

J.A.W. BENNETT AND THE SCHOOL HYMN

Jack Bennett known as J.A.W. Bennett was one of nine boys in 6A in 1928. 6A became Form 7 and then Year 13. He was a scholarly, perceptive, fey, religiously-minded boy, who was already a superior prose writer, able to pull seemingly disparate threads together. Yet he was unworldly, he had never been to the movies nor played any sport. His parents were hard-working ordinary people who belonged to the Brethren Church. They were proud of his achievements but uncertain of his later views.

He had two pieces in the 1928 *The Albertian*. The first, pp6-7 was titled *Science and Modern Thought*. He began with this:

“The political, social and religious life of modern England dates from the moment of the Restoration of Charles II” [1660]. On the button. The Royal Society was founded in 1660 and Charles promulgated the establishment of the Lucasian Chair of Mathematics at Cambridge University, and his contemporary, Sir Isaac Newton held the Chair for 33 years. In our own time it was held by Stephen Hawking for 30 years.

The second piece was an essay for the School Essay Prize, pp 49-50, entitled *Our Hellenic Heritage*. He begins: “The modern world is lacking in one Ideal – the Ideal of Beauty.”

While these are wonderful pieces, he is better known to us for a poem, in the same issue on p55. He called it *Envoi* (the final verse is not really an envoi, but no matter). There are seven verses and the first one goes:

“Dusk on the walls and the twilight lingering,
Darken, yet lighten our half-dimmed gaze;
While on the panels still bright with his fingering
God writes this legend in golden rays:”

It was set to music by a local musician, Dr S.K. Phillips, and it was first sung at the School Concert in 1930. This programme says the music was by Dr W.E. Thomas. We have a copy of the programme, where it can be seen that four verses were sung.

MT. ALBERT GRAMMAR SCHOOL
ANNUAL CONCERT
TOWN HALL, 24th SEPTEMBER, 1930

PROGRAMME

NATIONAL ANTHEM
"GAUDEAMUS"—Student Song

1. Chorus—"The Song of the Homeward Bound" (Clarke) The School

2. Tableau Vivant—"The Doll Shop" Members of School House

3. Instrumental Selection—"The Bouquet" (Laurendeau) Pupils

4. (A) School Hymn—"Envoi"
Words by J. A. W. Bennett. Music by Dr. W. E. Thomas.
Dusk on the walls, and the twilight lingering,
Darken, yet lighten, our half-dimmed gaze;
While on the panels still bright with His fingering
God writes this legend in golden rays:
"Through hardship to glory"—Mt. Albert, create us
Such that our honour may live evermore!
And these be our thoughts, when in years that await us,
We shall look back to the motto of yore:
Young yet thou art, and young is our loyalty,
Not yet are sacred thy walls with our fame;
But when the years will have given thee royalty,
Then shall be hailed, with all honour, thy name.
Grant with the days, then, Mt. Albert, a reverence
Springing from duty but vital with love:
That, in the ending, there be not a severance
Torn in the pattern thine own hands wove.

(B) Part Song—"O Peaceful Night" (German) The School Choir

5. Elocution—"Jules at the Phone" (West) T. C. Dugmore

6. Musical Varieties Variety Band and the School

7. Song—"The Mighty Deep" (Jude) Basses of the School Choir

8. Dramatic Selection—Scenes from "David Copperfield" (Dickens) Pupils

9. Chorus—"Casey, the Fiddler" (Hadyn Wood) The School

10. Concerted Recitation—"The Night Wind" (Field) Members of Junior III. A.

11. Revue—"Camping at Kaipara" (J. W. Bailey) Pupils

12. Instrumental Selection—"The Troubadour" (Laurendeau) Pupils (Cornet Solo by J. G. Parry)

13. Chorus—"The Leader of the Town Brass Band" (Longstaffe) The School

14. Dramatic Selection—"Caught by the Waves" Pupils

15. Part Song—"Saviour, Thy Children Keep" (Sullivan) School Choir

16. Interlude—"Pseudo Masters of the School" Pupils

17. Chorus—"Time to Go" (Sanderson) The School

Lighting Effects arranged by Mr. J. W. Bailey.
Permanent Wave Apparatus kindly lent by R. Eagleton.
Hairdresser and Wigmaker.

