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Devon, Pennsylvania

THE YOUNG LADIES' SCHOOL AT ST. LEONARDS  
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Part II Non-Academic Aspects

Source #2 (Winter 1971) carried an account of the state of girls' education in England at the time when Cornelia arrived there. This article begins a critical evaluation of her school at St. Leonards in the light of that account. The sources on which the evaluation draws (chiefly) are the SHCJ records of the school (manuscript volumes from the Mayfield archives numbered M6 to M16) set side by side with Reports Issued by the Schools Inquiry Commission on the Education of Girls, 1869 (referred to throughout as SIC, generally with the name of the particular commissioner reporting as well as volume and page). St. Leonards was not itself subjected to the commission's inquiry.

The boarding school at St. Leonards was not the only educational work on the site. In the parlance of the day it was called a school for Young Ladies, or more technically, a Highest school to distinguish it from a Middle school, one of which existed there for a number of years. The Highest school was from the beginning quite distinct from the other establishments. The prospectus by Bishop Wiseman makes this clear:

The internal arrangements of the Convent of All Souls provide every comfort for the Pupils, afford ample space, well-enclosed, for exercise and recreation, and keep them completely separated from the works of Charity which form part of the duties of the Community. The Poor Schools, Orphanage and Training Schools for schoolmistresses, are carried on in separate buildings, entirely removed from the Boarding School and Convent.<sup>1</sup>

To the 20th century ear attuned to the music of equality of opportunity and more or less conditioned to supposing this to be synonymous with comprehensive schools, this statement is a gross piece of snobbery and injustice. However, it faithfully reflects the class distinctions of the day, into

<sup>1</sup> Printed copy in Cornelia's COMMON PLACE BOOK, HCJ/R, p. 148(312).

which, as the commissioners would have agreed, Cornelia had to fit if any of her schools were to establish themselves.<sup>2</sup> In this article we shall discuss: buildings and equipment; health; recreation and holidays; acting; rules and religion.

*Buildings and Equipment*

The material conditions which a school tries to provide promote or impede its efficiency. The property at St. Leonards was attractive<sup>3</sup> but until Mr. Jones's death quarters must have been cramped since the nuns' wing was incomplete. However, in 1850 his library and the two adjoining rooms became part of the school; we see this in Cornelia's answer to a prefect's inquiry:

The two rooms are used for Studio, one for oils and the other as usual. Fire in the Studio only. The fire from the library warms the oil room.<sup>4</sup>

This sounds almost luxurious, but in 1857 the school journal records her sharply reproofing a class mistress whose room was not thought up to standard:

External want of order, ragged curtains, floors in need of painting, tables uneven and unsightly--general absence of beauty and order. (M 6:51)

If at the same time Cheltenham Ladies' College, still a private house, had to dispense with curtains wherever possible and its council hesitated to afford the principal a carving knife<sup>5</sup> it is not surprising that a nun class mistress should have been expected not only to mend curtains but even to paint a floor; and behind the reproof is the determination not to lose sight of ideals: beauty and order. Later we find her writing to Bishop Grant of beautiful and uncrowded dormitories (CC 12:22), and in 1860 she writes to him with satisfaction of the new school hall with its floor-to-ceiling paintings which Cornelia and the children did:

<sup>2</sup> See Source #2 (Winter 1971), p. 34.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed account see M. M. Therese Bisgood, Cornelia Connelly: a Study in Fidelity (London, 1963), pp. 117-119.

<sup>4</sup> Ms Ratio Studiorum (Mayfield Archives), p. 96.

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Raikes, Dorothea Beale of Cheltenham (London: Constable, 1908), p. 108.

