

Willoughby Public School: From the 'Bush' to the Suburbs.¹

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The origins of Willoughby Public School lie in the social, political and educational developments of nineteenth century New South Wales. The establishment of the school also reveals the significance of religious and local community action in an area of Sydney that was still rural but becoming suburban.

The nineteenth century was the age of establishing schools for all children. In an immigrant and colonial society of New South Wales those aged under 15 made up 40 per cent of the population by the 1860s. In Sydney, there were as many females as males and a rising level of marriages. New families soon spread into the suburbs with some crossing the harbour and making their way to the small still-rural settlement of Willoughby, which would become the first Sydney municipality north of the harbour in 1865. And with plans for roads and bridges came proposals to build communities through such bodies as churches and schools.

Since the 1820s, the colonial administration had supported with financial aid the efforts of the major religious denominations to provide schools for the 'coming generation' as a way to instruct in literacy and numeracy and form character and values. The growing importance of colonial family life reinforced parents' aspirations for their children through schooling and even on to the University of Sydney, which had been established in 1850.

In 1848, state administration of schools was created through a Denominational Schools Board to oversee aid to religious schools as well as a Board of National Education to promote and foster the development of new state schools which would offer a curriculum based on the 'National Education' system of Ireland. These new national schools were designed to teach children of all religions and were thus based on a curriculum and values of common Christianity, so signalling the early development of 'secular education' in New South Wales. And while the churches had often focussed on the urban areas, including the new settled areas along the foreshores of North Sydney, the Board of National Education soon sought to bring schools to remote and rural areas. In these ways, public education in New South Wales often began in the bush.

Even in the 1850s, settlement along the North Shore of the Harbour was sparse. The 'township' of St Leonard's was still more a rural village than an urban suburb. But the major churches had already established schools on the peninsular that led up from Lavender Bay. Of particular significance, the Church of England became noted for its educational efforts under the redoubtable Rev. Brainthwaite Clarke, Cambridge graduate, geologist, correspondent with Charles Darwin, headmaster of The King's School, and then rector of St Thomas North Sydney 1846-1871.² A sandstone school

¹ I thank Lyn Leslie for some preliminary discussion on this topic and for drawing my attention to the autobiography of Eliza Davies.

² See 'Clarke, William Branthwaite' *ADB* vol. 3

house was built in the grounds of St Thomas by 1850 (becoming the original home of Wenona girls' school in 1913).³

St Thomas in the mid nineteenth century brought together for worship parishioners from such spots as Kirribilli Point, Neutral Bay and Greenwich, walking by 'lovely flower-bordered bush tracks and by the banks of clean little streams' as remembered in 1906 by one of the congregation there for the consecration of the Church 50 years earlier.⁴ As Clarke himself also recalled, the St Thomas parish embraced an area of almost 232 square miles extending to Broken Bay – a 'walking district' of 'bush tracks'.⁵ There were few if any schools in this area. The Lane Cove Presbyterian School survived just two years from 1886 to 1868, with a mixed enrolment of religious faiths but generally low attendance.⁶

The area of nearby Willoughby was more isolated than St Leonard's, being truly part of the 'frontier' of the North Shore. Travel was difficult with Flat Rock Creek and its deep gulley still dividing the area from the settlement of St Leonards and its surrounding villages. It was, however, the combined efforts of the Protestant nonconformist Churches, led particularly by the Congregational Church, that helped to bring the idea of a school to Willoughby. Before even churches were built, there were 'meeting places' for worship which soon became associated with ways to instruct children in the ways of Christianity.

The Bush Missionary Society established a school in Willoughby in the early 1860s. Its first teacher was Eliza Davies, Scottish-born, immigrant and traveller in Australia and America, and convert to Baptism. Before coming to Willoughby she had been a governess and then a teacher in the Kiama district south of Wollongong. In her autobiography she recorded that she first visited Willoughby in early 1862, crossing over from Port Jackson, and coming inland over the rocky way from North Sydney. After spending a night in a bush hut she awoke to find a great many huts spread over a wide extent and recorded:

I saw dirty, ragged children. I asked the equally dirty mothers if they would like to send their children to school. Some said they had no school to send to; others said they had no clothes to wear; others that they had not money for school, and others asked me, 'What will ye gie me to send our children to school?' I found the people low, ignorant, vicious and drunken, living by stealing. They were liars and swearers; the fear of God was not before their eyes or did they regard the laws of man. They were so hidden away in the dense bush that few knew of their scattered village...I found a strong disinclination among them to have me settle in their midst. They preferred to have no school for their children, if it was at all likely to interfere with their vicious habits. However, I talked kindly to some of the mothers about their children, and told them of some of the advantages of education, and so I gained a promise of a few, that they would send their children to school if I should begin one.⁷

In the nineteenth century 'respectable' members of the educated middle class such as Eliza Davies often made harsh judgements on the uneducated 'lower orders' of society. Equally, a Christian education was often seen as the way to 'rescue'

³ Daphne Dobbyn, *A Sense of time past and future: A Short History of St Thomas Church North Sydney*, North Sydney, 1978, p. 18.