BUNNERS PRINTING WORKS

The last year that four verses were sung was 1942. In the *Calendar and School List* for term 2 and 3 for that year the sixth verse was also sung. It goes

“Young yet thou art and young is our loyalty,
Not yet are sacred thy walls with our fame;
But when the years will have given thee royalty,
Then shall be hailed, with all honour, thy name”

The 1943 issues had today's three verses printed.

We now sing three verses, 1, 2 and 7. Verse 3 is OK but verses 4, 5 and 6 are less good and don't apply today.

If you are a new Year 9 boy or girl what would you make of the first verse? Not much. So what follows is an explanation of it for you.

First, you have to imagine what things were like in the early part of the year 1928. The Hall was finished and opened in 1926. The gold lettering was new and going back to 1922, so most panels would have no more than six names on them, and some would have no names at all. The names would be new and shiny, and the wood panels and battens would have looked new.

Second, the window glass is not the original. There were little panes of glass in metal frames.

Third, what is now a car-park on the west side of the Hall was gravel then. It got quite dusty in summer.

So, here is the first line again:

“Dusk on the walls and the twilight lingering,”

Dusk and twilight have the same meaning; that period between day and night which ‘lingers’ during the summer. This happens in New Zealand but doesn't happen in tropical places.

The second line is:

“Darken, yet lighten our half dimmed gaze;”

‘Darken’, because of the dusk/twilight, but what about ‘yet lighten’? In cartoons when someone has a ‘bright idea’ it is represented by a light bulb over a person's head. Jack Bennett had this light bulb moment as he saw something new in his ‘half dimmed gaze’. Dimmed is not pronounced in the usual way. To make the rhythm of the poetry work an extra syllable is needed, so we have dim-méd, with a stress on the letter ‘e’.

The last two lines go:

“While on the panels still bright with his fingering
God writes this legend in golden rays:”

The setting sun is shining through the west windows, there is dust in the air which makes the sun's rays visible. The rays would have been broken up by the little window panes in the metal frames. Bennett used a metaphor to explain what is going on. He sees the rays as God's fingers ‘writing the legend in golden rays’. The golden rays of the sun falling on the golden lettering on the panels.

The word legend has several meanings. First it means a story from ancient times, not always true, and sometimes changing, about a famous person or event, like the legends of King Arthur or Robin Hood. A modern meaning refers to a real-life modern person who is famous in sport or the media or for performing an heroic deed.

The other main meaning of legend refers to the names themselves. Also notice that the first verse ends in a colon, not a full-stop. The next three verses, which we don't sing, are also seen by Bennett as part of the legend too.

The second verse begins:

"Through hardship to glory, Mt Albert create us
Such that our honour may live evermore!"

Jack Bennett knew that the Latin motto, *Per Angusta Ad Augusta* could be translated as *Through Hardship to Glory*. Another translation could be *No Pain, No Gain*. The motto works best in Latin because just one letter is changed to give a very different meaning.

A motto is a short statement that helps unite a group or family, such as that of the United States Marine Corps, which is *Semper Fidelis*, meaning *Always Faithful*, which really means that they will always look after their comrades, no matter what.

Bennett calls on our School to 'create us' which here means to educate us. This can be a difficult process, but worth it, so that our 'honour will live evermore'. As we travel through life's journey we will live good and honourable lives and be able to cope with challenges.

The last two lines are:

"And these be our thoughts in the years that await us,
We shall look back to the motto of yore:"

As we get older we reach a point where we look back, to the days of 'yore'. Yore is an old-fashioned word now just used in poetry. It means 'back in the day'.

We don't sing the third verse, but there is a good line in it, which is:

"Things thou hast taught us, rich in thy treasure-truth,"

Which is about looking at the School as a treasure chest, full of good stuff to set us up for life.

The next three verses don't work so well in modern times.