It will serve beautifully [she says] for the recreation room and the Theatre (which we have had at the Training School only, for the last four years--much to the inconvenience of the Highest School), and the present recreation room will serve for a good refectory. (CC 12:32)

Numbers were creeping up. By 1863 there were at least thirty-two Young Ladies, perhaps fifty--lists are difficult to disentangle<sup>6</sup>--and evidently by degrees Cornelia was getting the "almighty wall," as Thring called school buildings, on her side. There were by 1860 as separate rooms, a library, studio, classrooms, school hall, refectory and dormitories. We cannot be sure that all these were used only for their high-sounding purposes, but there appears to have been a deliberate development of accommodation. This sets the school apart from those many boarding schools, which being established for private profit rather than for educational reasons, often confined themselves for so long as they existed to what could be done in a private house. The commissioners of 1869 commented on the general inadequacy of school buildings so rarely purpose-built (Fearon, SIC 7:388); schoolrooms were "often low and ill-ventilated" (Fitch, SIC 9:302); it was "very unusual to find a regular schoolroom built expressly for general work" (Hammond, SIC 8:492); only the occasional private boarding school had added "a fair-sized schoolroom or dormitory to the original building" (Fearon, SIC 7:388). "Everywhere else," says commissioner Bryce, "the school was held in a private house, in the different apartments of which, upstairs and downstairs, the various classes were gathered under governesses or masters" (SIC 9:795).

In the year when Cheltenham was so worried about its survival that it enlarged its schoolroom to accommodate all sixty-five day pupils at once so that the school need not incur the expense of an increase in staff,<sup>7</sup> Cornelia was in a quite different situation. Her pupils were boarders, and she thought of her new hall in terms of recreation space. We know from the Book of Studies (1863) that it was used for study as

<sup>6</sup> These numbers are calculated from the mark lists or prize lists for each class recorded in report books. In July 1862, 32 children received prizes. Gompertz (Life of CC/1922/7, p. 299) says that in 1863 there were 50 pupils, but I have been unable to verify this.

<sup>7</sup> Raikes, p. 120.

well, but not as the school room. When the majority of schools were still conducting lessons in groups in one great room (Miss Buss still had but one in 1871<sup>8</sup>), the St. Leonards children used separate rooms for each class:

At five minutes to nine . . . those who study . . . must bring down their study books, papers and copy-books into the school hall. . . . At nine and a half the children of each class go to their respective class rooms in order, with the mistress of their class.

(Book of Studies, p. 14)

By 1863 then, school buildings were good enough to be on the side of efficiency. So was equipment. We can quote again Mr. Bryce:

Even the absence of desks in which ink bottles are fixed, and where school books, papers and copy-books can be kept, as well as the want of a definite room where each class is habitually to assemble, helps to produce that irregularity and slovenliness which is so frequent a fault in girls' schools. (SIC 9:795)

This was a general comment. Mr. Fearon gives a particular example:

Occasionally . . . a classroom is supplied with nothing but a bench round the wall on which the pupils sit. . . . and if the pupils write at all, they do so on little scraps of paper held in the hands on a book or slate. (SIC 7:388)

Even ten years later than the Book of Studies, when in 1873 Miss Buss bought Swedish desks for her children she said "the peculiarity of the plan is that each pupil has a desk and seat to herself."<sup>9</sup> Cornelia's Book of Studies shows that each child had a desk in which she kept her own study books; there were both benches and chairs; classrooms had blackboards and were pleasant places, too: they might have growing plants in them, each had its neat timetable, and pictures hung upon the walls, good pictures (BS, pp. 4, 88). It is said that Cornelia once sent a picture up to the studio to be kept there partly "as an example of the most vile taste." There were dressing

<sup>8</sup> Ruby Margaret Scrimgeour, ed., The North London Collegiate School 1850-1950: a Hundred Years of Girls' Education (London, 1950), p. 47.

