Nan Shepherd’s Schooldays

By Alison McCall

Aberdeen High School for Girls – also known as ‘McBain’s School’, after the headmaster, John McBain – started life in Little Belmont Street, in the building now known as The Old School House Pub. Having outgrown its original premises, in 1893 it moved to the former Mrs Elmslie’s Female Orphan Asylum, a magnificent building on a two-acre site in Albyn Place.

A print of the Orphan Girls’ Asylum, which became Aberdeen High School for Girls
[Source: Epsom & Ewell History Explorer]

The High School for Girls – which boasted science laboratories, an art room and a library – had a reputation for academic excellence. Many of its early pupils studied for the LLA, the Lady Literate in Arts degree, which was designed by St Andrews University as a degree that could be gained by women studying at home. When the University of Aberdeen first admitted women in 1892, High School girls were amongst the first female students.

The Former Pupils Club was founded in 1899 and flourished alongside the school. This meant that, at the start of the twentieth century, High School girls had both a first-rate school and a range of impressive role models. This was unusual for girls at the time.

Between 1885 and 1887, the school published a short-lived magazine, and, in 1902, the Former Pupils Annual Report started. The first issue of The Aberdeen High School for Girls' Magazine was published in October 1926. It was published biannually, in May and October. Produced by a committee of five, including the Headmistress, Lucy Ward, and Elizabeth (Beth) Barnett, a former pupil who was also Aberdeen's first female solicitor, it had two sections: the school section and the former pupils' section, each with their own editor, and five school representatives. One of the pupil representatives was Helena Mennie, later Helena Mennie Shire, who was to have a notable academic and literary career.

The Former Pupils' section of the May 1927 magazine was edited by Nan Shepherd, then a lecturer at Aberdeen College of Education, standing in for Miss Annie G. McIntosh. A former pupil of the school, Miss McIntosh was head of the English department at the High School, but absent in Italy, apparently convalescing from an illness.

The magazine included an article 'Considerations of an F.P. on hearing that the Present Pupils Enjoy Collaborating with the Grown-ups in Making a Magazine', a lively account of schoolgirl shenanigans twenty years earlier. It was signed simply 'N'.

The article narrated that High School schoolgirls of twenty years earlier had had a secret magazine, of which the author had retained a copy.

> *It never saw print. It was written, by the contributors, on version paper. A smudged and measly patch. But oh! The glorious freedom that we had, to say exactly what we liked and as we liked it! The wicked puns! The privacies of mockery! The audacious delights!*

All other articles in the magazine were signed by name, or by full initials. Only three items, the 'Recollections' and two poems, carried a single initial: 'N'. Who was 'N'? The author was a member of the Former Pupils Club, then numbering 1225 members, and had been a pupil at the High School twenty years previously, when the school roll stood at just above five hundred.

Cross-referencing the forty-nine members of the Former Pupils' Club whose first or surnames begin with N with the thirty-nine girls in the School registers 1905–10 whose first or surnames begin with N produced a shortlist of six

candidates. This was not an exact science, as some Nellies and Netties in one list were Helens and Janets in another. Nella Gordon, who also appeared in the school register as Annella Gordon, was Ann Isabella Gordon on her birth certificate and Ann in the 1901 census, and Nan Shepherd was Anna on her birth certificate, and in some of the registers. All possible Ns were included. Surnames beginning with N were at least immutable, but also rarer, and none were in the final shortlist. This shortlist of six comprised: Nellie Lees Brodie (born 1892), Ann Isabella (Nella) Gordon (born 1892), Nora Mary Atkins (born 1893), Anna (Nan) Shepherd (born 1893), Janet (Nita) S. Donaldson (born 1893), and Netty Margaret Lunan (born 1896).

In the article, 'N' reminisces about Latin lessons, a subject that only the top sets studied. If records remained, it might be possible to eliminate some of the six candidates, but there are no surviving records. We know, however, that Nan Shepherd and Netty Lunan were both in the Latin stream.

One final clue is contained in the article: the author describes the secret magazine as having been written in 'a fine, fruity flamboyant effulgence that it is my business in these latter days to disparage.' This suggests that the author is in a profession in 1927 in which writing style is important.

