

The good old days

*“There is plenty to be learned even from a bad teacher: what not to do, how not to be.”
(J K Rowling)*

One of the few big scares in anyone’s life is school.

I was a sook. I clung to my mother for longer than was decent, and with her complicity, managed to avoid Kindergarten completely. I seem to remember I turned up for one day, was terrified by all the strange, yelling, smelly, crying children, and thinking it a vision of hell, asked to be relieved of the torture. My mother granted me this wish. It may not have been a good decision, since blunting your sensitivities on the rough and tumble of other children is part of learning to survive.

So when it came to school, I was untutored in the ways of the world. Instead of the tiny, sweet smelling and utterly familiar nooks and crannies of home, under the protection of my mother, I was expected to muck in with all the other little monsters, and their tyrannical masters, the teachers.

The ‘baby boom’, when soldiers came back from the war, married and started reproducing in astonishing numbers, had created a situation where demand was always going to outpace supply. There were children everywhere. I was one of them, as were my sister and brother. We weren’t Catholic, but even so my parents managed to have three. As well as feeding and clothing these kids, there was the matter of giving them an education.

In the time of my youth, Morwell had a population of close to 20,000, expanding rapidly with every year. That was enough to support quite a few schools. The closest one to where we lived was Collins Street State School. It was built on what had been a large paddock, one street removed from the main shopping precinct.

The school buildings were classic post-war austerity style. After the war, the Bristol Aircraft Corporation had done a bit of lateral thinking, and repackaged their skills in fabricating aluminium – which had been used during the war for building bombers (the Bristol bomber was almost as famous as the Lancaster) – and found other things to build.

One was the ‘Bristol’ classroom. The base unit was a pair of two classrooms, joined together like Harlequin beetles, with a couple of storerooms and office in the middle. Each classroom was about 60 metres square, with high ceilings, and louvered windows on either side, to let in the light and the air, and waft out the smells. Out the front was a low dais, on which the teacher walked. He or she wrote on the two huge blackboards, which were actually green, on either side of the front of the room. It was the glory days of ‘chalk and talk’. Children sat and listened, and spoke when questioned. The walls were aluminium, the roof was aluminium, as

were the window frames and doors. It was lightweight, easy to put together and relatively cheap.

The beauty of this design was that it could be replicated indefinitely. You want six classrooms – Grades 1 to 6 – and hey presto, three modules. You want twenty – easy. The Department of Education was playing catch up with a booming population, and needed lots of quick solutions. Collins Street State School was a quickie school.

Pot luck in the classroom

The staff were equally off the shelf. In those far off days, no one dared enquire about the qualifications of the teachers. The best of them were well enough educated – ‘teacher’s college’ for the most part (not university) - and managed to teach children the basics. The worst of them were barely sentient bumlbers, who would not have been out of place in Dickens’ time. Some were barely competent. Add to this that we were not talking the gracious suburbs of eastern Melbourne, with carefully landscaped gardens and classic brick buildings - but a brand new school in an industrial town in the Latrobe Valley. It was pot luck.

Parents took all this on trust, unless they had the means to buy a private education – and thereby hope for higher standards. You got what the ‘Department’ dished out for you, and no one was allowed say “Please, sir, more.”

Each classroom was filled – to overflowing one might say – with sturdy wooden desks. They were about a metre long, built onto a green steel frame, with a continuous bench seat, and two raked writing tables, hinged so that pupils (not ‘students’ – that came years later) could put their books and pens inside. At the front of each desk, in pairs, were ink wells. They nestled in a circular wooden hole, specially designed for the purpose. The ink wells were white porcelain, and contained about 20 ml of ink – which was mixed every day by boy monitors – girls were considered too delicate to have their hands stained blue - and handed out carefully. Writing was with pencil and steel nibbed pen. It was very much like a scene from history, and indeed the technology was centuries old - with lots of dibbing and writing and blotting, but steel pens rather than quills.

Two pupils shared each desk. This was an invitation for rampant cheating and elbowing and other low profile misbehaviour. Though the worse excesses were avoided by most kids’ fear of being punished for crimes and misdemeanours – like spattering ink, or speaking out of turn, or heaven help you, talking back to the teacher.