<sup>9</sup> Scrimgeour, p. 43

rooms; dormitories had personal drawer and cupboard space, and from another source<sup>10</sup> we know that each child had her own curtained bed. If it seems petty to insist on what we now take for granted in the least of schools, we have to remember that the commissioners commented on the lack of such convenience in any but the best schools.<sup>11</sup> In the questionnaire which they sent round to girls' proprietary schools they specifically asked such questions as: Has every scholar a separate bed? What provision is there of washing apparatus? Are there separate rooms for study? Is there anywhere for play in wet weather? Are the seats provided with backs? (SIC 2:164)

### Health

Josephine Kamm summarizes the general school picture as follows:

Inadequate food, insufficient warmth, lack of exercise, and the habit of tight-lacing all contribute to the poor health from which so many boarding schools suffered.<sup>12</sup>

How much of this was true of St. Leonards?

Tight-lacing: Miss Buss had very sensible ideas and advocated comfortable, loose-fitting clothes for her girls.<sup>13</sup> The children of St. Leonards wore loose tunics but these were overalls. As to stays and lacing, the records make no comment.

What of warmth? We know the library and the studio had fires in them; we know from the Book of Studies that one of the duties of the mistress of order was to see that rooms "are well-ventilated and warmed when necessary" (p. 88); and we know from a manuscript

<sup>10</sup> Oral statement by M. M. Wilfrid Mulgrew, born 1874.

<sup>11</sup> Fitch, SIC 9:302, and appendix VI, pp. 403-423, tell us: only two schools had special rooms for recreation, the others used the dining room or more usually the schoolroom; nine schools did not provide separate beds for pupils, four others did not provide them for sisters, and one charged extra for a separate bed, two guineas; eight schools said their benches had no backs, five said they had a mixture of backed and backless.

<sup>12</sup> Hope Deferred: Girls' Education in English History (London: Methuen, 1965), p. 148.

<sup>13</sup> Josephine Kamm, How Different from Us: a Biography of Miss Buss and Miss Beale (London: Bodley Head, 1958), p. 171.

appendix on rules for the children's refectory (Ratio, pp. 51-53) that "plates are to be warmed before the refectory fire," a homely touch which suggests that the children were neither frozen nor starved.

The same appendix, which appears to be aimed mostly at the cook whose good sense Cornelia seems to doubt, provides details about food. Everything is to be made as attractive as possible: tea and coffee are to be served hot; bread and butter are not to be cut too thick; toast can be buttered or dipped in dripping or dipped in hot bouillon. There is to be soup every day, "of good taste so that the children relish it"; meat every day except Friday; and it is important, says Cornelia, that

the dishes served to our pupils ought to be inviting rather than otherwise . . . for example, a calf's head is not to be served with the teeth grinning at one, nor a pig's ear with unsinged whiskers.

One hopes the advice was taken; a scribbled week's menu includes roast meat, stuffed mutton, boiled meat with dumplings, but no monsters. There were three meals a day, plus tea, and breakfast had something substantial like herring or porridge or bacon (M 16: 69). For high feast days, for one of which details are extant in an econome's diary, the Young Ladies had the pleasure of consuming ham and veal pies, chicken, tarts and tartlets, moulds of rice garnished with marmalade, blancmanges and jellies, fruit, cake and wine. This diet is far from the skimmed milk menus which Kamm describes<sup>14</sup> and which the commissioners were probing with their questions: How many meals a day are given to the boarders? Of what does each meal consist? Some of the answers to Mr. Fitch's questionnaire (SIC 9:403-423) reveal that a considerable number of schools offered, except for dinner, a diet of but slightly mitigated bread-and-butter; it appears for breakfast, luncheon, tea and supper, occasionally garnished with cheese or treacle. In one school, supper was an extra. In these institutions conditions do not seem to have changed very much from the expensive school described by Miss Beale, where children had a breakfast of bread and butter and weak coffee at 8 a.m., bread and jam at noon, dinner at 4 p.m. and tea at 8 p.m. Miss Beale was speaking in 1866, but the school, she said, "was existing to the

<sup>14</sup> Hope Deferred, p. 146.

end of the first half of the nineteenth century,"<sup>15</sup> i.e., when Cornelia was just beginning at St. Leonards.

