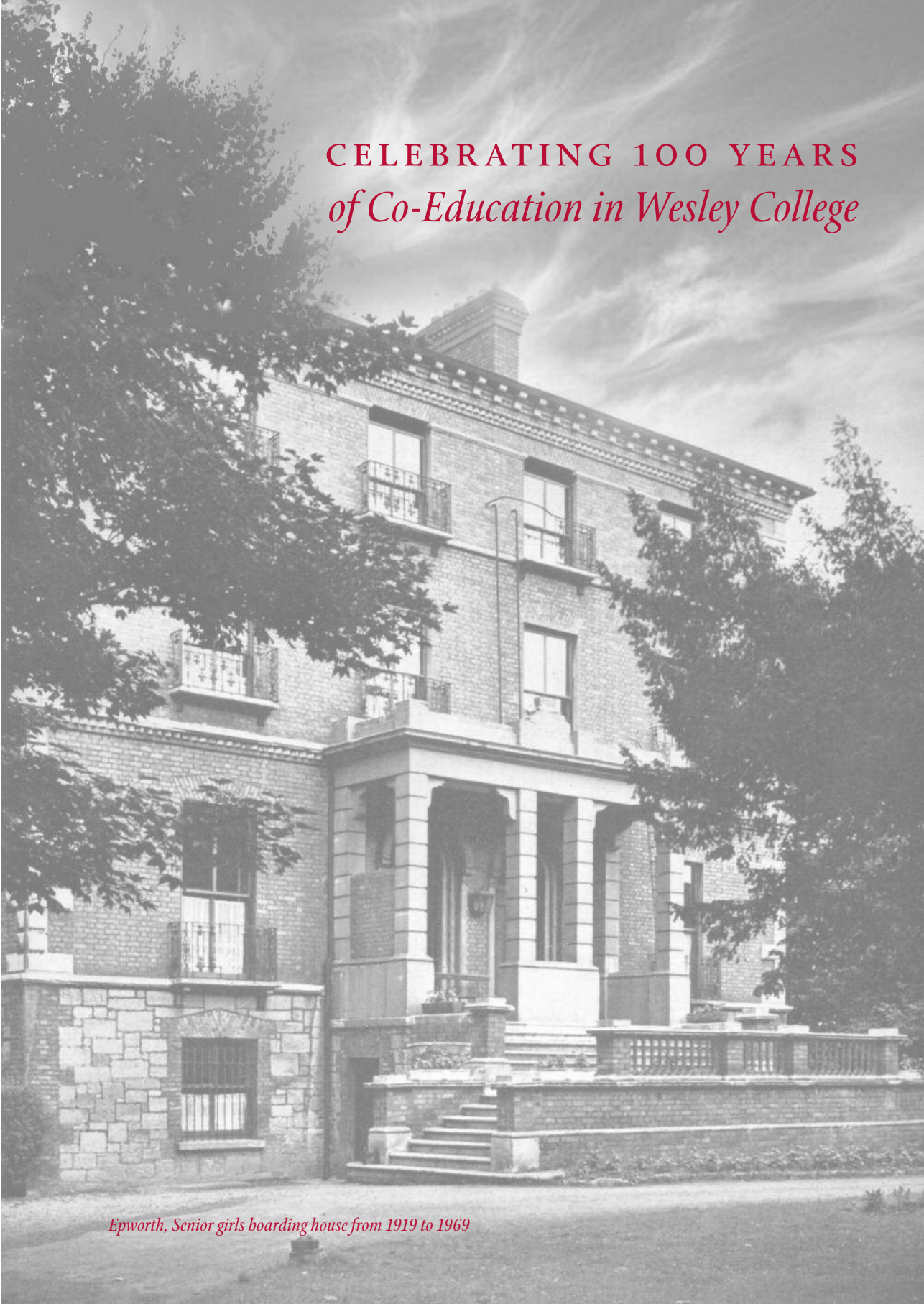


CELEBRATING 100 YEARS
of Co-Education in Wesley College



Epworth, Senior girls boarding house from 1919 to 1969

The Move to Co-Education

IN 1911 WESLEY COLLEGE became a pioneer of co-education amongst Protestant boarding and day schools when it accepted girls as pupils. There were smaller Protestant schools which were co-educational before 1911, such as Royal School Raphoe, Rainey Endowed Magherafelt and the Tate School Wexford. In fact in 1910 the Intermediate Education Board listed thirty six such establishments, which it called “mixed schools” (where both boys and girls sat the examinations). Most no longer exist, however – they were quite small, and were most probably co-educational for reason of numbers rather than idealism. Over a century earlier Irish Quakers had founded Friends School Lisburn (1774) and Newtown School in Waterford (1798) as co-educational schools, the Quaker ethos emphasising the inclusion and

Gym display, Tullamaine, 1923



equality of all, irrespective of gender. In later times Cork Grammar School for boys and Cork High School for girls amalgamated in the 1930s, and Sligo Grammar School merged with Sligo High School for girls in 1947. The multi-denominational Sutton Park School, which was founded in 1957, was the next school to embrace the idea, taking its philosophy from the “alternative” and “democratic” English school, Summerhill, but it was not until the 1970s that most of the other Protestant schools in the Republic such as The High School, The King’s Hospital, St. Andrews College, Kilkenny College and others followed suit. Today, one hundred years after Wesley’s innovative decision, there is no Protestant school in the country which started life as an all-male enclave that is not now co-educational. Protestant girls’ schools have generally amalgamated or closed down, though a couple of notable establishments, Alexandra College and Rathdown School, remain single-sex.

Front entrance of Epworth hall



