accounts of her education in her memoir, however, provide valuable information about the famous headmistress, Miss Buss. She gives us a picture of Miss Buss and her school which helps us with a revisionist and perhaps more realistic understanding of that important figure in the history of English education as well as information about the pedagogical and disciplinary practices of the day. Emphasis was on order and appearance of diligence, not on learning. The rote nature of the learning can probably be explained by considering the training and education of the teachers which did not prepare them to handle questions or discussion. Syrett describes the endless restrictions and rules. There was a list of permanent rules printed up in small print and double columns, and new rules were constantly being posted on the wall. Every moment, almost every movement was ordered, and when not supervised, the girls were put on their honor to behave or to report themselves. Girls had to enter infractions into the "Appearing Book," such as running down the stairs, speaking in class without permission, leaving a book at home, hanging a boot-bag by only one loop, getting out of the "crocodile" line, not color-coding book covers correctly, bringing a pen to school. Students stood at one click of the "clacker" and sat at two clicks. The boarding students could not talk in the bedrooms at night and answered roll each morning with a report of "present--spoken" or "present-not spoken." Physical punishment and detention were not punishment options, as they were at boys' schools, but these "signings" of infractions and personal admissions were reported to parents and proved sufficient to keep the girls under control. Serious offenders were "counseled" by Miss Buss, and no one wanted to experience one of her "rows" or "jaws."

Netta's first contact with this famous headmistress is described in both her memoir and in the novel. In *The Sheltering Tree* she tells how she, her sister Dora, and her father were left waiting in Miss Buss's parlor when ". . . the door was flung open and the lady of the house swept in with a movement suggestive of a strong swimmer breasting opposing waves. Head thrown well back, handsome silk dress swaying in a way oddly reminiscent of the long outmoded crinoline, she came forward to shake hands with us." She then proceeds to describe Miss Buss's similarities to Queen Victoria and concludes by saying, "The four years that I spent under the roof of this remarkable woman confirmed my first impression of her physical likeness to Queen

Victoria, and in addition gave me ample opportunity to become acquainted with her varying moods" [8].

In *Rose Cottingham*, Syrett creates Quayle College, run by a headmistress who is clearly modeled on Miss Buss. Rose has an encounter very similar to Netta's:

. . . her attention was fixed upon Miss Quayle, whose tempestuous entrance into the room was characteristic. Miss Quayle never opened a door in ordinary fashion; she always flung it back, appearing on the threshold like a very small goddess of vengeance. Very short, very stout, she yet carried her head in such regal fashion as to convey an impression of power and dominance quite awe-inspiring. It was a triumph of mind over matter, for Miss Quayle had none of the physical attributes of the amazon. Her round, rather pale face was plump and soft, her eyes, as Nature painted them were softly blue, her features blunt and indeterminate. Yet fire constantly flashed from those mild coloured eyes, and the round face . . . was frequently quite terrible in its wrath.

Miss Quayle's accomplishments are Miss Buss's:

[She was] the type of woman in those days characterized as 'strong-minded'- a pioneer, a pioneer, a breaker of traditions, a woman of indomitable will, inexhaustible energy, and ungovernable temper. In the educational world she was paramount. Her efforts had revolutionized the whole system of education for girls, and the huge Grammar School she established in the sixties, had become the prototype for other schools of a like nature throughout the kingdom. By the time Rose came under her dominion, Miss Quayle was past sixty, and her nature, originally overbearing and masterful enough, had been strengthened on these lines by forty years of adulation from her colleagues. In the educational world, Miss Quayle was a goddess - and a goddess to be propitiated. Her votaries adored, certainly, but they trembled at her nod. [9]

Rose describes her at one point as "an infuriated bluebottle banging about on a window". Netta did not get along with Miss Buss, nor does Rose get along with Miss Quayle. Both girls were often unhappy. In Netta's judgment of Miss Buss, we get a viewpoint that contrasts with the more usual Victorian encomium to the great leader. Netta Syrett writes:

Her violent temper, her restless energy, her inability to listen to an explanation before judging a case, her sudden transition from vehement denunciation to the embrace, enveloping some girl who, given a quiet hearing, might have cleared herself from an unfounded accusation, were certainly symptoms of the very nerves she derided. At the risk of precipitating vials of wrath upon my impious head from those who no doubt with good reason revere her memory, I give it as my considered opinion that, many as were her excellent qualities, Miss Buss was the last woman on earth who should have come into intimate relationship with children, or even with any but the most placid and docile of young girl [8].