What of exercise? By the popular standards of the day there was no lack of this. The commissioners however would not quite have agreed. They would like to have found in girls' schools more of organized outdoor games and physical training (Fearon, SIC 7:389-390). They objected to the inadequacy of a "walk or two round the square" (Stanton, SIC 7:74), or a promenade two by two during which one also learned French verbs (Fitch, SIC 9:299; Bryce, 9:818). They also objected to the genteel croquet as a languid game which encouraged lounging about (Fearon, SIC 7:390). Nor were calisthenics (included in the St. Leonards programme) considered a suitable substitute since they were an indoor exercise intended chiefly to improve deportment (Fitch 9:299). What was required was healthy outdoor exercise, and also, said Mr. Fearon, schools should provide their pupils "with games sufficiently violent to exercise thoroughly their bodies, and sufficiently difficult to divert their minds" (SIC, 7:390). He tabulated information from a hundred girls' schools. His ninth column is headed: "Number of different kinds of Physical Exercise in use other than walking abroad, croquet or dancing." Seventy schools wrote "None," and the rest recorded "Miscellaneous," which meant skipping rope, hoops, etc. One offered archery (7:564).

In the circular such questions were included as: How many hours a week are allowed for exercise? What are the usual games or bodily exercises? Is a teacher always present? Is there a gymnasium? The St. Leonards answer to these questions had they been asked would have met with only mixed approval. There was no gymnasium, but there was a large hall used for recreation; there was no swimming bath, but there was the sea in which they might bathe if they had their parents' permission (M 6:254), but this was not so adventurous as Miss Buss's "art of swimming" which was to begin very soon.<sup>16</sup> On holidays and Saturday afternoons groups went down to play on the beach (M 8:229); there were fields in which they were allowed to play (pace the hay and the cows /M 6:180/), which they certainly did, because some critic complained that education at St. Leonards seemed to consist of "running about the

<sup>15</sup> Dorothea Beale, "On the Education of Girls," Fraser's Magazine, October 1866, p. 518.

<sup>16</sup> How Different from Us, p. 136.

fields" (CC 12:53). "Other bodily exercises" included country rambles (M 10, February; M 8:218), mostly on holidays; dancing the polka at evening recreation (D 42:36), and occasionally on a Saturday afternoon riding hired donkeys round the grounds (M 10, April 1859). The school did not claim, as one did, that "chest expanders are used every morning" (SIC 9:417), and the timetable allowed for nothing called Exercise or Games; but from Monday to Friday there was recreation for half an hour after breakfast and tea, and for an hour after dinner and supper, and at the weekends there was rather more.<sup>17</sup> The Book of Studies makes clear that fresh air and physical exercise were thought an important part of recreation. It says, for instance, that during the half day's holiday allowed after the monthly examination, "if the weather permit part of it at least must be spent in exercise out of doors." Elsewhere it remarks that recreations may be otherwise spent only "when sufficient amount of exercise has been taken during the day." In a notebook Cornelia observes that she visited a town boarding school of forty girls all of whom were "more or less crooked!" (The underlining is hers.) She then adds an analysis of its daily allocation of time according to which twelve and a half hours were spent on school work, and "exercise in the open air, 1." Evidently she did not approve (CC 22:12). In other words, her school attached importance to healthy outdoor exercise, but had no conception of what we would now call organised physical education. On this score the commissioners would have considered it no better than the majority of its contemporaries, and Cornelia not so progressive as Miss Beale who was able to say to them, "We have a room specially fitted up with swings, etc." (SIC 5 /part 2/:740)

It looks then as if the school life at St. Leonards was in general conducive to good health. Possibly its academic programme made a slender contribution in this field, because for the second class (age sixteen or seventeen years) there was a course entitled "The Human Body" (BS, table at end). How or by whom this course was conducted is not on record; it comes, very oddly, under the heading of Object Lessons and was probably therefore unambitious to say the least. It is not very likely to have been a move in the direction which Miss Buss took so successfully a little later, when a doctor gave her first class a series of thirty-eight lectures on "The Structure of the Human Body with Applications to Health."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Book of Studies, p. 8, and various timetables in report books.