Dr. Irwin, by all accounts an excellent and popular Principal from 1910 to 1945, did have the example of Wesley’s co-educational sister school, Methodist College Belfast, which first admitted girls shortly after its foundation in 1868. Having been a teacher in Wesley since 1900, his decision to move to co-education, supported by the Governors and Trustees, came immediately after he assumed the mantle of leadership. His reasons are similar to those used today when the subject is debated. His Prize Day speech in December 1911 includes these comments:

“After very careful consideration the Governors decided to open the doors of this college to girls. Co-education has been adopted in many countries with excellent results. All the new universities and colleges are co-educating and there is no objection whatever that makes itself heard. In Dublin, Oxford and Cambridge, women attend lectures with men. There is no doubt co-education cultivates greater mutual knowledge and respect and those best qualified to judge assert that



R A Dench (fourth from right, back row), father of renowned actress, Dame Judi Dench, 1911-12

the moral tone is higher than where boys and girls are educated separately. Co-education necessitates a mixed staff; this in itself is beneficial to a school, the influence of the lady teacher on the boy and of the gentleman on the girl, has each a special value of its own."

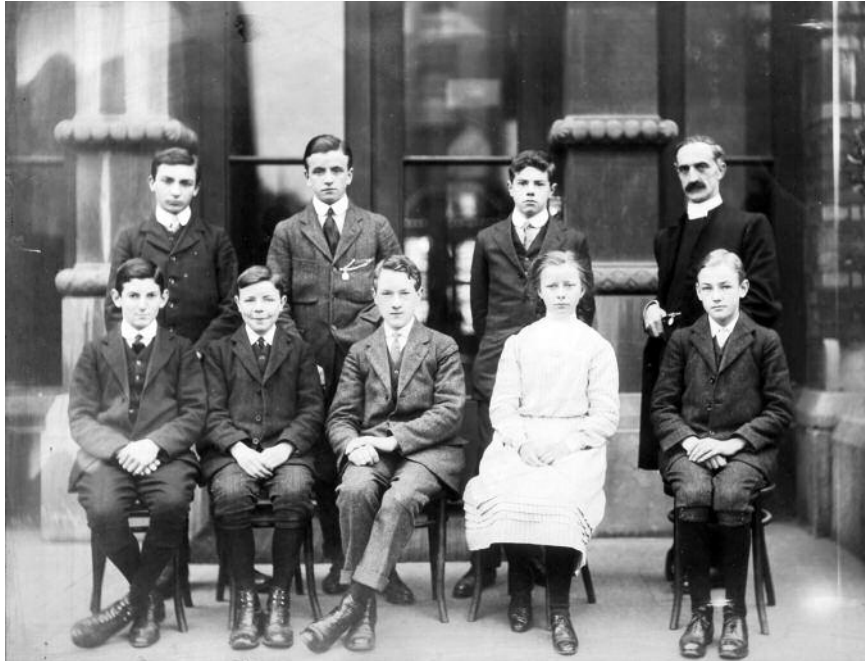
The opening of universities to women was a recent development and secondary and third level education for girls had to overcome widespread prejudices. As late as 1900 it was often thought to be a waste of money to give girls a higher education. Money should be spent on educating sons, with daughters taking up nursing or teaching if they did not succeed in winning husbands. However, girls sat the same papers as boys after the foundation of the Intermediate Education Board in 1878. Girls' schools successfully resisted any attempt to have separate papers, in order to show that a girl's intellectual ability was equal to boys'. There were three subjects in the Intermediate Board exams which were exclusive to girls, Botany, Music and Domestic Science. A clear 19th century discrimination against boys!

