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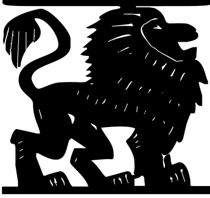

Learning to Be Modern Girls: Winifred Darch's School Stories

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Of all of the twentieth-century school story authors, Winifred Darch is perhaps the one most concerned with the democratic possibilities of schooling for girls. More than many writers in the genre, she wrote about state-funded schools and their role in the continuing democratization of social institutions. She was also interested in school as a workplace for women. Darch's books connect conversations about teachers and education policy with representations of schoolgirls. As a career teacher herself, she was aware that professional "educationists"—librarians and theorists as well as school administrators and teachers—played a role (or at least attempted to) in the success or failure of school story writers.

As with other examples of the genre, her books—published by Oxford University Press's juvenile division—targeted girl readers. Some books seem to be pitched to a young teenage or preteen audience. However, equally important is the possibility of an actual readership that included adults. Rosemary Auchmuty and other scholars have documented the "astounding popularity" of the genre with adult readers as well as children ("Origins" 148); the several international, intergenerational fan clubs organized around authors in the genre are proof of that. Similarly, Joseph McAleer has written about the intergenerational "cross-over" readership with regard to a related genre: girls' story papers (31; also see Tinkler). Consideration of Darch's prolific output in the context of a crossover readership illustrates her complex negotiation of the politics of professionalism, workplace justice, institutional authority, and the training of "modern girls."

The critical fate of Darch's most popular contemporary school story writers has been well-documented by feminist scholars, most notably Rosemary Auchmuty (1992, 1999, 2000). Even bestselling school story fiction was often marginalized by the school establishment it represented

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(librarians, head teachers, and teachers). Believing that these novels lacked artistic merit, literary critics also complained that they were out of touch socially, retrograde, and nostalgic for an insular world of class privilege for the daughters of the middle and upper-middle classes. However, the girls' school story genre continues to support an active fan culture and readership across categories of age, class, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, and other differences. New understandings of the importance of readers and the complex ways in which they make use of texts—insights that came from cultural studies, feminism, and children's literature studies—obviate or at least bracket aside such questions of literary value and social correctness. This "rise of the reader" in criticism has been crucial to interdisciplinary study of cultural production intended for children.

Darch stands in a place of distinction among the most well-known, and many other school story authors for two reasons. First, she wrote about the new girls' high schools that were created after the 1902 Education Act and that expanded in the first third of the twentieth century (Summerfield, Mitchell).[1] Second, she wrote several main characters who were scholarship recipients. Typically, needy students appeared as minor characters in fiction by other school story authors. Darch's more democratic subjects and settings distinguish her from many of the leading figures in the genre.

"We Are the School": The New High Schools for Girls

As Sheila Ray and others have observed, most girls' school stories written in the first half of the twentieth century centered on representations of boarding schools—an environment that did not reflect the education experience of most readers and writers. A prime example of this bias toward representations of an atypically elite education experience might be Elinor Brent-Dyer's sixty-two-book-strong Chalet School series, which ran from 1925 to 1970.[2] The fantasy of class privilege that Brent-Dyer's books arguably offer does not, of course, mean that other aspects of the novels lack political and social valence. Many fan-critics have provided sympathetic contextual readings of these books, as with Brent-Dyer's popular series, which remains in print and still supports international fan clubs (Mackie-Hunter; McClelland). Not only Brent-Dyer's books, of course, are set in elite institutional environments. The boarding school setting is so central to the entire genre that Beverly Lyon Clark's book-length genre study systematically excludes any representations of day schools, despite an otherwise remarkably inclusive approach that considers British and American, boys' and girls', and strictly "adult" novels that have a tenuous connection to the juvenile genre (such as Angela Thirkell's romance novel

The Headmistress). Darch's books bucked this tendency and demonstrate that stories set in day schools can be more intensely concerned with school life than boarding school stories, which commonly incorporate extra-generic elements of mystery, fantasy, and family stories (the three chief "intergenres" with the school story).