⁴ J.H. Watson, *A Short History of S. Thomas' Church North Sydney*, Sydney, 1923, p. 10.

⁵ Ibid. p. 16.

⁶ Lyn Leslie, 'Annie Bryson, Teacher', p. 3 (paper for Willoughby District Historical Society).

⁷ Eliza Davies, *The Story of an Earnest Life*, Cincinnati, Central Book Concern, 1881, (Bibliolife Reproduction) p. 436

children. In June 1862, Eliza Davies had opened a school with 18 children in a bush hut. Within six months she had the support of four leading citizens of the district to forward an application to the Board of National Education for the support of a 'non vested national school' whereby the Board would provide funds for a teacher's salary and also books on condition that a building had been established and a teacher appointed. There had to be a guarantee of 30 students in daily average attendance. Significantly each of the four petitioners supporting the school represented the major religious denominations – James Reid (Presbyterian), Thomas McClelland (Church of England), Richard Johnson (Wesleyan) and William Mason (Roman Catholic).⁸

Of those four citizens, at least three later signed the petition for incorporation of North Willoughby municipality, namely Reid, McClelland and Johnson, and two became active in early affairs of the new municipality of Willoughby. Irish-born Reid had settled at Lane Cove after arriving in 1840. By 1854, he had purchased two lots in Sydney Street from the William Lithgow Estate. Father of 12 children, he was also a supporter of the development of the district, proposing at the first meeting of Council the erection of a bridge over Flat Rock Creek.⁹ McClelland was also born in Ireland, arriving in Sydney as a young man in 1842. By 1858, he had land fronting what is now McClelland Street, between High Street and Warrane Road, probably for an orchard and small farm. He was also one of the petitioners for incorporation of the municipality and was elected to the first council, although he was soon replaced.¹⁰ In the minds of these settlers at least, a school for children of all faiths was a major way of forming minds, morals and values just as the new council was designed to encourage development of roads and bridges. A school supported by the government was a way also of bringing the community together as was already occurring in rural districts and hamlets across New South Wales.

Now aged 38, Eliza Davies was crucial to much of the support for the school. Before coming to Willoughby she had developed social contacts and networks with some of the elite of Sydney. Within a short period she developed a close association with William Wilkins the secretary to the Board of Education and the most influential administrator promoting the cause of 'public education' in New South Wales. In August 1863, Eliza Davies wrote to Wilkins pointing out that a 'School House' at North Sydney (as the school was then known) had been erected through 'subscriptions obtained by my efforts'. She now requested that the Board grant as a subscription 'twelve iron desk standards' similar to those in the 'Model School' at Fort Street training school for teachers. She also pointed out that the area had no other school and the residents required instruction. And again she emphasised how so many of those in the area were still rough bush settlers. 'In fact although so near Sydney poverty and ignorance prevail to a great extent it is as destitute of the means of education as places in the remote interior'.¹¹

The new school building was established on two acres at the corner of Mowbray Road and Penshurst Street, with a grant from William Lithgow who owned an extensive estate of 600 acres spreading across much of Willoughby, Chatswood

⁸ Board of National Education, Miscellaneous Letters received, 1848-66, NSW State Records, NRS 613, 1/420-21 (Reel 4022)

⁹ Esther Leslie and Jean Michaelides, *Willoughby: the Suburb and its People*, Sydney: Bicentennial Community Committee, 1988, p. 212.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 22.

¹¹ Board of National Education, Miscellaneous Letters Received Mar 1863-Nov. 1863, State Records of New South Wales, 1/422-23 (Reel 4023)

and Roseville. A graduate of Edinburgh University, Lithgow had extensive experience in government administration and politics in New South Wales. When he died in 1864 he left bequests to the University of Sydney and other institutions.¹² The land grant for a school at Willoughby was thus another part of his educational legacy.

J. Gardiner, a school inspector from the Board of Education, soon visited the school. Impressed by the school's educational standards, Gardiner suggested that Eliza Davies might become a teacher whom the Board employed. A firm Bible Baptist Christian, Eliza Davies still remained uncertain as to whether the schools under the Board of National Education allowed the teaching of the bible. As she recounted in her autobiography, 'I believed all the officials of the Board of Education were infidels, and they ignored the Bible in schools, and I could not get along without it'.¹³ But the local inspector soon reassured her that the 'Board of Education was composed of Christian gentlemen, members of different Churches'. Further reassurances came when she visited the central offices of the Board in Sydney and met William Wilkins who was 'courteous in the extreme'. She was now committed to the principles of common Protestant Christianity as well as the procedures of record keeping and efficiency that marked nineteenth century central state administration.¹⁴

The place of Willoughby as a state funded 'national' school was consolidated because of the actions of the Church of England and specifically St Thomas Church. The curate of St Thomas now sought to use the school for his Church choir to entertain the local people. Eliza Davies objected strongly, and even confronted the Rev. Clarke as well as seeking the support of William Wilkins, arguing that the school trustees 'could not convey the school property to the Church of England'. As she reminded Clarke, he had once refused to support her efforts to raise funds for the school and she had now sided with the Board of Education for 'I shall not turn traitor to those who gave me money for a public school'.¹⁵