The fact is that Netta Syrett was creative, imaginative, intelligent, and rebellious. She describes herself as a black sheep whom Miss Buss never liked. She was forever getting into trouble and being sent to Miss Buss's office or parlor for reprimands. And she simply could not do arithmetic, as hard as she tried. Miss Buss saw that as perverseness.

In *The Victorians* Miss Quayle cannot forgive twelve-year-old Rose for letting down the school by failing the Junior Cambridge because of her arithmetic. Her firsts in history and literature make no difference. The omniscient narrator comments often on Miss Quayle's temper: "Not intentionally unfair, Miss Quayle's ungovernable temper often betrayed her into unreasonable words, and deeds of gross injustice, and that it was the temper of an overworked, highly nervous woman was little comfort or explanation to girls who should never have been under her charge" [9]. Rose experiences Miss Quayle's wrath often but most memorable is the occasion when she comes to the aid of a fellow student by running back to get her to keep her from being left behind in St. Albans after a tour. Rose is accused of flatly disobeying Miss Quayle's order to come forward and line up. Miss Quayle publicly and violently shakes Rose and refuses to let her explain the situation. Netta had just this experience with Miss Buss. In another case, Miss Quayle commands a young girl to quit coughing and when she doesn't, sends her out of the room to be punished. This girl is diagnosed with tuberculosis and soon dies. Netta's own sister, Dora, who attended North London with her, also got in trouble with Miss Buss for coughing uncontrollably and died young of tuberculosis.

The history of the North London Collegiate School for Girls has been clearly documented in numerous books on the history of women's education in England [10]. North London was the template for numerous secondary schools for girls founded in the

1870s and 80s. Old North Londoners, as the alumnae call themselves, are proud of their school's history. To this day, on the last day of spring term the school celebrates its history and honors its founder in their daffodil parade, the daffodil having been Miss Buss's favorite flower. Today the school prospers in a beautiful setting at Canon's Park in Edgware, Middlesex, and prides itself on a strong academic reputation and on having been named Leading Independent Secondary School of the year twice in the last decade. Frances Mary Buss's name is prominently mentioned on the school's web page, www.nlcs.org.uk. Founded in 1850, the school was 26 years old when Netta Syrett entered. Miss Buss was in her mid-fifties at that point and a formidable force in the revolutionary education movements of the day. She worked hard to open up scholarship and examinations for her girls and wanted them to take the same exams as the boys.

4. The Training College for Women Teachers at Cambridge (CTC)

A supporter of women's higher education at Girton and Newnham, Miss Buss encouraged her ablest students to go to university, lending them money and coaching them for the scholarship examination. Martha Vincinus, in her study of the situation of single women in late Victorian times, points out that Miss Buss's students, coming from the middle class as they predominately did, sometimes found it hard to fit in socially at University. She writes, "When the first three of [Miss Buss's] students entered Girton in 1875 they were commonly known as 'the Bus-ters' because of their school girl manners and less cultured backgrounds" [11].

Miss Buss campaigned for improved training programs for teachers. She worked hard to convince fellow educators, the university dons, and the students that education in content was not sufficient for teachers; they also needed an education in how to teach. Teacher training schools, sponsored almost exclusively by churches, provided some pedagogical training for teachers on the elementary level, but those teaching on the secondary level had little to no training. The number of secondary schools in the 80s and 90s increased rapidly, but trained teachers were scarce. Miss Buss and other educational leaders determined to develop training schools designed specifically to train secondary teachers. She actively supported the founding of the Training College for Women Teachers at Cambridge (CTC to its students), encouraging promising students to apply. Not surprisingly maybe, since women were barred from training for most other professions, these women took training for secondary education more seriously

than men did. Miss Buss was among the most serious. She used her influence to name the first principal, Miss Elizabeth Hughes. Actually, Hughes flatly refused the job at first, but as one historian of the school writes, "I imagine that to refuse Miss Buss would have been something akin to trying to stop Niagara" [12].