There was a small Methodist school for girls run by the Misses Yoakley in Harrington Street but there were few options for Protestant girls to go to a secondary school except for Alexandra College in Dublin and a few small boarding schools in Cork, Limerick and Derry. The possibility of parents sending their sons and daughters to the same school proved popular, especially for country families who needed a boarding option. However, the most eloquent argument for educating boys and girls together comes from Wesley's Principal, the Rev. Gerald Myles, himself an innovator, who masterminded the move from St. Stephen's Green to Ballinteer. In his Prize Day speech in 1956 he opines:

"On this hotly debated question of co-education versus segregation we have no doubts. We are giving equal emphasis to 'co' and 'educational'. We feel this is the natural order and that the balance

First hockey senior XI, 1911/12





Prizewinners and exhibitors, 1912

Junior school pupils, c. 1915



Wesley College 1st XI Senior Hockey team of 1923-24, first cup win

of good is on the side of co-education both while the pupils are at school and afterwards.” Like Milton, he said, “We have no respect for the fugitive and cloistered virtue”.

A recent report, looking at Irish education in the 1990s and commissioned by the Minister for Education and Science, concluded that girls from co-educational schools do better in the Leaving Certificate than any other category of pupil; better, that is, than girls from single-sex schools and better than boys from all schools. Perhaps the State Examinations Commission has unwittingly acknowledged this by printing the higher level papers on pink paper and the ordinary level on blue! The report also highlighted many of the other benefits of co-education, noting that pupils felt that it led to improved social and personal development. Both girls and boys said they were more self-



Tullamaine entrance, junior girl boarders, a kindergarten and preparatory school



Girls dining hall, 1930



Dramatic society, 1942



E. Bradshaw with Senior Cup, 1959

confident, better balanced and more equipped to make new friends than their counterparts in single-sex schools. It is noteworthy that Dr. Irwin and Wesley College came to these same conclusions one hundred years ago and that it took about another sixty years for so many others to follow.

THE FIRST GIRLS

At the start of term, September 1911, Wesley opened its doors to twenty one girls, six of them boarders. The school was fortunate that at that time there was a hostel at no. 110/111 St. Stephens Green West, beside the Unitarian Church, which catered for young Methodist men from the country. Called the “Epworth Club”, it was falling out of favour with its inmates who were being enticed by the prospect of finding “digs” instead. So instead of closing down, it became the first Epworth boarding house for Wesley girls. Epworth was the town in Lincolnshire in which John Wesley was born. The Wesley College Quarterly for December 1911 says surprisingly little about the new arrivals, except extending to them a

“Cead Mile Failte. We promise to be on our best behaviour”.

The first Epworth was like “a rabbit’s warren” and the morning line of girls, “dressed in long wide skirts, blouses of every colour and wide brimmed hats,” made its way over the road. It was only about 150 yards to the front gate of the school.