Astonishingly, this could apply to two of the Ns! Nan Shepherd, lecturer at Aberdeen Teacher Training College, or Netty Lunan, who studied English Language and Literature at Oxford and who was, in 1927, a lecturer in English at Neville's Cross College, Durham, later to become the College Principal. Of the remaining four, Nellie Brodie was a teacher of domestic science in England, and Nora Atkins was a teacher of Voice Production and Singing. Nella Gordon and Nita Donaldson were both married, respectively, to James Shirreffs in 1921 and George Wyllie in 1926, and neither had an occupation recorded on her marriage certificate.

Closer examination of the school records revealed that Lunan had been a pupil at Ashley Road School, Aberdeen until June 1908. The Ashley Road records indicate that she had transferred to the Central Higher Grade School. It appears that she spent at least a year at the Central School before transferring to the High School for Girls. This moves Netty Lunan further away from the 'twenty years' since the author of the piece had been a pupil.

There can be no real doubt, though, that the author of the piece was the magazine's editor, Nan Shepherd. The extensive trawling through the records merely ruled out the possibility that it could be anyone else. The use of the single 'N' suggests that readers needed no more than the editor's single initial to identify the author.

The article vividly recounts episodes from Shepherd's schooldays. She recalled a fad for knitting ties 'ridiculous contraptions in which you cast on so many stitches and cast them off again and pulled.' 'We knitted, some of them (I ought to regret to say) underneath the desk in … but no! even after twenty years I dare not divulge what class that was.' The girls recorded the number of such ties knitted in their magazine.

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The secret magazine contained some of Shepherd and her friends' early literary endeavours. 'And here is another poem – four octosyllabic lines. Into its brief compass are packed three puns, a reference to a recent joke made by our Latin master, his nickname, concealed (but the concealment was for metre, not from trepidation), and as a glorious finale another recent joke from the Latin class, made by Us.' Another poem excoriated a teacher: 'There was a teacher in those days whose taste in colours was unchaste and burning. We noted and reviled. We repeated with savage gusto for at least a month the poem that one of us wrote to

commemorate the colours.'

The workload at the High School was known to put pressure on the pupils, but the following account from the article suggests that the girls' minds were not always on their work.

> *It was that year or the one following that we formed a Secret Society within the class. We constituted ourselves a Guard of Honour to a favourite mistress. What precisely our activities were I have forgotten. This I remember, that we used to hover in the top corridor and drop flower petals on her head as she came upstairs. In the nature of things I do not think we could have indulged in that ploy very frequently; and in what other fashion we Guarded her I do not know. But certainly we wore badges. They were of blue silk, with an interlaced G.H. embroidered in gold (I was looking at mine only yesterday) and we wore them conspicuously on our blouses. One of our masters exhibited an unmanly curiosity to know what the letters stood for. "Girls' High?" We scoffed. "Got Husbands?" Our scorn was superb. We were homosexuals then.*

The Former Pupils section also includes two poems, both signed 'N'. The first is illustrated by one of Shepherd's High School classmates, Margaret (Madge) Young Mitchell who, in 1927, taught portraiture at Gray's School of Art, Aberdeen. It seems reasonable to assume that the poems were also by Shepherd.

> ***Daffidowndilly***
>
> *Daffidowndilly, O Daffidowndilly*
> *How do you come to be gay and gold?*
> *The bulb that you grew from was brown like a walnut,*
> *And we planted you deep in the dark brown mould.*
>
> *Daffidowndilly all shining and yellow,*
> *Are you a bit of the golden sun*
> *Caught by the wind as it tumbled from heaven*
> *And stuck on a daffodil bulb for fun?*
>
> ***February Flowers***
>
> *Impatient heart! –*

Scilla and aconite –
Pushing forthright
Out of the mould,
Blue from the start,
And gold.

Too eager to tarry
For leaf or for stature or
Weather secure;
Too live for the mould
Longer to carry,
Too sudden and starry
To hold.

This article gives a number of insights into Nan Shepherd's schooldays. That her time there remained an important part of her identity can be seen from her active membership of the Former Pupils Club, and her ongoing friendships with former schoolmates.

Although the High School took children from the age of five (and had a mixed-sex infants department), Nan Shepherd started school closer to home in West Cults in August 1898. Elementary education was both free and compulsory but post-elementary education was not. The High School was fee-paying, and entrance required a girl to pass the Scottish Education Board qualifying examination for entry into secondary school. Shepherd sat this exam in May 1905, won a £12 bursary, and enrolled at the High School in August. She travelled into school from Cults on the suburban train with her friend Elizabeth Hyde Campbell (Hydie) and her brother, Frank Shepherd who was a pupil at Robert Gordon's. As Madge Mitchell lived in West Cults, she was presumably also part of the group. The uniform comprised a dark skirt and white frilled blouse. Some individuality was clearly permitted as Shepherd and her fellow 'Guard of Honour' members openly wore the badges which they had embroidered. Whether they were able to wear their hand-knitted ties remains unknown.

