

George Dempsey

I.

A year has passed since George Dempsey was laid to rest in Glasnevin. It is no exaggeration to say that his old pupils felt on that sad day that they were not alone burying their former teacher, but that they were burying a piece of Belvedere itself. Other teachers came and went; boys in the nature of things changed continually; but Mr. Dempsey was there as long as one could remember. For a few months before his death he had ceased to fill a place on the College Staff; a venerable Cincinnati, he had withdrawn from the public gaze. But the interval between his retirement from Belvedere and his final exit from this world was, alas! so brief that it seems to us now as though he had died in harness. The average school life of a boy at a college such as Belvedere rarely exceeds five years, so that it may be said of Mr. Dempsey that six generations of Belvederians followed in sorrow his coffin to the grave.

It is more years than I care to think of since first I sat a pupil in Mr. Dempsey's class. I confess that I was not a little nervous on that occasion, for some boy had told me that he was "very sarcastic," and I had all a youngster's dread of

sarcasm. "The strap" was unpleasant, but it was easy to understand. The scolding, such as is the common experience of the youthful scholar who has "missed" his lesson, is likewise an expected, if uncomfortable, part of the day's work. Satirical remarks are a form of correction which pain more acutely than the familiar disciplines. It is true that Mr. Dempsey had a faculty of expressing himself satirically, but he never wounded. His nature was too genial, his heart too big, for him to derive the slightest pleasure from hurting the feelings of those whom he taught. He could be strict, stern even, if the necessity arose; it did so but seldom, however, for, as often happens in such circumstances, his boys responded to his methods, and made as honest an attempt as can be expected of boys to learn from him. Such was, at least, my experience in those, dim, distant days when I studied for the Intermediate.

Of Mr. Dempsey's success as a teacher there is no need now to speak. I would prefer, in these few words written *in memoriam*, to dwell on his qualities as a friend and a counsellor to the boys who sat under him. My

first visit to "Hamlet" was made at his advice, and I remember even now the thrill I experienced on that occasion when, gazing down from the Olympian heights of the Gaiety, I beheld my pre-

advise what books one should read, and, in like manner, to interest himself in the pursuits outside school of the pupils he was teaching. Many a Belvedere boy grown to man's estate sought, in



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GEORGE DEMPSEY

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ceptor seated in the stalls. I remember, also, the few words of discussion on the play and the performance, which we had before the class formally opened on the following day. Again, Mr. Dempsey was ready, always, to

after life, the sage advice of his former "master."

In later years my intimacy with Mr. Dempsey was renewed through the medium of the Belvedere College Union. We met at the Annual Dinner and at

other functions of a social character. We met frequently on the Committee, of which he was for some years a member. It is a treasured memory of mine how he told me one day, when some purely routine business had gathered us together, that he would not have journeyed so far across town only for the opportunity thus provided of chatting with myself and one or two others over bygone days and the events of the current hour.

To have been taught by George Dempsey was an education in more senses than one. It may well be that one learnt more from the man teaching than from the matter taught.

WILLIAM DAWSON.

II.

[We take the following appreciation of Mr. Dempsey from an account by Dr. E. T. Freeman of the time he spent at Belvedere.]

I was in the Senior House at Belvedere for five years from 1902, following in succession the programmes of the various Intermediate Grades.

At that time the late Mr. George Dempsey was teaching English Literature and History, and he early formed the opinion that I should win the medal offered each year for the best Essay written in the Examination in my Grade. . . . I failed to gain the medal on two occasions, being consoled by the second or third place and a special prize. The next year this happened again and I was feeling quite pleased

with myself when we assembled after September, but Mr. Dempsey expressed his disappointment that I had again failed him. I endeavoured to lay the blame on Arthur Cox, as he had made a habit of winning the medal in the Grade behind me each year, and it was highly improbable that two medals in the same subject would be won by the same school. Mr. Dempsey listened to this ingenious explanation and then said, with the well-known sibilant intake of breath: "I am afraid you are only a flash in the pan." This "mot" was seized upon by my contemporaries and was the origin of the name that stuck to me for the rest of my school-days and for many years afterwards.

Few of us who were privileged in being taught by George Dempsey will ever forget him. He was an excellent teacher and had the faculty of making his subject always interesting. His fund of anecdotes and illustrations and his oft-repeated "Day you see?" kept the wandering mind attentive and alert. The fact that he held attention and interest was proved by that crucial schoolboy test—his hour passed quickly. He was always frank and outspoken and had a fine sense of justice. To my knowledge he scarcely ever inflicted punishment or caused punishment to be inflicted, yet the order maintained was absolute and the laziest and most perverse of boys endeavoured to do his best.

EDWARD T. FREEMAN.

III.

It is more than thirty years ago since I first met George Dempsey and in the course of conversation my native county, Armagh, was mentioned. To my surprise he knew all about the famous battle of The Diamond and the annual fight at Scarva; could quote the words of "The Old Orange Flute," and discuss the then political situation without leading to a breach of the peace. I well remember the broad and sane view he took of ancient and modern Irish history made a great impression on me. We afterwards became fast friends and I learned to appreciate the sterling character of the man. His communication was Yea, Yea, or Nay, Nay; he was absolutely unselfish; meanness, the half-lie and deception of any kind he hated worse than mortal sin; like Saul of Tarsus, he suffered fools gladly, but with no ulterior motive.

He took a great interest in Rugby Football, especially in the School Cup Ties. When Belvedere won at Lansdowne Road it was a treat to hear him chaff the hard-working small boy begging to be allowed off his work on account of the victory—he understood him, loved him and was proud of him. I have often noticed the light that shone in the eyes of his old pupils when meeting him, and their affectionate enquiries about himself and their old schooldays. It is given to very few teachers to make such an

impression on their pupils, and only to those like George Dempsey who are pure in heart. Mr. Dempsey's success as a teacher will probably be written by others; but outside Belvedere College his opinions on educational matters were eagerly sought, and he was looked on as one of the leading authorities on his subject in Ireland. His death has left a gap in the lives of many which it will be hard to fill.

ALEXANDER E. DOWDS.

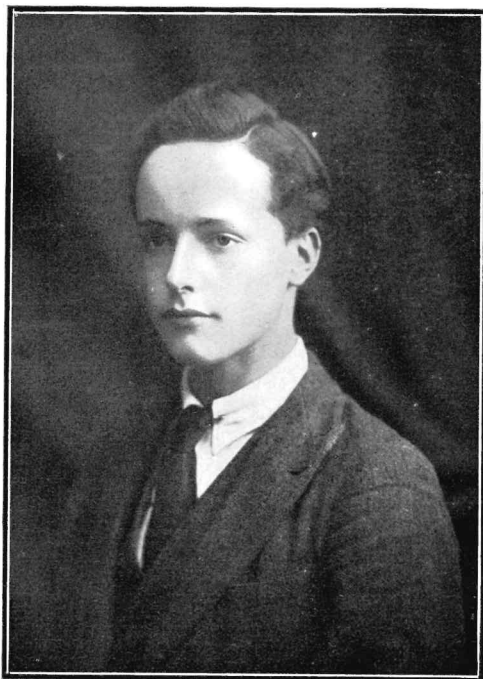


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