Nearly all of Darch's twenty-three novels are set in day schools. At least thirteen are set in high schools (as distinct from diverse and unregulated private schools, and girls' "public schools"—the handful of institutions modeled on boys' public schools such as Eton).[3] As Sally Mitchell points out, "stories set in day schools have far greater social interest" than boarding school stories. Undoubtedly, this is due to their greater focus on class and social mobility. The plots revolve around shifting family fortunes. In some of Darch's novels, a character must leave her expensive private (day or boarding) school because of financial troubles, often involving the death or disappearance of a father. Initially the characters, who are also coping with other losses, resist the transition, sometimes giving vent to their snobbery. However, all of them—except perhaps the most villainous and unredeemable—discover that the new school has its benefits: games, student-run organizations, better facilities, professionalized academic rigor (welcome to "brainy" girls), and a meritocratic student-enforced code of conduct in place of meaningless top-down-imposed rules. They also discover the pleasures of widening their social sphere, if only because they make friends they otherwise would not have had the opportunity to meet as relative social equals. It must be noted that this was an optimistic vision of token class integration. Based on a consideration of primary sources including the autobiographies of former scholarship girls themselves, Penny Tinkler concludes that:

> working class girls who were able to accept a place at secondary school often did so at considerable cost to themselves and their families. . . . The double burden of domestic and academic work, combined with an inadequate diet, often resulted in ill health amongst scholarship girls. . . . While scholarship girls were often ostracized by other secondary schoolgirls, they also became increasingly alienated from their elementary school friends, particularly once they left school at 15 to start work. Once girls started work their relationship to the street and other children changed. The scholarship girl, dressed in her uniform and preoccupied with homework, was estranged from this (25).

While they are generally optimistic, Darch's scholarship girl novels characterize "acute snobbery" at school coupled with isolation in the neighborhood—a "double burden" in and of itself.

The—at least—attempted integration of scholarship girls was an important factor that distinguished the new high schools from the large

majority of girls' private schools whose roots were in the nineteenth-century "ornamental" acquisition of accomplishments. Even if, as Tinkler shows, many working class girls could not take advantage of scholarships once they qualified for them, class integration represented an enormous perceived threat. As documented in Rosemary Manning's autobiography, the new state-funded secondary sector paradoxically fueled new growth in the private sector; this has been attributed to the reaction of parents to the idea of sending their daughters to school in a class-integrated environment. Contemporary American readers will recognize analogous patterns of middle-class "white flight" from integrated public schools that continues to this day. Again, with the qualifications that (1) high schools were not fully integrated except by tokenism, and (2) many adults have claimed systematic failures in the academic training they received there, the new girls high schools were founded on several ideals. These include:

- preparation of a substantial number of girls for university study
- fostering a meritocratic and socially democratic environment
- providing academically rigorous instruction in science, math, classics, and other subjects previously reserved for middle-class and elite boys
- professionalization and rationalization of traditionally feminine subjects, such as domestic science, modern languages, and (arguably) English literature
- professional training of teaching staff (trained in subjects and pedagogy)
- appropriation of elements of boys' public school traditions and ethos, like the prefect and house systems, organized athletics, and the corporate spirit exemplified by the school song

As for this last category, as one of Darch's characters explains to a newcomer to school, "The idea came from boarding-schools" (*Honour* 43). Before girls' boarding schools the traditions originated in boys' public schools. So the high schools borrowed some of the camaraderie-building and other tools from these elite male institutions to serve their own ends.

