

TEACHERS AT PATRICK'S IN EARLIER TIMES



By:

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Apart from parents, close relatives and family friends who have moulded our lives when we were young, there are the teachers who are mostly forgotten after one enters into adulthood. A student passes through a limited number of teachers but a teacher passes through hundreds more all of who he cannot remember. The students come into their classes and they go away leaving new entrants to come. Hence it is the students who have to remember their teachers with nostalgic memories and not the other way around. I had the good fortune to come under some excellent teachers, some of who I thought I will feature in this piece.

I joined St.Patrick's in January 1949 shifting from St. Henry's College, Ilavalai and was admitted to Form VIII (Junior School Certificate Class) after an entrance examination. It is from this class, students who pass out move out to the Higher Forms, Pre Senior and then Senior. After more than six decades, I could recollect the names of some of the teachers, although not all of them. One thing I noticed at St. Patrick's soon after admission was that most of the teachers came in full suit and they all looked spick and span.

I recollect that our class back in 1949 had a good turnover of teachers. They came and they went with the result that a particular subject was taught by more than one teacher during that year. English language was first taught by Mr. V.C.Canagaratnam whose spoken English was much like that of an Englishman except that his colour belied him. He left (or shifted I cannot recollect) when Mr. P.Saverimuthu came over. He had just returned from U.K. after completing his Master's Degree .His English was poised and voice resonant. I still remember him bringing a novel by Sir Walter Scott 'Quentin Durward' and explaining all the adjectives and adverbs in a paragraph to teach how, when and where they should be used. We were enjoying his teaching but he suddenly left to take up a senior appointment with the Education Department. I do not recollect who took over. There was Mr. Selvanayagam who was teaching us a subject and he also left to join St. John's College. Mr. A.A.Joseph was teaching us History when he left suddenly to take up an appointment as Asst. Commissioner of Local Government. Latin was not taught as a regular subject but I got special permission (as I thought it would improve my English) to follow it. Mr. Bartholomeusz was the teacher but he also left suddenly to join the Prisons Dept in a senior position. All the others in this Latin class were Seminarians. After Mr.

Bartholomeusz left, this class was suspended. Some weeks later, a new teacher resumed this class but by then I had lost interest.

In spite of these changes, we had some exceptionally good teachers in that class. Special mention must be made of Mr. S.P.Innasimuthu who taught Mathematics. He was also the Class Teacher. This was my favourite subject and Mr. Innasimuthu made it so easy for me. Mild mannered and soft spoken, he never used a cane or even a harsh word on a weak student. Other teachers I could recollect now were Messers J.S.B.Selvadurai (who taught Geography which did not interest me at that time), Lawrence , an elderly person whose wife also taught in the Lower Classes) who taught Tamil and Theodore. Towards the last term we had a new teacher, Mr. Emmanuel to teach us General Science. His class was held just before the mid-interval in the morning sessions but he used this time too to continue his teaching with the result that none of us could go out to relieve ourselves or to the Tuck-shop to have a bite and /or tea. He was a totally dedicated teacher but of a stern disposition and hence not much liked by the students. One particular day, one of the students walked out of this class during the interval time and came back only to be pulled up. The boy told in plain everyday Tamil that he had gone to relieve himself for number 1. Normally his reply would have evoked peals of laughter but there was pin drop silence. Mr. Emmanuel was taken aback but recovered himself to announce that if anyone wanted to go out during the interval, he could do so. Next day most of the students went out and the extension of his class into the interval stopped. I resumed my habit of having a masala vadai and a cup of plain tea at the Tuck-shop, each of which would cost a princely sum of cts. 5 then.

At the end of the year, all Form VIII students had to take up a Junior School Certificate Examination conducted by the NPTA (Northern Province Teachers' Association) which was actually a Promotion Test. In this particular year, an unusual incident happened. Soon after the examination was over, there was an announcement that as some question papers had leaked earlier, it would be cancelled and a fresh one held. For me there was a personal setback as I had contracted mumps meanwhile and was asked to go home. The Christmas vacation was also about to begin. I went home and told my parents about the cancellation of the JSC exam. What next? My mother had an idea. She approached an elderly couple, relatives of ours, who lived in a small house close to the College and asked them whether they could help me stay with them for the duration of the exam. The lady obliged and in fact she looked after me extremely well. I walked from their home to the examination hall with a muffler around my neck and sat for all the papers. When the results came I had managed to get distinction in six subjects. On the results of this examination, I was promoted to the Mathematics stream in the Pre Senior Class. One regrettable thing in my life is that after leaving College and taking up employment, I had forgotten this lady who helped me in my hour of need. Late in my life I did think of this lady but by then it was too late. She and her husband had already gone to the next world. This pain lives with me even now.