Classes varied in size, but it was not uncommon in some schools to have 50 to a class.

Now it is an iron law of psychology that controlling 50 kids for hours at a time, day after day, requires something more than just asking nicely.

The teacher was a psycho

Punishment was finely graded. At the lower end of the scale was being verbally abused, yelled at and told you were a simpleton and would never amount to much. Then there was being sent out of class. These techniques are hallowed in time, and still used with real enthusiasm in modern schools.

But then came corporal punishment and that was a speciality of the 'good old days'. Depending on the teacher, this would consist of "getting the cuts", a euphemism for being thrashed with either a broad leather strap, swung with all the strength a grown man can muster and descending at a sizzling speed onto the outstretched hand of the perpetrator. Or with a stick – typically a wicker stick or bamboo cane – which when swung with sufficient might bent before landing on the bottom or hand with a terrifying crack and stinging like a red hot iron.

Each school varied, but getting whacked was a daily occurrence. It tended to be the boys. Not only were girls more likely to be docile and less offensive to the eagle eyes of teachers, but there was a certain squeamishness about most teachers when it came to overt displays of violence towards 'the fairer sex'. A smack over the fingers or a ruler on the back of the legs was deemed suitable for girls. But for serious offences, requiring the deliberate infliction of bruising and bleeding, only the boys needed to fear the brutal wrath of teachers. There was an unspoken assumption, lifted from generations of this sort of thing, that it was somehow good for you: "This hurts me more than it hurts you," would be said with a straight face before the blow descended. If inflicting grievous bodily harm on enough 'bad boys' made everyone more compliant, went the reasoning, it was a pain worth every stroke.

One sunny day in Grade 6, a formidable teacher called Mr M was disobeyed once too often by the class 'bad boy', a child with the improbable name of Lazarus. The teacher summoned the boy, Peter, to get his punishment. Peter refused to come out the front. He was either stricken with fear – for M was a big man – or felt that he had been punished once too often, and was mounting a one man rebellion against the whole system ... who knows what a frightened boy is thinking as he waits for the next brutal assault on his dignity and his body. The class watched, horrified, to see what would happen next. They knew the teacher would win – that wasn't the issue. It was how long this torture would go on, and what pain would be inflicted.

A cat and mouse game began. Peter ran like a terrified rabbit around the classroom, leaping over desks to try and escape the teacher. The teacher pursued, rapidly giving way to an ungovernable rage, red of face, sweating and cursing. It was a hot day, and the sight of this appalling circus soon had the girls in tears and the boys quaking in fright.

The whole sordid affair went on for minutes – it seemed like hours. Finally the teacher grabbed the boy, wrenched him out the door, and slammed it behind him. There was a brief silence. Then the sound of the belting – a series of loud blows – leather cracking down on bare flesh like gunshots – again and again, until the teacher was exhausted and the boy in tears. Meanwhile, back in the classroom, there was a stunned silence. It was like listening to an execution.

I don't know if it scarred Peter for life. It certainly scarred me. Years later, when by then I was a teacher in my own right – I happened to watch another teacher give corporal punishment, as it was euphemistically called – to another bad boy. It was in the staffroom. I had a period off and was doing some correction. In came the head teacher, dragging the culprit with him. He was only doing what everyone expected – this was a tough school. Iron discipline was assumed by all. He forced the boy to hold out his hand, before strapping him – probably six to ten strokes. The teacher was a big man ... six foot two, a countryman, and strong as an ox. The boy was fourteen or so. It was all over in two minutes, but I felt a bit like those people in the American south forced to walk by a lynching. It was sickening.

For me, school was a dreadful combination of boredom and violence. I famously ran away from school several times – in the first year. It wasn't that I was subjected to violence. But from the very first day, I sensed the toughness of it all. There were daily assemblies. The children were lined up in their classes. They sang the national anthem. The headmaster gave a speech reminding them that they were being watched every moment, in case anyone was contemplating transgression. Then, in file, like prisoners, they moved into the classrooms. There a whole day had to be got through under the hawk like gaze of the teacher.

For those people who say "School days were the best days of my life...", I say, "What's the matter with you?"