By 1918 this building was overflowing and Tullamaine was bought on Sussex Road (this space is now occupied by the Burlington Hotel). It became the second Epworth, but only for a year. Tullamaine became a home for Junior girl boarders and a kindergarten and preparatory school. The school bought another house on Winton Road, just off Appian Way (now Fitzwilliam Lawn Tennis Club) and this remained as the Epworth for Senior girl boarders until the school moved to Ballinteer in 1969. A notice was erected outside Tullamaine which announced that the premises was now a “Boarding School for Girls, Preparatory School for Boys”. With much ribald laughter coming from Dubs passing the new notice the Governors were forced to remove it fairly rapidly.

The number of girls in the school grew quickly and soon there were thirteen boarders and thirty five day girls. Although there was, quite naturally, an imbalance of the sexes, (there were one hundred and seventy five boys on the roll in 1911), a 50/50 split occurred gradually but quite naturally without the school having to organise this arrangement. This has wavered a little throughout the decades since but remains the case today. The closing of a Methodist Female Orphans School on Northbrook Road gave a boost to numbers in 1943. These girls were now to be educated in Wesley and paid for by the Methodist Orphan Education Fund. Up until the 1950s there were more boys in the senior classes as more girls than boys tended to leave after the Intermediate in 4th Year, or having finished the commercial or secretarial class that existed for about 25 years. The curriculum in this class was: English, French, Business Methods, Book-keeping, Domestic and Tots. Women's Lib had yet to make its mark! Experimental Science was a subject denied to girls until introduced by the Principal, Gerald Myles in 1948. This had been a major criticism of the curriculum as girls could not easily proceed to Medicine or Science in university. However, just up the road Diocesan Girls' School, which was to amalgamate with The High School, did not offer

Epworth Girls Gardening Club, 1948



'Mixed' dining, 1956



Leaving Cert to their girls until the 1960s. On a very positive note, for him, the author was in a French Leaving Certificate class of thirteen, of which he was the only male. That, sadly, was 1966.

Some of the first girls made their mark academically, and proved to all who needed proof, that co-education worked. Irene Storey won a prize of £3 for Mathematics and £2 for Modern Languages in the Intermediate exam in 1912. In 1914 Evelyn Darker won an Intermediate Exhibition in Modern Languages and in 1919 Norma Stephens achieved first place in Ireland in an Intermediate subject. Elizabeth Noble was the first Wesley girl to become a TCD Scholar (1919) and won a gold medal in Modern Literature. Gladys Gurd was also a TCD Scholar in 1926 and won a Gold Medal in Classics in 1928.

CO-EDUCATION IN PRACTICE

Despite the innovative and clearly successful experiment of educating secondary pupils of both sexes in the same classrooms, co-education was narrowly interpreted and strictly supervised. Some of the arrangements appear strange or even laughable today. A girls' Dining Hall was built in 1930, separate from the boys. Until then, girls did not even dine on the premises! There was no mixing at break times as girls

Sports day, Tullamaine, 1959



Girls swimming team, 1959





Deportment, sports day, 1957.

had to stay indoors in the Large School Room and talk politely in small groups while boys went out to the yard to fight and wear out their uniforms. If the weather was bad the girls had to retreat downstairs to a gloomy cloakroom, described rather extravagantly as a gym. The boys then occupied the Large School Room.

Girls and boys had separate Debating Societies. Subjects debated by the girls in 1936 included “Houses are Really Haunted”, “The World has Changed, not Progressed”, “Hitler is Justified in Seizing the Rhine” and “World War is Inevitable”. It would be interesting to know how these topics were argued! Perhaps the best subject was “The Ignorant derive as much Happiness from Life as do the Educated”. There were also separate Dramatic Groups. In the male version boys would play the role of a girl rather than have the real thing in a skirt. There were, however, the odd exceptions to this, usually at Prize Distributions, when a scene from Shakespeare would be performed. At the Prize Distribution in 1915, which was held in the Antient Concert Rooms in



Junior sports day, 1964.

Pearse Street, the “choruses of the choir, under Mr. Dench, were finely rendered and the casket scene from the Merchant of Venice was well done, the leading parts being taken by Miss Jones and Master Dench”. It is an interesting fact that the world would have been a poorer place if Wesley had not recently introduced co-education and Dame Judi Dench’s parents had not made their thespian connections on stage. Not only that, but the Choirmaster and Head of Music, Mr. Dench, was Dame Judi’s granddad.