Unfortunately the article does not name any of Shepherd's teachers. As many teachers, both current and previous, were members of the Former Pupils' Club, Shepherd knew that the magazine would be read by some of her former teachers.

Presumably the teacher whose taste in colours was reviled had long since retired or left, but Shepherd's reluctance to name the teacher in whose class she had surreptitiously knitted suggests that he or she was likely to read the article. There is no clue as to the subject taught by the 'favourite mistress' for whom Shepherd and her friends formed the 'Guard of Honour' nor the teacher who favoured 'unchaste' colours, and therefore it is impossible to hazard a guess at their identity.

Maths teacher Mr (later Dr) William L. Marr was probably the teacher referred to in the following anecdote:

> *There was an afternoon when a certain master (still happily active) found his class unduly exalted. I don't remember why – one cannot remember all the reasons for schoolgirl exaltation. At last he suggested in annoyance that we must have had "something to lunch."*
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> *"What's your special tipple, Miss —? XL?*
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> *She was doing algebra.*
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> *I wonder if he remembers what he answered!*

Dr Marr died aged 83 in 1953 and would have been 'still happily active' in 1927.

Miss McIntosh, for whom Shepherd stood in as editor in 1927, joined the staff as an English teacher in 1907. Had she replaced the newly married teacher to whom Shepherd and her friends sent the bacon? McIntosh does not appear to have taught Shepherd, whose subsequent English teacher was Miss Lucy Ward. Ward became headmistress of the High School on the retirement of John McBain in 1912, at which point McIntosh was promoted to head of English. When Ward retired in 1929, Nan Shepherd and Dr Mary Esslemont represented the 'younger generation' of her old girls at her presentation. In her speech, Shepherd said that she had been impressed by

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many forth equipped with the values that abide, the standards that do not shift.[1]

By the time Nan Shepherd was enrolled in the High School in August 1905 it already had an excellent academic reputation. The close relationship between the school and the Former Pupils Club meant that the girls also benefitted from the role models provided by previous pupils. The club was formed in 1899, and the first President was Mrs Lizzie Barnett. A teacher prior to her marriage, after she married she became involved in several good causes and published a number of pamphlets. Her daughter Elizabeth Barnett, Aberdeen's first female solicitor, was close in age to Shepherd, and was also on the magazine committee in 1927. Shepherd was also a close friend of Elizabeth's elder sister Euphemia, later Dr Euphemia Barnett, who lectured in botany alongside Shepherd, and for whom Shepherd wrote the obituary in the *Aberdeen University Review*.[2]

The Former Pupils Club had several special interest groups including a literary branch, founded by poets Bessie Craigmyle and Rachel Annand Taylor. Members of the Former Pupils' Club acted as examples and mentors to the pupils, and Shepherd in turn mentored pupils such as Helena Mennie (later Helena Mennie Shire).

Women, of course, did not have the vote during Shepherd's schooldays, but members of the Former Pupils' Club such as Clementina Esslemont and Bessie Craigmyle were both suffragists. Indeed, soon after Shepherd started at the High School, she could read in the local press of a Suffrage meeting held in the Music Hall in October 1908 at which both were on the platform party, and Craigmyle spoke.[3]

Nan Shepherd joined the Former Pupils' Club in the 1911/12 session and was an active member. By 1915/16 membership was at 398 ordinary members and fifty-five honorary members (teachers and former teachers). Members were scattered all over the world, and the magazine included tales of their adventures. The Personalia column in the magazine attests to the calibre of its former pupils. One Former Pupil, Mrs A. B. Reid (Mary Fraser) was, in 1927, in addition to being the President of the South African branch of the Former Pupils' Club, Mayoress of Cape Town, and her life in South Africa was the subject of regular reports.

In 1932 a Former Pupil blazer was introduced in green, brown and yellow

stripes, made to order by Esslemont and McIntosh. Did Shepherd purchase one?

Not only did Shepherd not mention any teachers by name, she did not name her friends. Who were the other two 'exultant conspirators' who posted a rasher of bacon to their former teacher? Who were the members of the Guard of Honour? Who were the co-authors of the magazine?