Following the passage of the 1866 *Public Schools Act* a Council of Education was established to oversee the inspection and funding of all schools receiving government money. Increasingly, public schools spread throughout New South Wales, although the state-funded denominational schools at St Leonard's continued for more than another decade, including the single sex schools Anglican and Catholic schools associated with their local parishes. By 1878, in the city of Sydney and surrounding municipalities there were 71 schools under the Council of Education. Of these 26 were public schools and three provisional public schools, but there were still 42 denominational schools, including 20 Church of England, 16 Roman Catholic, two Presbyterian, two Wesleyan (Methodist) and one Jewish.¹⁶

In 1867, a Council inspector reported on Willoughby, which still remained the only public school on the North Shore. Already pupils had apparently come from neighbouring areas such as Lane Cove, Longueville, Burns Bay, Gore Hill and Roseville to attend what had become known as 'Mrs Davies' school'.¹⁷ There were now 39 pupils enrolled including 22 of Church of England faith, four Catholic, and four Presbyterian and nine of other or no stated religion. The inspector found:

¹² 'Lithgow, William (1784-1864)' *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 2 and Leslie and Michaelides, *Willoughby*, p. 207.

¹³ Davies, *The Story of an Earnest Life*, p. 455.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 456.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 473.

¹⁶ Council of Education, *Report for 1878*, p. 8.

¹⁷ Leslie and Michaelides, *Willoughby*, p. 61

the material condition of premises is good...fully supplied with suitable apparatus and books' but while the children were 'punctual' they were 'not regular in attendance' (with only about half there each week). The 'tone of the school is pleasing' and the 'ordinary subjects are taught, and the duties of the school are performed with an earnestness, fidelity and considerable success. The pupils are making good progress.'¹⁸

Eliza Davies retired in 1869. By 1872, John McCord, later inspector of schools, had become head teacher, remaining at Willoughby until succeeded in 1874 by 'Major' Alex Gilchrist who would be at Willoughby until 1905.¹⁹ Unlike Eliza Davies, both were apparently trained in the ways of colonial public education which was becoming increasingly popular with parents. In 1873, the school had an enrolment of 73 students with an average weekly attendance of about 45. In formal enrolments girls outnumbered boys by 41 to 32, but at inspection there were only 28 girls compared to 33 boys. The brick school house was now too small and could not be 'properly or sufficiently furnished' with the teacher being required to 'manage four classes in an unsuitable room'.²⁰

By 1875, the school had moved to its present site of two acres of land donated by two of the original petitioners Reid and McClelland. The new stone school building opened in 1876.²¹ Two years later, the school (still formally known as North Sydney Public) had an enrolment of 91 while at St Leonard's the Church of England denominational school now had 117 students and the nearby Catholic school an enrolment of 186.²²

In 1880 the *Public Instruction Act* removed all aid to church schools and created the principles of 'free, compulsory and secular' instruction in local public schools administered by a new central Department of Education. Already a number of former denominational schools on the North Shore had been transformed into public schools. Thus the former Presbyterian School, associated with St Paul's Presbyterian Church at Lavender Bay, had been transferred to the Council of Education in 1874 and reopened on the corner of Miller Street and Blue Street. Known as 'Greenwoods' School, after its long serving principal Nimrod Greenwood, it became officially North Sydney Public School in 1910 and also the home for the development of public secondary and high school education, before moving to its present site at Crows Nest just near to St Thomas Church.²³

From the 1880s on, a new era began for public education on the North Shore. While the educational efforts of the Churches remained significant, and particularly those of the Catholic Church (which had condemned public schools as 'seed plots of vice and infidelity') the new Department of Education soon opened new schools, often at the behest of parents and community groups. And many of these were in the expanding suburbs of Sydney which were now extending to new areas while connected through transportation to the inner city. By 1887, the Department of

¹⁸ Council of Education, *Report for 1867*, p. 78.

¹⁹ Leslie and Michaelides, *Willoughby*, p. 62.

²⁰ Council of Education, *Report for 1873*, p. 148.

²¹ Leslie and Michaelides, *Willoughby*, p. 62.

²² Council of Education, *Report for 1878*, p. 37 and pp. 103-06.

²³ Fiona Hetherington, *Establishing a State Primary School (1930-1945): The History of North Sydney Public School*, B. Ed (Hons) Thesis, University of Sydney, 2001, pp. 27-49.

Education had agreed to establish a school at the former 'central township' now known as Naremburn.²⁴

As early as the late 1860s, Eliza Davies had claimed that 'a good school in the bush' had attracted 'men of moderate means' to Willoughby, being a more 'respectable class' than the 'original inhabitants'. Having built a house, they worked in the city as 'mechanics' during the week and joined their family at the weekend.²⁵ The construction of the new stone bridge over Flat Rock Creek in 1886 created more opportunities for settlement.

The era of public education in the emerging suburbs of the North Shore had arrived.

²⁴ *Naremburn Public School 1887-1987*, 1987.

²⁵ Davies, *The Story of an Earnest Life*, p. 491.