<sup>18</sup> Scrimgeour, p. 44.

We should add to all this that there appears to have been active in the school a particular and motherly care for the children. In Fraser's Magazine for June 1845 we have the following statement:

There are innumerable instances of girls having returned home with broken health or the seeds of disease, some . . . through the blindness and want of care in those who promised to watch over them with a mother's eyes.<sup>19</sup>

This was a prevalent fear which the 1849 prospectus already quoted attempts to allay by references to physical and moral training, to health and instruction.<sup>20</sup> This might have been merely the fashion of the time in school advertising, but with it we can set a statement of Cornelia's to the nuns, written somewhere between 1846 (at Derby) and 1855 and which shows her clear intentions:

The children have been too much coddled lately, getting tired for nothing, and encouraged in it by the Infirmary . . . though when anyone is really overfatigued, she is to be attended to with true charity.  
(COMMON PLACE BOOK, p. 24)

Again she writes that there is to be "motherly watchfulness over the children without self-seeking or coddling tenderness" (CPB, p. 18). The nuns were not to make "milk sops" of their charges, as she once put it,

<sup>19</sup> "An Inquiry into the State of Girls' Fashionable Schools," p. 705.

<sup>20</sup> The first paragraph of the prospectus runs:  
The want of a place of Catholic Education on the southern coast has long been felt. The health of many children requires the mild climate of this part of England during the winter, or the advantage of sea air and baths in the summer. The recent establishment of a Convent at St. Leonards by Religious devoted to the Education of Youth, offers to parents these advantages, united to those of a religious and accomplished education. This will relieve many parents of a double anxiety respecting the physical and moral training of their Children, by securing to them without sacrificing one to the other, health and instruction.  
(Written by Bishop Wiseman in 1849. CPB, p.148)

so children were not to stay in bed without permission (though they certainly sometimes did: witness the comic remark of the Italian teacher who noted: "All the children are very good and attentive; the only inconvenience is that very often they stop in bed, especially the two Charltons!"); they were expected to sit up straight and not loll "with the feet stretched out"; to join in general recreations and exercise out of doors; to take their afternoon tea standing (BS, pp. 9-15). Apparently everyone usually washed in cold water, because of one it is recorded that she be allowed sometimes to wash in hot. Other concessions were made if needed, for example, a child who used crutches was not allowed to abstain from meat and took porter twice a day; another who had a bad heel was to have it "bathed sometimes in salt water because she was inclined to contraction of the sinews"; two weaklings were wrapped up to the throat in flannel, and for everyone there was an infirmary to look after her and a dispensary available after 8 p.m. each day (M 16:92; 7:107). What special skill beyond motherly care and common sense, or what potions beyond something called herb-head, these two reassuring titles offered is nowhere revealed. Nevertheless Cornelia felt justified in telling Bishop Grant in 1860 that many had told her that "no children in a mass ever looked so healthy and so happy" (CC 12: 53), and into the rule for the prefect she wrote:

She shall watch over the health of all the children with maternal care, and if any are delicate she shall provide for them the necessary attention. (Par. 359)

Another prevalent fear about health was that too much study was not good for a young lady. We find Miss Beale combatting this in her 1866 article in Fraser's where she collects the opinions of doctors to the effect that the health of girls would improve if their minds were better developed. "Idleness and the want of a definite purpose in life," she said, "creates unhealthy ennui."<sup>21</sup> One of the commissioners wrote:

Want of well-regulated continuity in study is the cause of many of the present evils in the education of girls, and particularly of frequent failures in health. (Fearon, SIC 7:389)

Cornelia would have agreed with these two remarks. Her belief that happiness and hard work are closely connected,