In the Pre-Senior Class we had Mr. Kurien who taught Physics but he soon left back to India and Mr. Phillips took over. For some reason, this subject did not click with me. Believe it or not, it was Rev. Fr. Charles Navaratnam who taught us Mathematics and what a good teacher he was. We had Mesers Mathuranayagam (Advanced and Applied Mathematics and Chemistry), F.J.Armstrong (English) and Ferdinands , Senior (Tamil) . The Vice Rector at that time Rev. Fr. B.A.John taught us Religious Knowledge. This class had an array of brilliant students but S.J.Emmanuel outshone them all. He is now a

respected Priest . More or less the same set of teachers taught us in the Senior Form too. Special mention must be made of Mr. Mathuranayagam who was an excellent teacher, but he left suddenly to join St. Joseph's College. He was succeeded by Mr. Namasivayam who had just graduated.

I was fascinated with Mathematics and English and was not concentrating on the other subjects. I was particularly weak in Tamil as we had no literature to read. There was not even one Tamil book in the well-stocked Library. Mr. Ferdinands advised us to read some books and magazines and he recommended a particular magazine 'Manjari' which was a digest of good articles but none about films or film stars. I did try to buy one copy and tried to read it but the language was beyond me. My Tamil handwriting was also poor but Mr. Ferdinands gave me special exercises to improve my writing which he would patiently correct and bring back the next day. When the Senior Schools Certificate Examination results were out, I had managed to get a pass in Tamil and also Physics which was another weak subject for me. I got distinctions and Credit Passes in all other subjects.

In the Senior Form, Mr. Armstrong had an idea of publishing a magazine in English (at his own cost) titled VB-1 (our class was then called as such) that would include small essays written by the students. He wanted us to prepare for the English Language paper in the Senior School Certificate Examination which would always contain a question to write an essay. I was asked to be its Editor. We did not take this idea seriously. A few weeks later he inquired of what happened to the Magazine and gave us a couple of weeks' time to complete this assignment. Some of us wrote our essays and gave them to him. He took mine first as I was considered the best in English in the class. He began tearing it to pieces pointing out that I had put the cart before the horse in constructing sentences. Mr. Armstrong was a perfectionist. My vanity was exposed and from then on, I concentrated on writing rather than reading. I managed to get a Credit Pass.

In January 1952, I was enrolled for the HSC (Higher School certificate) equivalent to the General Certificate of Education Advanced Level now) but after the SSC results were out, I had to leave college and seek employment for financial reasons.

Although I did not have the privilege of studying under other well-respected Teachers like Messers F.N.C.Saverimuthu, S.F.Santhiapilla i and Iyer, I can remember them very well. Mr. F.N.C. was well known for his sense of humour and pungent comments which would make the gullible students blush and come back next day refreshed. Mr. Santhiapillai tall and always attired in a white suit and tie was a mild-mannered and soft-spoken. Mr. Iyer who taught English in higher forms was a perfectionist and would bring the daily English language Newspaper ' Ceylon Daily News' to his class and read the Editorial and point out how it could be better written. A South Indian Brahmin, he could on some days be seen in typical Brahman costume.

There were other Teachers I could recollect, Messers Motha who taught Physics and was also in charge of Sports activities assisted by Kandiah, Johnson, Krishnaraj, Frank Thuraisingham, Pancras, Ferdinands Junior, Alfred, Jacob, Amirthanayagam, Rajasekeram, and Gnanaratnam. I am not including Messers Sam Alfred , D.S.Gnanapragasam and Lawrence, great Teachers who joined the college later. I could also remember our Librarian Mr. Santhiapillai who kept the Library spick and span.

It is these teachers who were the backbone of the College, turning out students year after year, some to

the Universities, some to their employment, but at all of them into a new adult world to face the challenges in life. Teaching is a noble profession but it is only a few who become rich from it. The rest were and are there out of sheer dedication and commitment to their profession and let us remember them with reverence.

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