

THE AGE

BOOK REVIEW

FORT STREET - THE SCHOOL

BY RONALD S HORAN

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Michael Kirby*

Ronald S Horan, Fort Street - The School, Honeysett Publications, Sydney, 1990, 1-359, including Foreword by Sir Hermann Black, \$29.95 (hardback).

Fort Street School in Sydney is the oldest public school in Australia. It was established in 1849 as a "model school". It soon became the exemplar of the public education system which spread to the four corners of Australia in the late 19th century - schools "free, secular and compulsory". The primary audience for this institutional history will be the students and ex-students of the school. However, because of the influence of innovations commenced at Fort Street School upon the development of public education more generally, this book has a wider appeal and should reach a larger audience.

The author is a former modern languages master of the school, Mr Ronald Horan. He spent 36 years as a teacher at the school which he himself had attended as a student. In a very real sense, therefore, the school has become his life.

The beginnings of Fort Street go back to the earliest days of the New South Wales colony. There were no teachers for the children of the convicts. The earliest schools, patterned on those of England, reflected the fierce denominational controversies that accompanied European settlement of Australia. Perhaps it is not surprising that the colonial administrators therefore looked to the National Education Board of Ireland for a model for public schools which would be open to all classes of pupils.

Ultimately the first headmaster, William Wilkins, arrived in 1850. His wife had died in Adelaide, on the journey to Sydney. The couple had been put on a ship to Adelaide being assured that Sydney was but a "pleasant afternoon's ride" away. When, eventually, Wilkins arrived he was depressed and under-nourished. Yet he flung himself into the task of creating a new system of public education. Just for his

story, this book is worth reading.

The book is divided into decades of which Fort Street school has now seen 14. The early headmasters were stern disciplinarians with a ready use of the cane. The author recounts the measures taken by succeeding generations of schoolboys to reduce the sting of the cane, as by slipping a horsehair into it so that it would shatter in the master's hand, returning the pain to those who would inflict it.

Horan's book reveals the many features of Fort Street school which were unique when first tried. From the start girls were welcomed into the school. Until the girls and boys schools were separated for 60 years in 1916, the school offered education to both, though in strictly separate classrooms. The first Australian kindergarten modelled on the Prussian example, was established in 1856. The training school for the teachers needed in the expanding system of public education was established in the 1870s. Interestingly, it is revealed that one of the trainee teachers who spent time at Fort Street was Havelock Ellis, later to establish his fame in pioneering work on human sexuality - a subject taboo at school until very recent days. Manual training was introduced in the 1890s. Concerts also became a feature of school life at about that time. The school magazine was established before the First World War. The skills learned in producing it were soon to be used on the battlefields of Europe where many of the promising youth Australia perished. By the 1920s, an old boys and old girls union was established. The first president of the former was a brilliant young barrister, Herbert Vere Evatt. By the 1920s the list of famous students began to grow. Their influence in so many walks of life made membership of the "Fortian" company something of a mafia. They included Sir Douglas Mawson of the Antarctic, Sir Garfield Barwick, Sir John Kerr and the poet A D Hope.

Decade by decade, the author traces the innovations they tried. Soon after the first War, the school introduced the teaching of Japanese. German was revived after a decent interval. Play festivals became a regular feature of the life of the school. Former NSW Premier Neville Wran once said that his forensic and political ambitions were nurtured under the lights and greasepaint of the Fort Street annual play day.

The book is illustrated with sketches, including some specially commissioned by the author. They portray some of the notable students, such as Sir Edmund Barton, the first Prime Minister of Australia. They also illustrate the school buildings in their various stages of development. Views will differ about whether an archive of photographs would have been a more vivid illustration of the text. The production of the book by the prizewinning publishers is elegant and the layout is flawless.

In recent years, the notion of "selective" public schools for gifted students has fallen upon hard times. Teacher unions, educational bureaucrats and "experts" objected to the idea in principle. Yet the fundamental idea, far from being elitist, was always democratic. Such schools provided the best examples of excellence in public education. Their substantial dismantlement in recent years has been an obvious source of pain to the author. Yet now the position is being reversed once again. At least in New South Wales, more selective schools are being established. In the recent Federal election, Mr Hawke made the point that Australia must move from being the "lucky country" to the "clever country". Perhaps the best days of Fort Street school, the earliest flagship of public education in Australia, still lie ahead.

* President of the Court of Appeal of New South Wales. Fort Street High School 1951-1955.