The college, now located on the Cambridge campus, changed its name to Hughes Hall in 1949 to honor this first principal. On the college website today they give the school's history:

Hughes Hall is the oldest Graduate College in Cambridge. It was unique in specialising in the admission of women graduates at a time when the University itself still did not confer degrees on women. The foundation followed the pattern of the other women's colleges in Cambridge in starting with a Principal and fourteen students in a small rented house. As a key part of the movement for women's education in the 1870s, the Cambridge Training College came into being, finally, in 1884. This institution, despite many vicissitudes, can truly be said to have been the origin of the College we know today [13].

Vivian Hughes was among the first students of this new Cambridge Training College, entering immediately upon graduation from North London. Her choice to be a teacher is described in this way:

The majority of us who had matriculated faced the fact that we should have to become teachers. It seemed a fairly pleasing prospect, mainly consisting, as far as work went, in talking and putting red crosses on other people's mistakes. But we now heard that you could be *taught* how to teach - a funny idea. Soon a chance arose for me to hear more about it. Along with some other enthusiasts Miss Buss was trying to raise teaching into a real profession, like Law or Medicine. [13]

So Hughes went to CTC. She may well have been in the first class, although she never mentions the date of 1885. She writes of being one of fourteen students in the cottages in which the college had its humble beginnings and seems to have predated the "Tin Tabernacle" lecture hall constructed of corrugated iron which Syrett knew. In Hughes's day the "lecture room" was "a source of much entertainment to the Cambridge people who came to visit the new 'Training College'. In the top room of one of the cottages was placed a trestle-table covered with American cloth. Around this the fourteen of us

managed to squeeze, leaving just room for the lecturer at one end, and a blackboard behind. There were no means of heating the room and Miss Rogers used to sit with her feet in a muff" [14]. Netta may have come one year later. She too lived in the "row of poor little houses on the outskirts of Cambridge." She says, "But I am glad to have known the College in its early days and in its homely, not to say poverty-stricken, setting" [8]. Hughes asserts "it would amuse the present-day students in their fine buildings in Wollaston Road to see those meager beginnings. Two tiny houses had been made to communicate by the removal of . . . walls. There was nothing at all between the door and the pavement. Stairs were so narrow that we had to squeeze to pass one another. Sanitary arrangements were of the most primitive, and a bathroom, of course, was unheard of" [14].

The present Hughes Hall website references Vivian Hughes' description of these early days, but they would do well to cite Netta Syrett as well. She doesn't dedicate a large section of her memoirs to her experiences there, seven pages, but she uses those experiences extensively in one of her early novels, *The God of Chance*, published in 1920. In her memoir she asserts: "In *The God of Chance*, life at the C.T.C., as its students called and still call it, is . . . fully described . . . , and though the heroine is a purely fictitious character whose parentage and social circumstances bear no resemblance to my own, she reflects my reaction to the novelty of college life. . . . In 'Miss Middleton' I have drawn what is on the whole a faithful portrait of Miss Hughes, the first Principal" [8].

The parallels between Syrett's experiences as she describes them in her memoir *The Sheltering Tree* and the experiences of Debora Chanford, the heroine of *The God of Chance*, are numerous: both were accepted on the basis of having passed the Cambridge Higher Local Certificate rather than having a degree from Newnham or Girton; both arrive a week after the other thirteen girls and have to catch up; each delights in her simple room; and both criticize the frumpy dress of their classmates--in the novel Deborah characterizes her classmates as a "dowdy scholastic crew"; both help the less socially astute girls learn to dance and dress; both enjoy the new friendships and the "cocoa" sessions at night with the girls in their dressing gowns gathering in one another's rooms; both comment on the study of the new subject Psychology; each worries about whether the life of a teacher will suit her with its hard work and loneliness and fears there is no other option; and both experience the difficulties of finding a teaching job in London without a university degree prior to the CTC training. The parallels continue on into their first teaching experience. Both Syrett and her

fictional counterpart, Deborah, found jobs outside London in one of the new high schools that were cropping up all over, where almost all the teachers were young and new at their jobs. Syrett went to Swansea, Wales, for a couple of years and then found a job at the London Polytechnic Institute in London. Deb went to a new high school called Sandcombe and then later to Kensington. Both were successful teachers, appreciated by their pupils and good disciplinarians (which pleased their headmistresses). In her memoir Syrett says of her own real experience, “*The God of Chance* again faithfully reflects my state of mind during the first term. Except for the hours at the school, where I soon found I liked teaching, I was desperately lonely and unhappy. In the novel, “That first term lived in Deborah’s memory as the loneliest period of her life” [15]. Both Syrett and Deborah relate the sad story of a newly hired teacher who was dismissed before she even started work for riding a bicycle on Sunday.

