

PWY YDW I'N MEDDWL
OEDDWN I?

1914

WHO DO
I THINK I WAS?

1918

Mair Gwynedd Smith, Dowlais Visual Art Group

A Real Education

“Morning Charlotte – you’ll have to mind the kids this morning. I need to visit the Head of Dowlais Central School.”

“Why Mam – I should be going there myself today?”

“Your Father’s pay hasn’t arrived from Ypres near Belgium. We’re short of cash – I already owe Mr Grayson seven pence for lamb chops and the grocers one shilling. He earned much more doing building work; and yet he insisted on going.”

“What’s the school hot to do with it?”

“Well Mrs Lewis informed me that they’ve relaxed the rules, and they’re taking on married women in the Girls and Boy’s schools, as well as the infants. She’s put in a good word for me”



“Very well Mam -I’ll light the living room fire first, and then feed Jenny and Joe”

It was a bleak day as I approached the granite edifice of Central School. The large arched window loomed up in front of me like a church in judgement. In the grey yard sat baskets of skipping ropes and chalk for outside play. Beyond the pink-grey smoke of the Iron Foundry rose up like dragon’s breath, and skittered ominously back and forth. There was a dank sulphurous miasma around the place as sparks in the distance lit up like heavenly stars.

I was ushered by the school clerk into a corridor lined with simple wooden chairs to wait for Mr Richard Price the acting Headmaster. I could hear clattering and laughter in a room to the left which smelt of boiled beef and cabbages.

I could see Mr Price as he was called, through the glass placed within a sturdy oak panelled door. He appeared stern and officious and was writing with elegance into a large leather ledger. Three large canes of various lengths were arranged in order on the wall above his desk.

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At length he stood up and beckoned me within. “Mrs Davies”, he muttered, “Mrs Ruth Davies”. He bent forward to shake my hand. “I understand you’ve applied to work here”. He stepped forward to place a wedge under the door. “I realise you’re short of money – well your children have inadvertently mentioned the fact in class. I know that you’re a good Christian and teach in the local Sunday school, so you are used to handling the little wretches. If you don’t mind filling in the requisite forms for me – I need to see the quality of your handwriting”.

I nodded politely at him – despite my fears he seemed a genuinely nice person. I had prefilled my best ink pen, and completed the task easily. As he smiled his moustache seemed to swirl. “Thank you Mrs Davies. Here – I’ll take you to the classroom to which you might be allocated”.

As I entered I could see rows of girls sitting bolt upright in recognition of Mr Price’s presence. Their faces looked grim, but their long tresses were neatly plaited. The whole room looked orderly with small wooden writing desks set out in straight rows. On each was an inkwell and an opened book. A closed one would result in harsh admonitions for laziness. They all wore long gathered linen skirts down to their ankles and home-made knitted cardigans and jumpers to compensate for the draughty windows. They seemed more like military cadets than pupils about to leave the school at the age of twelve. I wouldn’t have heard a pin drop. I could see immediately that discipline in all aspects of their conduct was anticipated.

I had been informed by other staff that they learnt by rote, reciting their times tables and the date of accession of kings and queens and that the top class could quote in detail some excerpts from William Shakespeare.

All at once the bell went, and the girls immediately stood up like soldiers at attention. “Please may we go to dinner Mr Price?”, they recited rhythmically in unison. “Yes you may – You’ve been good this morning”. They strode past their heads held up high.

“They’ll have a nasty reawakening this afternoon Mrs Davies”, he informed me. “The doctor is due to call in to check for signs of rheumatic fever. Then the nit nurse will arrive. Only last week the dentist had to give out seven mouthwashes”. I squirmed in disgust. “Schools need to be run efficiently you see”.

“By the way how is Mr Davies?”

“A letter reached me from the front just two weeks ago. Two of his comrades are already in Field Hospitals suffering the effects of mustard gas – both can hardly breathe and at the moment their eyesight is too bad for battle. Many of his unit have lost toes due to damp conditions. Still he’s bearing up. I’ve sent him over some strong leather boots and socks – I don’t think he tells me the half of it. Oh Mr Price what unfortunate times we’re living through”. He shook my hands and nodded encouragingly.

“Well I don’t believe we will take you on – so you can tell Mr Davies and boost his morale. See you on Monday sharp Mrs Davies”

“Goodbye for now Mr Price – and thanks for your time”

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I strode home with mixed feelings as the sun came out. Many young mothers stood nattering on the doorsteps swaddling their infants with tartan shawls. As usual the terraces were swept scrupulously clean.

Yet at that very moment, I could sense a cold wind clearing the smog. There was a disturbance in the air, and the future of all the people here was likely to change irrevocably. I instinctively knew that women in my lifetime would be given greater responsibility, and that some in the community would relish their new commitments. I intended to lead my children by example, expand my influence, and cause them to see a larger, less limited existence.