<sup>21</sup> "On the Education of Girls," p. 512.

and that there must be a balance maintained between work and play, are clearly reflected in two statements. The first is to her niece Bella: "Knowledge is power and there is no use in going to sleep when active energy would make us all the more useful and happy"--underlining hers (CC 1:114a). The second is to Bishop Grant who had evidently been worried by rumours that the children were overworked:

I have told your Lordship that the Study in no way weighs upon the health of our children. On the contrary they have here five minutes recreation at the end of each hour and we attribute the unusual healthfulness of our children to the care taken not to overtax the body or mind, neither keeping them confined to their studies beyond the time allowed nor making a task of the studies. The pleasure they take in their occupations is the proof of their not being overtaxed. We have never had a case of ill health much less of death or consumption from Study.  
(CC 12:54)

#### *Recreation and Holidays*

A special section in the Book of Studies (p. 9) is devoted to this subject, and in the school journals and other Mss there are both detailed accounts and frequent references to how such times were spent. To the modern mind the allowance is rather oddly disposed over the year and its continual imposed organisation unrecrational.

There was only one long vacation of six to seven weeks in the summer when the children went home; the little vacations of Christmas, Easter and Whit being only a few days long<sup>22</sup> or possibly two weeks at Christmas, were often spent at school. Moreover we know from the record of 1859-60 (M 6:204), that even when the children returned from the official Christmas holiday (December 23 till January 8), classes did not begin till January 29--for what reason we explain below. In addition to this there were at least twelve whole holidays in the year of which nine were in honour of saints;

<sup>22</sup> Cornelia followed the custom of the day, but was also probably influenced by Jesuit practice. The Rev. T. Williams, headmaster of Mount St. Mary's, Derbyshire, reported his school's vacations as: 10 days at Christmas, 3 or 4 at Shrovetide, 3 at Whitsun, 7 at Easter, 6 weeks in summer. (SIC 5:229)

six half holidays in honour of saints, and a half holiday after every monthly examination; there were also Saturday afternoons and on ordinary school days the daily three hours already referred to. The Sunday ration seems to have varied with the years from three to five hours, but existing timetables are not always clear. Listed in this way school seems like mostly play and little work. How does the allowance compare with other schools?

The commissioners make clear that the average length vacation in a year was ten to twelve weeks (SIC 7:91; 8:66, 594), and the average weekly recreation allowance in the better schools between twenty and thirty hours. St. Leonards had about ten weeks vacation, twenty hours a week recreation plus a weekly half holiday. Its half holiday on the monthly examination day, its three weeks of holiday-at-school in January, its days off in honour of saints, were all extras to this; and its recreational spirit of Sundays (of which more below) was probably unusual; mid-Victorian protestant England favoured an unnatural gloom and piety for the sabbath.

How were periods of recreation and holidays spent? If one looks at the Book of Studies and at timetables, and if one remembers the continual interest the commissioners betray in whether or not recreation was always supervised, one might conclude that recreation was no recreation at all. The children had to "join in the games" or conversation of the age-group to which they belonged; the "strictest unity of amusement or employment must be maintained," and the allowed activities were laid down: drawing, working (by which was meant needlework), music, reading aloud (but only from approved recreation books). Further details may be gleaned however about these excitements from the school journals. After supper they played games, or they sang and danced--quadrilles, the lancers, the polka, the waltz. (Bishop Grant once wrote to Cornelia: "It is said that in one of your houses the pupils have been taught to waltz and dance the polka, as well as play whist. If you discover this to be true, stop it quietly" /D 42:36/. We do not know the rest of the story.) Once at least they had what they pleased to call a masquerade (M 8:215). One afternoon they had "bon-bons and talked and told tales (M 8:216). They quite often played backgammon, chess, cards (CPB, p. 143), cache-cache (M 10 March 1860). Books read aloud included Scott's Kenilworth, Waverley, The Fortunes of Nigel (M 14:1), slow going for modern youth but as good as

space travel a hundred years ago, and evidently reading aloud was enjoyed. We are told that one of the nuns

was a captivating reader and used to be sent to read in the School Hall whilst we were occupied with needlework; but she read too well, and the Prefect complained that instead of our being working listeners, we were gazing listeners. (D 73:244)

