

‘Writer in Bud’ by Mary Mackie (née Whitlam)

Lincoln Christ’s Hospital Girls’ High School in the 1950s

From the Garton Archive: Item of Interest No 11

Although I was very proud to be attending ‘the High School’, where my mother had been before me and my sister came after, being the world’s laziest person I hated the long walk, or bike-ride, from my home on Carholme Road. It was mostly up-slope and ended with a real steep hill. What a fag! Another long trek was necessary every time we had sports. The field lay about ten miles away (I exaggerate, but that’s how it felt) along Nettleham Road; there were no showers, and in winter trying to get dressed with frost-bitten fingers while shaking with cold after a game of hockey, then having to walk all the way back to school... Not fun. And for swimming we had to trek across the city to South Park School, another trial, especially since the South Park lot were envious of us High School girls. Or so we imagined.

However, inside the hallowed corridors of Lincoln Christ’s Hospital High School it was a different world, hushed and repressive, all dark wooden panelling and chalk dust. ‘Don’t run, girls!’ and ‘Be quiet, no chattering!’ I was a rebel (of sorts), wearing my hat at a non-regulation angle and having my mother make my summer dresses with a fashionable drop-waist. However, one of my class-mates won the rebels’ prize when she turned up with pink hair (in the Fifties!) and claimed it had turned that way when she rinsed it in beer, as recommended by one of the women’s magazines.

Though I was in the top stream, I was an average scholar there. My year boasted half a dozen really bright girls who always came top at everything; we also-rans vied for ‘best of the rest’. I often wonder what became of those cream-of-the-class lasses. Did they all go on to brilliant careers? My own talent lay mostly in English, especially writing essays. That was where I *could* hope to do well. I even got top marks in the mock GCE for History because the papers were marked by our own teacher, who thought my way of writing essays was exceptional. Pity she didn’t mark the real GCE History papers. I failed!

My family having part German blood (our ancestors moved here in the 1850s), they evolved some individual ways of using the English language. Reading aloud from ‘Cranford’ in class one day, I pronounced the word ‘misled’ as ‘mizzled’, which caused my friends to collapse in mirth. It was a moment before I realised why. Obviously, ‘mizzled’ is a cross between ‘mystified’ and ‘puzzled’. Doesn’t everyone know that?

Boys, of course, were strictly off the menu. Once – and only once, in my memory, when I was fourteen or fifteen – the school did hold a dance to which the youths of the Grammar School were invited. This was a huge concession and, as hardly needs saying, we were closely chaperoned. Mainly I recall it as a toe-curlingly embarrassing evening. It was, however, a change for me to be able to dance the female steps as, being tall, I generally got to be the ‘boy’ when we had dancing lessons.

Strict and old-maidish as the teachers seemed to be to us nubile teenagers, they also seemed to be blind to the appalling embarrassment to which they subjected us when were obliged to strip down to gym-blouses and navy knickers and hurry up and down the (public) Greestone stairs for the delectation of every passing workman, to the accompaniment of much wolf-whistling, pop-eyed appreciation and lascivious comments. Was that double-standards, or what? We all hated it.

However, a certain *frisson* ran through the school at the news that we were to have a male teacher to assist the music mistress. Did the hapless man guess how many adolescent hearts beat faster at the very thought of someone of the forbidden gender being among us? Happily, when he arrived he was really quite plain, not the type to attract longing glances and romantic fantasies. That, probably, was fortunate for all concerned.

Did being classified as forbidden fruit make the opposite sex even more desirable? Most of us had a healthy interest in male beings, whether cousins, friends or film-actors. I had always written stories, from the age of eight. In my teens, my attempts at writing all revolved around romance. Our English mistress, Miss Ryder, very kindly read many of these derivative fables, mostly based on TV series, and was not entirely dismissive of them. My own family didn't know what to make of this strange child who spent all her spare time scribbling. It was not a talent shared by anyone else of our acquaintance. My Dad often said he would like to write about his experiences in India during the war – he talked about it but never did get the stories down on paper. When I professed an ambition to write for a living, he exclaimed, "You'll never be a writer!" I like to think he said it to goad me on but maybe he didn't believe I had the staying power. Certainly when I did, in 1971, reach publication he was very proud and supportive. One of my later books made him cry, which amazed him.

I left school at sixteen. In our family it was not the done thing for girls to stay on into the sixth form. Some of my boy cousins did so, which was acceptable, but when one of them passed exams for University at the age of seventeen, the aunts and uncles thought that going too far. "Who does he think he is?" This cousin (educated at the City School) became a professor and an international lecturer, acknowledged expert in his field. He's in his late 70s now and the family still haven't forgiven him for getting above himself. As for the girls in the family, most of us were expected to leave school as soon as possible and get a little job before marrying and having children. So I, too, left school after the Fifth Form, with six 'O' levels. I was not sorry to leave, but in later life I did wonder what might have been different if I had stayed on and tried hard. Who knows? I might have succeeded academically, but, equally, I would probably have missed some wonderful things.

I continued to write – stories, novels, plays and poetry – and, in my mid-twenties, was fortunate enough to have a novel accepted for print. Since then I've published nearly seventy books, starting with romantic mysteries (what else?) before moving on to more serious fiction, contemporary and historical, some Norfolk sagas and in the last decade several books on non-fiction subjects. Yes, I married and had children, but of course a writer can write anywhere, so I've been able to accompany my husband through his varying career. In addition the writing has taken us to some fascinating places, even to informal meetings with royalty. My life has been blessed with many good things. I have given dozens of talks, latterly accompanied with

PowerPoint shows which I create myself, and I manage two websites, my own being www.stillscribbling.co.uk .

It was, I am sure, my years at the High School that opened my mind to the possibilities of studying. The school gave me a grounding in many different subjects and equipped me with the skills, and the curiosity, to continue to expand my education, long after I left the classroom behind. English mistress Miss Ryder especially played her part in encouraging me to go on writing, for which I am grateful.

There really is a University of Life, available to everyone if only they will use it. Thank you, High School, for giving me a fine start. I only wish I had appreciated you better when I was fortunate enough to be a pupil.

About the Author

The LHS Admission Register records that Kathleen Mary Whitlam (now Mackie), was a pupil at Lincoln Christ's Hospital Girls' High School from September 1953 to July 1958. The cause of leaving is given as a cryptic 'To work'! Her father's encouraging words, 'You'll never be a writer', resonate with The Headmaster of Lincoln School's equally 'prophetic' advice to John Hurt, 'You'll never be an actor'!

In the event, Mary went on to be a prodigious and popular writer, and much of her oeuvre has been collected for the Archive at LCHS by Professor Charles Garton. She first published in 1971, and is the author of more than seventy books in various fiction and non-fiction genres, many of which have been translated into some twenty different languages. She has also published several short stories and has had her one-act plays performed by amateur dramatic societies. She has also founded a number of writing groups, and has taught classes in 'Creative Writing' to enthusiastic learners. She is also a popular public speaker, who travels widely to give talks on the craft of writing. As you will see from her delightful memoir, she is also 'still scribbling' at the tender age of diddly-one, and is clearly grateful to the High School for giving her such a 'fine start'.

Coincidentally, like John Hurt, she is currently living in Norfolk.



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