

A Pen Portrait of Tom Hosford

by Trevor Roycroft

Tom Hosford: An Unforgettable Schoolmaster.

Two generations of West Cork scholars owe a debt of gratitude to Tom which, because difficult to discharge, should be all the more readily admitted. For, from amongst his former pupils – and they include at least one bishop, and the President of a major Protestant denomination – there are, scattered throughout the world today, prides of parsons, bevvies of bankers, crowds of civil servants, flushes of farmers, tribes of teachers, harems of housewives and piles of plodders who are indebted to Tom for almost their entire scholastic education.

A Character

Tom was an original, Dickensian to a degree, who deserves a place of his own in literature. Physically a big man, tall and broad, his bulk was accentuated by the fawn-coloured pepper-and-salt tweed which he invariably wore. His sole concession to sartorial liberalism was an infrequent change to the more conventional long trousers, from the knickerbockers and woollen stockings which formed his staple dress. But, then, he was an inveterate cyclist, a centaur - if one can be centaur on pneumatic tyres – man and machine

blending into an upright rigidity of propulsive motion. His heavy and ragged moustache partially concealed the humour of his lips, but the uncontrollable liveliness of his eyes was blatantly expressive of anger and amusement alike.

Tom, despite his brains and vast and comprehensive knowledge, despite those towering passions, real or simulated, in which he gave expression to the semblance of ogreish qualities which he in no wise possessed, was a modest and retiring man. His education, which was local, he augmented by his own efforts and perseverance, and became a Master of Arts at Trinity College.

His school, which, as I have said, produced members of many recognised professions as well as of several which it would be kinder not to mention - catered for ages between ten or eleven and University standard and I do not mean to Matriculation only, but as close to degree work as the University would allow without actual attendance at lectures. It numbered up to thirty or forty pupils of both sexes, and was domiciled under one roof in a long low schoolroom, the property of the Methodist Church.

Tom's earlier class met before seven a.m. and every morning, winter and summer alike, found him arriving well ahead of that hour. He would light a reluctant fire in each of the two pitifully inadequate grates, and would be blowing on his fingers and stamping up and down the room when the first pupil arrived. His lunch he carried with him, a few sandwiches and a



Tom Hosford's School

Included in the picture are Rowena Camier (2nd Row, 3rd from left) and Trevor Roycroft (3rd Row, 4th from left)

flask, and he would not leave the school room again until almost five of an evening, and then only to cycle to his home outside the town.

Early school lasted until after eight and, following a breakfast break of about half an hour, resumed again at nine. From then on, it would be anybody's guess; the lucky were released soon after two, but those who were ill prepared or unfortunate might find themselves detained until well on in the afternoon, by which time Tom would be engaged with his University Students.

The dénouement to every unsuccessful examination was the word "Retire" which he varied, according to mood, with "Go down" or "Wend your way towards the rear" - an instruction which foretold a period of detention and re-examination. And he was a lucky pupil whose book did not reach his desk before him. Is it any wonder that stories about Tom should have been legion, or that many of them should have been apocryphal? For the truth of one I can vouch. When failing eyesight at last compelled him to seek the aid of spectacles, he refused, with characteristic stubbornness, to see an oculist. "Go up," he said to the boy who happened to be nearest. "Go up to the Medical Hall and get me pair of glasses. Try them on yourself and if they'll do, bring them down." I might add that Tom was totally blind for some time before his death!

His service to the community cut across all religious, social and economic barriers and every creed and class in the neighbourhood was represented in his

school. His fees were infinitesimal, and, in cases of want, have been known to be non-existent - yet he left a considerable sum of money when he died. That he did so was due neither to parsimony nor to greed but to his utter self denial and self neglect in the cause of his profession.

If, in the Celestial Mansions, there is set aside a room for Further Education, then I am convinced that Tom waits there to gather around him, once again, those of his former pupils who have escaped the damnation to which he so frequently consigned them.

An excerpt from Trevor Roycroft's book "Dearest Beth. The story of an Anglo-Irish Family." (yet to be published).