Once at least, on the Prince of Wales's wedding day, they had fireworks (M 8:216); very often they rehearsed charades (M 10 January 1959; CC 26:85); once they had a ventriloquist (M 16: 7 pages from the back7). Once a journal records:

Instead of their weekly walk they were allowed to see an Entertainment at the Assembly Rooms, consisting of Panoramic Views of the Places along the Southern and Western Coast of England. Sketches of our colonies in Australia, and illustrations of the principal events of the life of Lord Nelson concluding with two views of St. Peter's, Rome. The whole was very nice and instructive, though some comic songs were not altogether unobjectionable. The children were accompanied by their prefects.

(M 12:177)

At least once a bazaar was organized jointly by the training school students and the Young Ladies (M 10 April 1861); on several occasions they attended each other's plays (M 10 September 1859); once at least both sets played cache-cache with the Middle school (M 10 May 1859). Society might demand that they live in different buildings and even that they have their own partitions in church (CC 13:57), but sometimes they mingled in more heavenly fashion; and when it came to belonging to a private religious group, no barriers apparently were permitted: we find two Young Ladies becoming members of the Angels Sodality at the same time as four orphans (M 6:254).

To return to recreation: in spite of the apparent lack of freedom, which is part of the contemporary pattern rather than something peculiar to Cornelia's ideas, there seems to have been an atmosphere of happy ease. One of the students wrote:

It was always a delight to us to see her at any time, but to have her all to ourselves at recreation was the next best thing to a private conference. She joined in our games,

first with one set of girls, then with another. (D 74:426)

Her niece says: "We do have such jolly times when the nuns come up" (D 42:80). And Cornelia herself betrays the happy relationship which existed between her and the children in the following proclamation which she once put up:

Be it known unto you all, my well-beloved little and big darlings, that for very excellent reasons, all appertaining to your greater good, the Whit Tuesday Pic-nic will be transferred to the 21st of June.

N.B. No grumbling allowed!!!

You would not think of such a thing?

Oh No!

(D 42:114)

#### *Acting*

How were the days of holiday from the Epiphany to the end of January spent? In January 1858, Mrs. Barbara Charlton visited the school to decide whether or no to send her two daughters there. "We arrived," said she, "in the midst of holidays and plays,"<sup>23</sup> and had she arrived in any year from 1851 onwards<sup>24</sup> it would have been just the same. At first plays and performances were held over till Shrovetide (a less satisfactory arrangement one guesses from recorded complaints, because lessons and plays got mixed up together to the inevitable detriment of the lessons, some maintained<sup>25</sup>); apparently all pupils took part, Young Ladies, students, and Middle School children, each set having its own "night" (curtain up at 4:30 p.m., the handbills mostly say), and then being audience to the others (M 8:226; M 10 January 1958). Apart from themselves the only audience were parents and priests. There was usually a Shakespeare, an Italian play, a French one, and something for the little ones to act. The tone ran from high tragedy, through piety, to farce, and one of the rules was that no child might act in more than one English play (M 16 October 19, 1870); each January

<sup>23</sup> L. E. O. Charlton, ed., Recollections of a Northumbrian Lady 1811-1866: being the memoirs of Barbara Charlton (nee Tasburgh) (London: Cape, 1949), p. 231.

<sup>24</sup> Gompertz (1922), pp. 298-299; cf. D 74:305-6.