Many of the friends Shepherd made at the High School became lifelong friends, friendships consolidated by the Former Pupils Club. Elizabeth and Euphemia Barnett have been mentioned already, as has Madge Y Mitchell. Another prominent family were the Esslemonts, the daughters of M.P. George Esslemont, and Clementina, another President of the Former Pupils' Club. Mary (later Dr Mary) and Clara were older than Shepherd, Anna and Catherine younger.

Nan Shepherd's schooldays, whilst academically rigorous, were also fun. She enjoyed the camaraderie of the tightly knit High School. Whilst Shepherd was undoubtedly bright, as demonstrated by her scholarship and subsequent career, many of her classmates were also highly academic. By the time that Shepherd graduated from Aberdeen University, in 1915, the carnage of the First World War was well underway. The huge death toll of the war ensured that many of Shepherd's generation would remain unmarried. But their education and the example of teachers such as Miss Ward had also given them new opportunities. Shepherd's contemporaries became doctors, lecturers, librarians, journalists and writers. They travelled the world. The 1920s in Aberdeen saw the flourishing of societies for women. The High School Former Pupils' Club already existed, of course, but the Soroptimists were formed in 1921, the Aberdeen Businesswomen's Club opened in 1926, and women threw themselves into developing the Girl Guides and the St Katherine's Club. Scoffing about the idea of having husbands and Shepherd's comment 'We were homosexuals then' may have been something Shepherd recollected with amusement as a teenage 'phase' but it was undoubtedly true that their education equipped them to thrive in a world lacking men. It is interesting that a sample of Shepherd's schoolmates selected on the basis of a name beginning with 'N' included two graduates, both of whom became lecturers, and two other unmarried women with careers.

The May 1928 magazine announced the publication of Shepherd's first novel *The Quarry Wood*, but this was not the only publication from a former pupil. The magazine also reviewed books by Elsie Rae, who made her name as a poet during

the war and had written a new collection of poetry, Gwen A. Polgreen, a former teacher who had served in the British Army Hospital X-ray unit in Serbia during the war and whose poems had been accepted by Poetry of Today, Florence E. Shirras, described as 'at present on her way to Japan' having published *Aids to Catering*, and Maribel Edwin Thomson, author of *Nature Studies – Rovers and Stay at Homes*.

Nan Shepherd was a private person, and at the time of her death she had disposed of or redacted much of her personal correspondence and papers. The secret school magazine which she had in her possession in 1927 presumably met the same fate as so much else which might give us an insight into this fascinating writer. In her editorial, Shepherd requested her readers to volunteer articles and begged them 'do not to wait to be asked! … We prefer the lively interest that offers what it has.' Her light-hearted and witty article was possibly written under pressure to fill the Former Pupils' section of the magazine when she stepped in to cover for Miss McIntosh. Written before she became a published novelist and public figure, this article is, therefore, all the more interesting.

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Cross-referencing the forty-nine members of the Former Pupils' Club whose first or surnames begin with N with the thirty-nine girls in the School registers 1905–10 whose first or surnames begin with N produced a shortlist of six candidates. This was not an exact science, as some Nellies and Netties in one list were Helens and Janets in another. Nella Gordon, who also appeared in the school register as Annella Gordon, was Ann Isabella Gordon on her birth certificate and Ann in the 1901 census, and Nan Shepherd was Anna on her birth certificate, and in some of the registers. All possible Ns were included. Surnames beginning with N were at least immutable, but also rarer, and none were in the final shortlist. This shortlist of six comprised: Nellie Lees Brodie (born 1892), Ann Isabella (Nella) Gordon (born 1892), Nora Mary Atkins (born 1893), Anna (Nan) Shepherd (born 1893), Janet (Nita) S. Donaldson (born 1893), and Netty Margaret Lunan (born 1896).

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By the time Nan Shepherd was enrolled in the High School in August 1905 it already had an excellent academic reputation. The close relationship between the school and the Former Pupils Club meant that the girls also benefitted from the role models provided by previous pupils. The club was formed in 1899, and the first President was Mrs Lizzie Barnett. A teacher prior to her marriage, after she married she became involved in several good causes and published a number of pamphlets. Her daughter Elizabeth Barnett, Aberdeen's first female solicitor, was close in age to Shepherd, and was also on the magazine committee in 1927. Shepherd was also a close friend of Elizabeth's elder sister Euphemia, later Dr Euphemia Barnett, who lectured in botany alongside Shepherd, and for whom Shepherd wrote the obituary in the *Aberdeen University Review*.[5]

The Former Pupils Club had several special interest groups including a literary branch, founded by poets Bessie Craigmyle and Rachel Annand Taylor. Members of the Former Pupils' Club acted as examples and mentors to the pupils, and Shepherd in turn mentored pupils such as Helena Mennie (later Helena Mennie Shire).