Darch thematized this perceived threat to upper- and professional-class insularity represented by qualified integration in the high schools. In some cases she (probably unfairly) represents servants upholding an anti-integrationist mentality most staunchly. In her first novel, *Chris and Some Others* (1920), fifteen-year-old daughter of a retired army captain defends her high school against snobbish denigration. A young housekeeper auditioning for a job in Chris's house warns Chris's nurse, manager of the house: "The people who go there are not all that high, you know. . . . Mr. Barber, the greengrocer—he's got a girl there" (4). Illustrating the circular nature of the gossip economy, later in the novel a neighbor declaims, "I never felt I could send Dagmar to a school where she might sit next to the greengrocer's

daughter." This character inquires whether "the girls and governesses at the High School are all ladies? I have heard some people say that they are not sure." The heroine rebuts that "under-educated" gossips are less qualified to be called "ladies" than the teachers, invoking the more meritocratic usage of that term (117, 118). A similarly snobbish guardian in another novel is displeased with the failure of the high school to inculcate her charge with docile manners and regrets, "Your father suggested sending you to Cheltenham or Wycombe Abbey [girls' public schools]. I'm afraid I was wrong when I dissuaded him." (*Cliff* 222). The theme recurs in *The New School and Hilary* (1926), set immediately after the 1902 Education Act. The newly impoverished heroine, forced to leave her costly private school, asks her mother, "What does 'Secondary School' mean exactly?" Darch continually illustrated the newness of girls' high schools. By making the sympathetic girl heroines equally ignorant about the new schools as some of their elders, Darch constructed degrees of "understandable ignorance." Ignorance is forgiven up until the point that it becomes willful. Characters gain or fail to gain new school literacies, and the novels serve in this parallel pedagogical function for readers.

At first dismayed that she would be attending school with scholarship girls "like the children we see coming by the gate after twelve," she learns to adopt the new democratic mores before even showing up for the first day, admonishing her similarly-positioned cousin Marigold who complains about the school uniform hat: "'Only common girls wear them!' 'Girl . . . is a name common to both of us. I expect we're common girls, so we'll have to wear common hats'" (43). Sally Mitchell has observed that the designation "girl" is class-inclusive, as opposed to the term "young lady." In this case, Darch's heroine is at once assuming a new identity—having more in "common" with girls less privileged than she had thought herself to be—and reaffirming a continuing "girl" identity regardless of her changed economic circumstances. The identity "girl" encompassed new opportunities and alliances.

Day schools "didn't count" as schools in the imagination of girls whose only experience of organized education was found in books. Wealthy, governess-educated Pleasance in *The Upper Fifth in Command* (1928) imagines, "if you are at a day-school you will have plenty of time to spare." "Not much!" corrects her new friend (27). Pleasance is then won over by the thought of "Cricket, lacrosse, swimming!" Other (less meritorious) privileged newcomers bring their sense of entitlement with them into the entrance examination room: "Isn't this a horrible school? Nobody to look after you, or be pleased to see you or anything. Everybody just rushing about and knocking into you . . . You pay lots to go to St. Ursula's, so they do

things properly" (*Lower Fourth and Joan* 56). Snobbish and undeserving Chloris is eventually cast out for violating the universal schoolgirl ethic against "sneaking" (In this case, not simply cheating, but not owning up when one's actions unfairly get someone else in trouble).

"Learn to Be a Lady": Scholarship Girls

Given the fact that, as historical subjects, scholarship girls were at risk in many ways, and given the social threat that they represented to those wishing to maintain the class order, the significance of Darch's heroines is great. Scholarship girls tend to approach their new schools differently than do their more-privileged counterparts. Of Darch's four main characters who are scholarship recipients, two are working class—Heather, daughter of a washerwoman, and Margery, whose mother struggles to raise five children. The other two, like many of her characters, have fallen on harder times: Joan's family has recently lost her father, a small flour-mill owner—described by a supporter as more "county" than the upstart newcomers who covet their property—and Jean, a French war orphan, who fills a spot for a "girl of good birth, willing to work for examinations [to] be accepted without fees at [a] first-class boarding school." (*Lower Fourth and Joan*; *Jean* 43) Among Jean's few possessions is a diamond necklace once owned by Marie Antoinette, a distant relation. Darch uses the class position of these two characters ("county" and distantly related to royalty) to underline the double standard that comes with the school's benevolence. Scholarship girls were held to a higher and more arbitrary code of moral conduct and academic achievement in addition to having to face more obstacles. This is especially true at Jean's new "potty little private school"—a rare example of a private school in Darch (41).[4] The head admonishes Jean for accidentally denting a wall: "Listen to me, Jean. You are being received free of charge in an expensive school, and you've got to realize that this benefit brings with it obligations" (116).