Separate dining halls lasted into the 1950s and separate playgrounds until the 1960s, when girls blinked their way up the steps from their dingy bunker into the real world of slugs and snails and puppy dogs’ tails. When you consider that Trinity College did not permit women in the College after 6 pm until the late 1950s, it is easier to understand attitudes to segregation in a second level school in the same period. However, it is not being suggested that socialising was beyond the capabilities of Wesley pupils before these days of liberation. Day

pupils had, of course, far more freedom than boarders, but boarders had one afternoon of leave a week and the period between 3.00 and 5.30 pm on that day wasn't always spent browsing in Woolworths or Hodges Figgis. The apparently rigid control of pupils, epitomized by the daily lines, monitored by duty staff, that trudged from Epworth and Tullamaine (the Senior and Junior girls' boarding houses) and Burlington (the Junior boys' boarding house) into Stephen's Green every morning, and back at 3.00 pm was capable of being by-passed on leave days. In the 1960s, most Saturday nights had an activity that all, including day pupils, could attend. This was usually a film, debate or concert. These events have now, sadly, disappeared from the calendar. If a film was shown, there was, supposedly, a demarcation line at the back between male and female pupils. A recent President of the Past Pupils Union confesses to having broken this rule to be beside his future wife. However, it would be wrong to bemoan the disappearance of Saturday night activities as the school now offers a far wider range of extra curricular activities than was possible in the '60s. Times change.

Snowball fight between Tullamaine girls on the hockey pitch and junior by boarders from Burlington 1963



In an interview in an evening newspaper article entitled "Famous Schools of Ireland" in 1956, the famous Lady Warden of Epworth, Mary Margaret Smyth is quoted as saying:

"Being an Old Boy and Old Girl of the same school is quite a bond. But practically all of these attachments begin years after the boys and girls concerned have left Wesley. We keep them much too busy for such things while they are still here." This article is pasted in an impressive scrap book kept by a girl who missed little of the activities of the school between 1951 and 1957. She has, however, added her own take on the Lady Warden's piece. "Ha! Ha! Wishful thinking on Smithy's part," is appended. Mary Margaret was a fair and respected Lady Warden, despite enforcing rules for boarders which only permitted one bath per week and one hair wash a fortnight, along with an insistence on the wearing of "sensible" stockings.

SPORT AND MUSIC

In 1911 the girls were quickly into their stride on the hockey pitch and a Senior X1 was selected. Many of the first girls in the school were already Seniors. The team included two Becketts, Dorothy and Primrose. They were aunts of the playwright, Sam Beckett. The Leinster Cup was won for the first time in 1924 and the success was repeated in 1928, when three of the team were picked for the Leinster Schools XI. 1928 was a good year as the Senior tennis team also won the Leinster Cup, a success repeated in 1930.

Three poems were written and printed in the Quarterly, celebrating the victory in 1928. A couple of verses will suffice to paint the atmosphere:

*"Claremont Road is live with noise
Made by screeching girls and boys,
As players for battle now prepare.
'Play up, Wesley,' is the note*



Senior Choir winning Schools Choral Competition 1993

*From each strong and lusty throat,
And the streamers, red and blue, float through the air."*

*"Here's to the Hockey Cup!
Welcome to Wesley's walls.
Loudly we sing and round it sup
And cheer through Epworth's halls.
The Danish white and reds
To blue and red now yield;
This victory new lustre sheds
On Wesley's dragon shield."*

Winners of the Alice Yoakley Cup for Senior Choirs in the Feis Ceol in 2010



The Danish white and reds were Alexandra College, who succumbed to three second half goals. The tradition of success on the hockey field continued and to date Wesley have won the Senior Cup ten times and the more recent League, seven times. An undersized pitch and four tennis courts were laid out in Tullamaine. The hockey pitch was unique in having a tree growing on it in the corner beside the entrance gate and the groundsman's cottage. It was said that the Wesley right wing would always beat a visiting left back "around the tree". Nowadays, with two floodlit astro pitches and two practice areas, the facilities may be much better but not as amusing. Many past pupils went on to play for Old Wesley Ladies HC. This club existed from 1927 in the Leinster Senior League until it morphed into Hermes LHC in the 1960s.