The final verse begins:

"Grant with the days, then, Mt Albert, a reverence
Springing from duty but vital with love:"

Jack Bennett is asking, as the days pass, there will be a sense of 'reverence'. Reverence is an unusual word in regard to a school, rather than a religious service. He asks that this 'reverence' will grow out of duty, not in a dry solemn-faced way but vital (alive) with love. Alive with love. How good is that?

And finally:

"That in the ending there be not a severance
Torn in the pattern thine own hands wove."

Bennett uses a metaphor of woven fabric to represent the 'wholeness' of the School and asks that this fabric not be torn or severed: That is, while the School will evolve and change as society evolves and changes, it will always be true to its purpose, that is, it will always provide the best education and life experiences it can for the young people of the School for the whole time of its existence.

Mr Maurice Hall, the fourth Headmaster, visited Bennett in England. Jack Bennett expressed dismay that the poem he wrote as a boy was still being sung. Perhaps he thought that we sang it all, which would be dismaying.

In his last year at School Jack Bennett won a Lissie Rathbone Scholarship. His name is in the Hall in 1928 as the winner of the Scholarship.

Lissie Rathbone was the widow of William Rathbone, a wealthy merchant and land owner. Mrs Rathbone set up Scholarship for English one year and History the next. Mrs Rathbone died in 1918 and the Scholarship was first awarded in 1925. Today it is administered by Victoria University of Wellington, though students going to some other Universities can qualify.

Bennett went to what was Auckland University College and graduated with Honours in English. Dr Rebecca Hayward of The University of Auckland English Department wrote a significant paper on Bennett in 2005. She notes his friendship with the Rhodes Scholar James Bertram and his debt to lecturer Pip Arden, an outstanding scholar.

Bennett's friends became a sort of second family, as he was very conflicted about leaving his own family as he had won a Postgraduate Travelling Scholarship and moved to England and Merton College, Oxford. He won another first class degree. Dr Hayward notes:

"He then completed a DPhil at Oxford on further scholarships, unusual in those years when far fewer people did research degrees ... Bennett was then faced with trying to get a job. He had a temporary Junior Research Fellowship at Queen's [College]."

Dr Hayward continues:

"Bennett and his wife stayed in New York during the Second World War where Bennett directed the British Information Service. He used the time to explore the collections of the Metropolitan Museum and the Pierpont Morgan Library."

On his return to Oxford he was made a Fellow of Magdalen College. He wrote several books on Chaucer and became the editor of the scholarly journal *Medium Ævum*. Always a spiritual person he converted to Catholicism. He was a member of the Inklings, an informal literary group that included those other deeply religious and well-known figures, C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien.

When Lewis died in 1964 Bennett moved to Cambridge and took up Lewis' Chair as Professor of Medieval and Renaissance English. His Inaugural Lecture was entitled *The Humane Medievalist*. He did some of his best work at Cambridge. He was never in robust health and did not live to see his seventieth birthday.

An obituary in *The Times* stated that:

"... his death robs the country of one of its most distinguished literary medievalists."

His friend from his Auckland student days, James Bertram said of him:

"... his wide learning and luminous appreciation of Chaucer, Langland, Malory and other writers helped to extend the modern revaluation of the Middle Ages". This was published in *The New Zealand Listener*, 7 March 1981.

In a tribute to him by Professor Douglas Gray in *Medium Ævum* Vol 2, No 2, 1981 Gray said:

"Jack was a marvelously entertaining companion, endlessly inventive in conversation, spontaneously witty."

And:

"Jack was a man who inspired enormous affection in that large and heterogeneous crowd of those who were proud to call themselves his friends. He was totally without venom, and, I think without enemies."

Bennett was on his way to New Zealand to stay with friends in Coromandel. He did not make it.

Bertram again:

“In Los Angeles, tired from the plane, he went early to bed, and did not wake again in this world.”

Jack Arthur Walter Bennett, a clever Brethren boy from George Street, Kingsland became an eminent scholar.

He is buried with his wife Gwyneth, in the Assention Parish Burial Ground, Cambridge, England.

Brian Murphy