However, Darch's two working-class scholarship recipient heroines are more noteworthy because a much rarer type in fiction, as in reality (Logically, there are far fewer working class women's memoirs of their schooldays). Heather's widowed mother, who had been in service, takes in washing to pay for her uniform. Typically Darch's working class women characters have a materialist and determinist understanding of class status that the narratives do not endorse. "Ladies are born, not made," she insists. As usual, fathers are absent, and mother figures fail to endorse their daughters' scholastic ambitions: "If only father had lived! He . . . had always jokingly said that if ever he became a station-master Heather

should go to a High School and 'learn to be a lady'" (11). The heroine is fortunately singled out by her teacher to take the Annual Scholarship examination and is the first local girl to win, even though "it is hard for the country schools to compete with the town" (6). Her victory is not only in being accepted to the High School but assimilating into the world of schoolgirls. By the end of the novel she is winning hockey matches and reciting "Play up! Play up, and play the game!" The ubiquitous line (the poem was written by a scholarship recipient of Rugby's preparatory school) refers to the "game" of Empire and manly battle—as well as cricket; in this ethos, "domestic" endeavors like a match or a moral decision are an embattled war game. Darch's novel *Margaret Plays the Game* refers not to the heroine's athletics but to her reconciliation to a useful life as a secretary—she accepts her fate with manly stoicism. Unlike her Victorian counterparts, becoming a proper schoolgirl now involved assuming qualities such as a stiff upper lip. Thus Heather's development involves transgressing class and gendered values.

The other working-class scholarship girl is the heroine of Darch's second-to-last novel, *The Scholarship and Margery*, published in 1938. Bullied out of her rightful place by a girl with nearly the same name as hers, Margery secretly takes a full-time babysitting job. In the end she confronts the identity thief and is warmly welcomed into school. This is I believe the shortest of Darch's books (ninety-four pages in the 1938 Oxford edition I've consulted) and is more of a simple morality tale than a novel. Nevertheless, the situations and feelings she represents are complex. The agony Margery feels at the prospect of showing up to school without a uniform—the villainess has stolen her uniform voucher—and her knowledge that she cannot complain to her mother about it, is memorable.

Interestingly, *Heather at the High School* was singled out for praise in Geoffrey Trease's anti-girls' school story polemic, in which he disparaged the genre's "low level of writing" as opposed to boys'—girls have no Kipling! He urged girls' school story authors to write about day schools as Darch did.

To take its place among English public schools: Elite School Models and the Classless Ideal

Darch's unusual decision to make scholarship girls the heroines of four of her novels signifies, I believe, her commitment to more democratic schools. Reflecting the actual high schools' hybrid heritage—state-funded like the by-then-defunct board schools, they also partly modeled themselves on some of the public school traditions, as we have seen—Darch's democratic ideal incorporated most elements of that elite heritage. This

ideal is most elaborately explored in *The New School and Hilary* (1926). Darch dedicated this to the actual headmistress of the high school where Darch taught for thirty years (Sims 2006, 2000). It's easy to imagine that the admirable and charismatic fictional headmistress Miss Evans was based on the real-life counterpart in Darch's own teaching career, M. E. Hall. Miss Evans has high expectations for the brand-new school over which she presides: "'This school is going to take its place among English public schools'—and Miss Evans's eyes positively flashed" (69). There is a sharp sense of the one-term-old school as an institution that has yet to be fully formed: "Last term . . . we had no examinations to work for, no prefects, very few rules. . . . We've our way to make, our traditions to form. People about here aren't quite sure what we shall turn out to be. I don't want this School to be a mere forcing-house, a cram-shop for the Civil Service, or even for the Universities. I want it to be a place where you are preparing to live" (51–52).