<sup>25</sup> Complaints and criticisms came from some of the nuns at a later date than this study covers. See M 16 (1876).

between four and six plays would be done, the aim each evening being to provide something serious followed by something light. Between 1851 and 1868 they did: Comus, Macbeth, Julius Caesar, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Hamlet, Lear, The Merchant of Venice, The Tempest; Athalie, L'Avare, Esther, Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme; Metastasio's Betulia Liberata; various less known tragedies such as Caius Gracchus and the Rose of Aragon by Sheridan Knowles, and Talfourd's Ion; a string of farces with titles like The Bashful Man, Caught by the Ears; dramatizations of Fabiola and Callista, of parts of The Lady of the Lake, Paradise Lost, Homer; dramas romantic in the full Gothic style such as Fridelin, and dramas pious like Le Martyrs de Sainte Eulalie, or Bishop Wiseman's Hidden Gem and his St. Ursula and the Shepherdesses of Bethlehem; the "babies" did Cinderella, Whittington and his Cat, Bibiche and Musette. The list is by no means complete because the printed programmes have not all survived. The point one would wish to make here is not that St. Leonards was necessarily doing more or better plays than other schools were, though given the general strictness of regime and the puritanical fear of this particular brand of "worldliness," this is perhaps likely; but rather that it chose to organize an educational form of recreation in a special way: three weeks of concentration on producing plays, taken out of what other schools would regard as regular term-time. Victorian families often indulged in amateur theatricals at home; one remembers the charades in Jane Eyre, and in Barbara Charlton's diary of only two years previous to her visit to St. Leonards there is an account of how at Hesleyside they gave a week over to theatricals to celebrate the passing of a local railway bill.<sup>26</sup> Cornelia was borrowing a society custom for the school world and for educational ends.

When Barbara arrived in 1858 she would have found them in the middle of Macbeth and a farce called the Irish Tiger. She remarks that she was "much pleased with what /she/ saw of Mrs. Connolly /sic/ and the nuns, who seemed not to have thrown off all common sense with their worldly raiment." Nuns and children must have been making costumes, painting scenery, moving furniture, rehearsing, with Cornelia in the center of it all. Since at that juncture the school had not yet acquired its new hall, preparations would have been under way in the training school.

<sup>26</sup> Charlton, p. 225.

"The stage was erected," says the journal of the year (1858), "in the Music Room against the wall which separates it from the Lecture Room which was used as a dressing room." Irrelevant and awkward objects like pictures and a Pieta and a gas-pipe are moved; two scenes are specially painted by Cornelia; dresses, made by children and nuns, are laid out in the dormitory. The whole is undertaken very thoroughly. As much as forty years later Miss Beale would not let members of Benson's Shakespeare company, which came to give Macbeth in the college, wear either make-up or theatrical costume, and the three witches stalked round a chair in full evening dress; but Cornelia had quite different notions; her children who were playing male parts actually wore bloomers outside their dress (history does not record exactly how this was done), and one gathers from the protests of some of the nuns about the effects of paint on youthful vanity that at least some make-up was worn. The point perhaps is that in contemporary society private theatricals were acceptable, but anything which savoured of professional acting inspired horror. Cornelia's letter to Bishop Grant already quoted, in which she refers to the new hall as being so very suitable for the theatre, shows that she thought the plays a serious contribution to school life, and that she had no intention of being forced to drop them by those who might consider the practice worldly. Mother M. Francis Bellasis, who had lived at St. Leonards during the sixties, wrote that Cornelia's chief reason for establishing the theatre was the opportunity it gave pupils to learn to know themselves, and teachers to see what there was in their characters to correct; there were also accidental goods: the "healthy mental food" provided by the plays "to take the place of endless chatter," and the fact that their moments were filled and ingenuity taxed by the need to make scenery and dresses (D 74:305). Her chief reason (learning to know themselves) could still be a valid one for giving drama a serious place in school and is often the justification offered for modern classroom drama without audience. Cornelia herself was always the inspiration of this work, a kind of workshop into which she drew everyone; and because the most important thing which the children had come to school to learn was that literally everything is done in and for God, she called it the Holy Child Theatre.

(To be continued in next SOURCE)