

Mrs. Parker of Parknook - Some recollections.

To those of us who were children in Gosforth 50 years ago - and we spread all over the world, from the Solomon Islands to Capetown, from Vancouver to Hong Kong - fragrant memories will be awakened by the mention of Mrs. Parker of Parknook, notice of whose death has just reached me in the "News" of November 2nd.

Ned Life was quiet in "Gosfer Boddem" in the early 1900's. We had no radio - only an occasional visit from a German band, a dancing bear, or Fred the Fiddler. There were no buses either, and a visit to Whitehaven was a major event requiring the three mile walk to Seascale, thence by train to Corkickle; unless perchance old Jim Watson could be persuaded to clear a corner in his covered carrier's cart which made the trip every market day!

Those were the days of large families. The village and surrounding farms swarmed with children, and more than 150 attended the church school, many of them walking from 3 to 5 miles every day. The attendance record, I believe, was held by Norman Bland of Scargreen, 2½ miles away on the edge of Stockdale Moor who for 5 years (or was it 7?) was "never absent, never late". I wonder how many children are on the school roll today . . . and do they still walk, or does a paternal government provide bus transport for distant dwellers?

Being such an isolated community meant that we had to provide our own amusement and the leaders in all this were Dr. and Mrs. Parker, strongly supported by Joseph Birch the schoolmaster. The highlight of the year was the Gosforth Christmas Concert - matinee and two evening performances, held between Christmas and the New Year. The matinee was patronized by "the gentry" - the Brooksbanks from Irton Hall, the Ainsworths from Harecroft, the Lowthorpe-Lutwidges from Holmrook, the Ryders from Calder Abbey etc. - who brought their house parties, and the last evening performance was followed by the Grand Ball of the year. In the earlier days the concert was entirely a local production - words, music and book by Dr. Parker, but later, an operetta with topical songs and gags, and a one-act play comprised the programme. All the scenery was built and painted by the Doctor in the barn at Parknook, the dresses were made by Mrs. Parker. Rehearsals began in September, chorus in the village school, principals at Parknook, and from mid-November onwards, Parknook was a scene of great activity several evenings each week, with hordes of children being fitted with costumes by Mrs. Parker in the drawing room while the Doctor rehearsed principals in his study. It was a "lang drabbly road" from the village to Parknook on those winter nights, and it was considered good form to leave boots or clogs in the stone flagged hall amongst the stuffed birds and the swords and muskets of generations of Parker sailors and soldiers.

In these days when it is considered "the thing" to render public service, especially when due notice of it is given in the social columns of the press or illustrated magazines, one remembers with profound admiration and thankfulness the long years of unselfish service which Dr. and Mrs. Parker gave

to the children of Gosforth. Nor did their activities end with the organisation of the Concert. Mrs. Parker gave unsparingly of her time for the Band of Hope, the Church choir and any other movement which required her influence and power of leadership, while Dr. Parker founded the cycling club which enabled the grown-ups and teenagers (if they possessed bikes) to visit places of interest as far away as Levens Hall under the tutelage of one whose knowledge of the antiquities of West Cumberland was unexcelled.

I last saw Dr. Parker in January 1918 when I visited Gosforth during a short leave period from France where the company of Australian Infantry I commanded was "resting" after the Passchendaele fighting. He was mortally sick but mentally as active as ever. I tried to express my appreciation of all that he and Mrs. Parker had done for the children of Gosforth and he replied "Well John, we looked at it this way. The best things raised in Gosforth are our children . . . they are even better quality than our shortorns and potatoes. There have always been so many of them that they couldn't all be absorbed locally and a big proportion had to go and make their way in the outside world. We have tried by our Concerts and other educational activities to give them self-confidence and poise which would enable them to hold their own amongst strangers. So many of our young people have done well in various parts of the world that we feel any little help we were able to give has been richly repaid."

As I sit here in my Melbourne office, early in January, with the outside temperature well over 100°, nostalgic memories flood me of those evening trudges along the snow-girt road to Parknock where impressionable youth enjoyed the priceless privilege of companionship with a lady of gentle birth who was never known to be irritable or ungracious, and with a cultured gentleman whose knowledge of the flora, fauna and history of his beloved countryside was encyclopaedic and who was always on the look-out to encourage and assist in the development of any intellectual pursuit.

I presume some memorial will be provided for Mrs. Parker in the Church she loved so dearly and served so well. But her real memorial is enshrined in the hearts of those to whom she gave so much of her grace. Her life was of a nature to establish a tradition of behaviour to one's neighbour, both young and old, and I dare to hope its influence will be felt not only in Gosforth but in far distant places for generations to come. And no-one could wish for a finer memorial than that!