During the period in which *The New School* takes place, Mitchell observes that girls' culture was "occupied by change, moving erratically toward the modern world, selfconsciously 'new' but still driven by powerful (and unexamined) old feelings" (22). One of these changes would be the democratizing possibility of reformed, academic schools for girls. But the "powerful . . . old feelings"—and powerful structures—of class distinctions and divisions remained in place. This plays out in the story of a new teacher, Judith Wingfield, whose plot coexists with the girl-heroine's plot. Both have left private and costly St. Ursula's, Judith as a graduate, to join the new high school. The brand-new teacher is eager to "see what a school of this sort was like, a school for all classes of people, because I expect schools of the future will be so" (75). Her hope is that social distinctions could be ignored. She quickly discovers her own newfound class marginality in her status as a teacher. Able to pay the rates at the local tennis club, she's nonplussed to find that they won't have her. The (almost) last straw is the primitive level of the only accommodation she is able to secure in town: "Judith had come to Uffington with a firm resolve that she was going to help break down the foolish barriers which still divided class from class. Still, mixing with all sorts of children and helping to raise their ideals was different from taking a bath in your landlady's kitchen!" (33) It's "different" because she saw herself "raising up" the poor, not being looked down on by the locals.

Scholarship girls are not the only subjects marked by class: so are teachers. Darch's novels vividly animate the aversion to high school teachers shared by many different social classes. In some circles this social exclusion persisted well into the twentieth century. For instance, headmistress

and author Rosemary Manning, whose career reached into the 1970s, wrote about being socially rebuffed because of her schoolteacher status by parents and other peers whom she wanted to befriend.) Wingfield's anxiety and discomfort is related to the fact that in the eyes of the parents and the community, as a teacher she functions arguably as a quasi-servant to the middle class and upper-middle class parents of her pupils. Social disdain for teachers in the twentieth century may have been as culturally significant as the governess panic was in the nineteenth century (Peterson). Like governesses, teachers were (and are) both potential role models and potential mother figures to other people's daughters. I would argue that this fear of the social proximity of teachers may also have much to do with their perceived class background. The sense of social mobility given by newly democratized university admissions policies far exceeded their reality, as Carol Dyhouse has shown. The myth of the working class scholarship girl-turned-university graduate may have been more just that, a myth, more prominent as a hope or fear than as a reality.

Unlike the heroine of Emma Frances Brooke's 1895 novel, *Transition*—in which the newly impoverished clergyman's daughter, thrown into teaching alongside trained working-class women, becomes radicalized by the experience—Darch's Wingfield does not experience class consciousness in a radical sense. Instead, the girls and the teachers continue to search for, invent, and affirm their new-old traditions. In the happy ending, the teacher and indeed the whole school find acceptance by the tennis club (they lend their rooms for end-of-year festivities), and Judith finds comfortable housing in the home of a student. The school has been accepted by the local elites and their institutions. At the end of *Heather at the High School*, for example, out on the hockey field, Hilary hums Harrow's football song "Forty Years On"—an iconic school story moment that epitomizes the unresolved gender and class issues at the heart of girls' school culture.[6]

The conclusion to *The New School* encapsulates the sometimes uncomfortable relationships between "feminists and bureaucrats"—to borrow Sheila Fletcher's title of her book on the history of women's education reform. Hilary innocently asks her beloved headmistress who the founders of the school are:

> "I suppose, literally speaking, our founders are the County Education committee." "But Miss Evans—you made me read that lesson out of the Apocrypha—'Let us now praise famous men,' to-day—and you really don't mean the fat sort of people you see on committees are famous men?"
>
> " . . . But after all, Hilary, we are heirs of all the ages, aren't we? Can't our founders be all those famous men and women who've done things for educa-

> tion in the past—all those who first founded schools—King Alfred—King Henry—Dean Colet and the rest?" (249)

This optimistic conclusion exemplifies some of the contradictions of the new-old ethos of girls' schools and girls' culture. Just as the history of girls' education reform is credited to male policy makers and supporters alongside women reformers, so the new girls' schools were founded upon traditions belonging to institutions that had once excluded them as well as new ideas about women's roles in society.