5. The Life of a Teacher

Whether one reads the novel or the memoir, Syrett’s portrayal of the teacher’s life is negative. In the memoir she says, “teachers . . . were expected to lead cloistered lives” and in the novel she depicts vividly the lonely, hard lot of these women. While still at CTC, at one of the “cocoas,” one of the experienced teachers who has come to the school for training so that she can compete for jobs, instills fear into the hearts of the younger women. She says,

“You don’t know anything about it, you young girls. I’ve heard a good deal since I’ve been here about the importance of the teacher, and all that kind of thing. But I’ve been teaching for years, and I know what it means in practice. You live in lodgings. You’re desperately lonely. The pay is wretched. Just enough to keep body and soul together while you’re strong enough to work. Nothing for your old age. . . And the months and years go on, and you’re afraid - horribly afraid! That’s why I came here - because I was afraid. Things are altering. Untrained teachers are not being accepted now, and I can’t afford to drop out, so I’ve had to borrow the money to learn to bring myself up to date.” She laughed unsteadily. “It’s a pity, because I don’t think there’ll be enough now to keep me out of the workhouse when I’m really past teaching . . . Perhaps some of you who are cleverer than I may make a better thing out of the business than I’ve been able to do. But do let me warn you that it’s a blind alley. Teaching, I mean. You’re out of the main stream of life. You get no opportunities.

. . . You never meet men, for instance. And girls ought to marry. . . .” [15]

Deb’s best friend at CTC, Katherine, looks on the state of the profession very cynically. She sees young women going out to teach when they know nothing of life and asserts:

“Teaching isn’t made so lucrative and attractive as to draw any but the class of which the students here are typical, into the profession. You can see how it works out. It’s quite simple and syllogistic. The High Schools have made education cheap. Small tradespeople, clerks, the better-paid artisans, send their children thither. The studious ones get on. They pass examinations; they often get scholarships, which take them to the University. Nowadays they pass from the University to Training Colleges like this. At the end of their course they get posts in public schools. . . . And so the machine turns from the High School to the High School. Dust to dust - ashes to ashes - and that is ‘education’ in England.” [15]

Deborah Cranford, despite pressure from her ultra-conservative parents and manipulations by her selfish mother, is able eventually to leave teaching for a highly successful and fulfilling career first acting and then teaching drama. Netta Syrett, however much she prided herself on being a good teacher, dreamed of being a writer and was able to realize that dream. With the publication of stories in the *Yellow Book* and of a novel by John Lane’s Bodley Head Press, she went on to write 38 novels, 27 short stories, 4 plays, and 20 children’s books in her long career as a professional writer.

6. Conclusion

With Syrett’s and Hughes’s memoirs and with Syrett’s novel we get a glimpse of the world of the young teacher trainee and teacher in the 1890s. It is understandable that neither of these women who trained at the CTC stayed in the teaching profession. Syrett, like her character Deborah, yearned for broader experience and more “life” than the teaching profession could provide. Vivian Hughes taught for several years but eventually married a successful barrister and raised a large family. Both attest to the need for reforms which did eventually follow where teachers gained better education, were offered more future security, and were freed from many of the inhibitions surrounding the profession, such as not being able to marry. The other day when I saw some information about a journal entitled the *International*

Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning I was struck with how far we have come in teacher training since the 1890s. Most universities have a School of Education and within my discipline of English we have Ph.D.s who specialize in training our English education majors. My female students who are education majors were born in the 1990s and often have no conception of a time when education was not generally available and teaching was not a profession but was simply one of the limited areas where women could find employment. And the job was not particularly attractive in those early days. Not until the 1880s and 90s were women allowed to attend universities and secure professional training. It was a long and hard fought battle which should not be forgotten.

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