Women, of course, did not have the vote during Shepherd's schooldays, but members of the Former Pupils' Club such as Clementina Esslemont and Bessie Craigmyle were both suffragists. Indeed, soon after Shepherd started at the High School, she could read in the local press of a Suffrage meeting held in the Music Hall in October 1908 at which both were on the platform party, and Craigmyle

spoke.[6]

Nan Shepherd joined the Former Pupils' Club in the 1911/12 session and was an active member. By 1915/16 membership was at 398 ordinary members and fifty-five honorary members (teachers and former teachers). Members were scattered all over the world, and the magazine included tales of their adventures. The Personalia column in the magazine attests to the calibre of its former pupils. One Former Pupil, Mrs A. B. Reid (Mary Fraser) was, in 1927, in addition to being the President of the South African branch of the Former Pupils' Club, Mayoress of Cape Town, and her life in South Africa was the subject of regular reports.

In 1932 a Former Pupil blazer was introduced in green, brown and yellow stripes, made to order by Esslemont and McIntosh. Did Shepherd purchase one?

Not only did Shepherd not mention any teachers by name, she did not name her friends. Who were the other two 'exultant conspirators' who posted a rasher of bacon to their former teacher? Who were the members of the Guard of Honour? Who were the co-authors of the magazine?

Many of the friends Shepherd made at the High School became lifelong friends, friendships consolidated by the Former Pupils Club. Elizabeth and Euphemia Barnett have been mentioned already, as has Madge Y Mitchell. Another prominent family were the Esslemonts, the daughters of M.P. George Esslemont, and Clementina, another President of the Former Pupils' Club. Mary (later Dr Mary) and Clara were older than Shepherd, Anna and Catherine younger.

Nan Shepherd's schooldays, whilst academically rigorous, were also fun. She enjoyed the camaraderie of the tightly knit High School. Whilst Shepherd was undoubtedly bright, as demonstrated by her scholarship and subsequent career, many of her classmates were also highly academic. By the time that Shepherd graduated from Aberdeen University, in 1915, the carnage of the First World War was well underway. The huge death toll of the war ensured that many of Shepherd's generation would remain unmarried. But their education and the example of teachers such as Miss Ward had also given them new opportunities. Shepherd's contemporaries became doctors, lecturers, librarians, journalists and writers. They travelled the world. The 1920s in Aberdeen saw the flourishing of societies for women. The High School Former Pupils' Club already existed, of course, but the Soroptimists were formed in 1921, the Aberdeen

Businesswomen's Club opened in 1926, and women threw themselves into developing the Girl Guides and the St Katherine's Club. Scoffing about the idea of having husbands and Shepherd's comment 'We were homosexuals then' may have been something Shepherd recollected with amusement as a teenage 'phase' but it was undoubtedly true that their education equipped them to thrive in a world lacking men. It is interesting that a sample of Shepherd's schoolmates selected on the basis of a name beginning with 'N' included two graduates, both of whom became lecturers, and two other unmarried women with careers.

The May 1928 magazine announced the publication of Shepherd's first novel *The Quarry Wood*, but this was not the only publication from a former pupil. The magazine also reviewed books by Elsie Rae, who made her name as a poet during the war and had written a new collection of poetry, Gwen A. Polgreen, a former teacher who had served in the British Army Hospital X-ray unit in Serbia during the war and whose poems had been accepted by Poetry of Today, Florence E. Shirras, described as 'at present on her way to Japan' having published *Aids to Catering*, and Maribel Edwin Thomson, author of *Nature Studies – Rovers and Stay at Homes*.

Nan Shepherd was a private person, and at the time of her death she had disposed of or redacted much of her personal correspondence and papers. The secret school magazine which she had in her possession in 1927 presumably met the same fate as so much else which might give us an insight into this fascinating writer. In her editorial, Shepherd requested her readers to volunteer articles and begged them 'do not to wait to be asked! … We prefer the lively interest that offers what it has.' Her light-hearted and witty article was possibly written under pressure to fill the Former Pupils' section of the magazine when she stepped in to cover for Miss McIntosh. Written before she became a published novelist and public figure, this article is, therefore, all the more interesting.

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