Every Day’s A Schuil Day

By The Unreliable Narrator

William Stewart (1823–1906), “The Dominie”, Paisley Museum and Art Galleries

Education and Literature are old school friends. With buttoned-up blazer and responsible shoulders, Education sits at the front of class, passing to its peers the tools needed to navigate the world that loiters restlessly at the gates. Literature, that wild-eyed dreamer, lurks at the back of the room, scars the desk with secrets and stories, and breathes life into the lesson. An unlikely pair of pals, perhaps, but after weathering the years together each one offers the other some semblance of structure, a modicum of support. Over the quiet hum of the classroom you will often hear them, finishing each other’s sentences: Education provides the context, Literature the content, and onwards they go, gently guiding one another.

Much like its literature, a nation’s education reflects and is shaped by the society of which it is a part. Consequently, Scotland’s schools have morphed and meandered with the changing of the tides, breathing in and echoing back that which lies outwith the classroom walls. Unsurprisingly for a country into whose contours and curves religion has long nestled itself, written records report Scotland’s earliest-known education as ecclesiastical and the preserve of the church. And yet, the song came before the pen; when Scotland was still an overwhelmingly oral society its schools may well have been bardic, and thus

education in its infancy a literary chorus of poetry, music and stories.

Fast forward a few hundred years and Education began to make regular guest appearances in Literature's library, with Scottish school stories often evoking the era to which they belonged. Dominies and the democratic intellect emerged from the nineteenth-century strive for progress; forties fascism flavoured the formidable Jean Brodie and her blurring of education and indoctrination; and *Gregory's Girl* swept aside textbooks to teach a cinematic lesson to 1980s Scotland: football's only one of life's games – can't lose 'em all.

Fiction and film return time and again to the school setting, because a school is not just a building: it is, as teacher Iain Crichton Smith once wrote, 'a womb and a museum and a place of learning … a vast family, boisterous and protected'. Where better to fire up the writer's mind than among such multiplicity?

Perhaps this is why in schools we find the well-trodden trope of the Scottish split-self in conceivably its most common form: the teacher-by-day, writer-by-night, those who stand straight-backed at the blackboard in mornings then huddle blearily over typewriters by moonlight. Thankfully, if the extensive roll-call of Scotland's teacher-writers is anything to go by, a double life of this kind can be harmonious rather than haunting, and with good reason. The craft is different but the tools are the same; whether nation-building in the classroom or world-building on the page, teachers and writers rely on resilience, reflection, and creative communication.

In this new issue of *The Bottle Imp*, we timetable a literary lesson on Scotland's schools and teachers. Welcoming us into class is Emma Dymock, who examines the effect of the education system on two of Scotland's teacher-scrievers in '"The most exhausting of all ways to make a living": School Teaching and Education in the Life and Work of Sorley MacLean and Iain Crichton Smith'. Jamie Fairbairn tells a teacher's tale in 'Fae Tantallon tae TikTok: a decade o Scots at Schuil', and Linden Bicket compares notes on Miss Jean Brodie and Mr Alfred M.A. in 'George Friel, Muriel Spark, and "the music of what happens"'. David Alston lectures on the lessons of a life in 'Hugh Miller (1802–1856) and the Crucible of Childhood', while Ross Sayers reflects on lessons learnt in '*Sonny and Me*: Writing for YAs'. The final class of the day is led by Kaiyue He, who returns to Spark and hands out revision notes on 'Teaching Tyranny: The Crime of Miss Jean Brodie'. For after-school reading, *The Bottle Imp* library is brimming with book reviews, too.

Settle down, settle down! It’s your own time you’re wasting.

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