Girls have played cricket with enthusiasm since the 1980s and have won the Leinster Senior Cup on six occasions.

Music has always been important in Wesley, but the involvement of the girls was much greater than that of the boys. The choir, consisting entirely of females, came first in the Department of Education choir exams in 1936 and 1943. A boys' choir was under consideration in 1939 but the "difficulties" could not be overcome! Boys eventually joined the choir in 1948. An orchestra existed in the '30s and '40s. In 1940 twelve girls and four boys entered competitions in the Feis Ceoil. The development of the Senior Choir eventually led to victory in the National Schools' Choir Competition in 1994 and in 2009 victory was achieved in the Alice Yoakley Cup for Senior Choirs in the Feis Ceoil. These triumphs are probably the most visible example of the success of co-education in the school.



Summer frock uniform in blue and white gingham, 1962

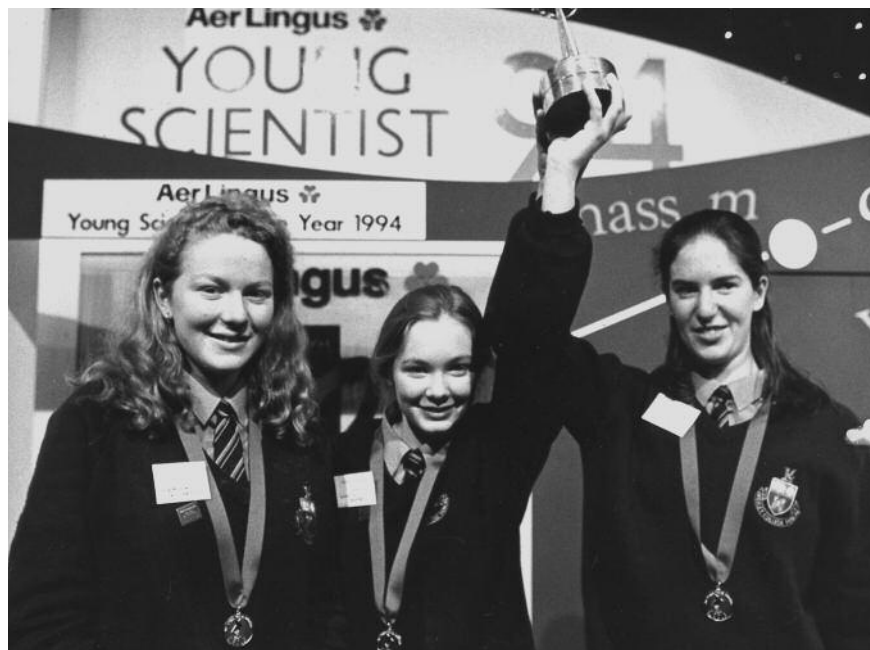


Students with Lifelines magazine, 19??



Debating team winners, 1983-84

Runners up of Young Scientist of the Year, 1994



A new girls' uniform was introduced in the late 1940s. It consisted of a red blouse, navy gym slip with red sash, a navy beret with WCD badge, black stockings and shoes, a navy tie with red and white stripes and a navy gaberdine. In the '60s the gym slips were replaced with skirts and a summer frock in blue and white gingham was introduced. It looked more like a tablecloth. The red blouse survives along with a light blue summer polo shirt.

THE COMMUNITY, STAFF AND PAST PUPILS

Boarding schools like Wesley in the past relied to a huge extent on the selfless talents and dedication of a small number of staff. Epworth, since 1915, has had three very long serving Lady Wardens. Miss Norah Alexander, an excellent English teacher as well, was in charge from 1915 to 1944. Miss Mary Margaret Smyth (1944 to 1964) also taught Latin and Miss Madeleine Cooke (1964 to 1998) also taught English and was Head of the History Department. Miss Maple Cooke was in charge of Junior Girls in Tullamaine for nearly forty years as well as being an inspirational teacher in charge of Form 1. All four gave their lives to the school and were basically on duty twenty four hours a day, doing two jobs for all three terms.

After 1911, with the rapid expansion in pupil numbers, the Principal and his family eventually had to vacate their extensive rooms on the second floor and went to live in a newly purchased house on Leeson Park, purchased in 1922. The male staff had a large commodious staff room looking south towards the Dublin mountains. It was perpetually polluted with cigarette smoke. The female staff were awarded Dr Irwin's old bathroom, with the bath thoughtfully covered in wood. In 1931 there was a majority of ladies on the staff. "Cookie Senior", as Maple Cooke was called when a young Madeleine Cooke joined the staff, had a strong aversion to smoking and alcohol. When describing her voyages around Europe during the summer holidays to her 1st Years, she prefaced her remarks with the comment that, "One day, on

your cigarette money, you will visit Paris/Rome/Barcelona etc". In other words, you will be able to travel on the money you save from not smoking. Very wise advice, and in a time when the dangers of smoking were only a vague rumour. She was also once seen, by the author, attacking a Guinness lorry with an umbrella outside Hartigan's in Lr. Leeson Street. The lorry was blocking the footpath as her line of Tullamaine girls was heading home.

An Old Girls' Union was launched in 1930. It was very active and perhaps not surprisingly, Miss Alexander was President until she retired in 1944, when she was succeeded by Miss Smyth. Money was raised for bursary funds to assist parents who could not afford the fees. It organised an annual dinner, a Shrove Tuesday pancake party, a summer outing, tennis and golf tournaments, coffee mornings and bring-and-buy sales. In 1962 the Union celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the admission of

1st XI winners of the Leinster Senior Cup, Leinster Senior League and the Kate Russell All-Ireland Trophy, 1982-83



girls with a Fork Supper in a new recreation hall that had recently been built in the grounds of Epworth. In 1988 the OGU and OBU amalgamated into one Past Pupils' Union. The attitude towards segregation of the sexes that had existed in the school throughout the first fifty years of co-education was finally laid to rest in the minds of past pupils

A WESLEY HERITAGE

*"Be strong, O Wesley boy,
Be blythe, O Wesley maiden.
Blythe and strong in hours of joy
And cheer the heavy laden.
For the weak and the friendless fight,
To young and old be tender.
Honour the King, uphold the right,
Keep Wesley's name for ever bright.
In word and deed defend her."*

This is the chorus of the school song, words by H L Doak, who was an ex-pupil and teacher of note. Probably first sung in 1917, the music, which was composed by Mr. Dench's successor as choirmaster, T H Weaving, is stirring as well as tuneful. It is interesting for a few reasons. Written during the Great War, the words reflect the grim mood of the times. The King was still being honoured until the 1950s. The line now reads "Honour the truth". However, modern school choirs have giggled at some of the words, without appreciating they were written at a depressing time for the school, with regular news of the deaths of past pupils at the front. The word "blythe" which Wesley girls are exhorted to live up to does cause particular amusement. Now generally spelt "blithe", it can refer to people who are joyous, glad and amiable but also carefree, casual and unconcerned. Undoubtedly the school's ethos over the last hundred years has been successful in producing the joyous and amiable rather than the carefree and unconcerned.



POSTSCRIPT

I HAVE CONCENTRATED almost exclusively on the period from 1911 to the 1960s. It is the story of co-education in Wesley, not the history of girls in Wesley. There is a subtle difference. Since the school moved to Ballinteer in 1969, co-education has become so integrated in the general life of the school and it is so much the norm nowadays, not just in Wesley, that it is hardly worth highlighting. All those with an interest in Wesley know what the school is like today and how the system works. How it has evolved to this is the subject of these pages. I have avoided names and stories about pupils, except for some in the very early years. Only a few outstanding members of staff who made a major contribution have been named. If I had started to highlight individuals it would have been a never-ending list and it would have been difficult to know who to put in and who to leave out. In a work of this length, lists and statistics need to be avoided



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