Reading School

The borrowed and invented traditions that characterized the girls' school ethos—their appropriation of elements of imperial masculinist culture and their construction of new models of female citizenship and identity—was in no small part achieved via print culture, both literary and popular. Not only did many girls and women experience girls' schools—at least certain types—solely through their reading experiences, Darch's novels also constructed the schoolgirl ethos by referring to girls' consumption of the genre. Many prolific school story authors had no experience with school or with the types of schools they fictionalized, but this was most definitely not the case for Darch.

The intertextuality of Darch's novels' per se is not what distinguishes them. As is characteristic of much children's literature, most school stories are intertextual and might be said to engage in what have been called "reading games" with their readers. In countless school stories—for adults as well as for children—the characters read, think about, quote, and refer ironically to school stories. Joanna Lloyd's *Audrey—A New Girl* even contains a disclaimer: "The names of any girls' school stories mentioned in this book are not, to the best of the author's belief, those of existing books." What distinguishes Darch's novels is the degree to which they make sense of their own and their peers' roles and identities in school via fictional representations. In her essay on intertextuality in children's literature, Claudia Nelson examines texts that "use devices that may seem considerably more elaborate than the more usual practice of employing a protagonist who is said to enjoy the consumption or creation of literature but showing this enjoyment from the outside" (223). From this vantage point, Darch's use of intertextuality—characters read and talk about books and magazines—is quite common.

However, while they most definitely do not fit any postmodern criteria for metatextuality, her evocations of girls reading contain more significance than simply the promotion of literacy, the provision of a bookworm heroine,

the salute to fellow practitioners of the genre, or the pleasures of readerly recognition. They testify to and participate in an economy of self- and institution-building in which school narratives were the local currency.

Newcomers to school are especially prone to rely on fiction as a sort of conduct book and key to mythologies. *Heather at the High School* (1924) opens on a scene of reading that foreshadows the bookish-but-liked heroine's future status. Distracted from tending the fire, she is absorbed in a school story paper—the inexpensive weeklies popular with working- and middle-class girls, less officially sanctioned because of their negative orientation towards school authority.[7] The paper provides a typical narrative in which snobbish characters shun the new scholarship girl. One exclaims, "Us friends with you! A washerwoman's daughter!" In the characteristic melodrama of the story papers, the bad girls throw a picture of the heroine's mother into the fire. The heroine of Darch's novel wonders:

> Was school-life really like that if one left the safe haven of the village school . . . ? . . . . Heather felt that she would give anything to penetrate into that magic world of which her 'paper' professed to give her a glimpse, a word of "form-captains," "gym-slips," "japes," and "persecutions" (10).

Her entrance into the school does not represent an ending in her use of the story papers but rather a beginning: schoolgirls themselves use the papers to map their world. Upon arriving at the high school to take the examination that will win her a scholarship there, she wanted to fit these latest arrivals on her horizon into the scheme of school as she imagined it. She pulled out the *Schoolgirl's Chum* from the capacious pocket in her petticoat and examined it carefully (10).

Darch's representation of girls' reliance on fiction to understand the new world of school that they were entering is persuasively realistic. Darch's imaginary school story magazine *Schoolgirl's Chum* is echoed in Joanna Lloyd's later use of the imaginary *Schoolday Chums*, which her characters read. These are fictional counterparts to such girls' magazines as *School Girls*, *Girl's Friend*, *School Friend*, *Schoolgirl's Own*, and *Schoolgirl's Weekly*. See Penny Tinkler's extended and interesting discussion and her distinction of elementary from secondary school magazines.

School story papers are also seen as keys with which to interpret teachers. In *The New School*, a student wonders about new English teacher Wingfield. "Will she come down on things with a heavy hand? . . . as in *Schoolgirl's Chum*, you know." Then proceeds a conversation between this character and a snobbish one who claims that she is superior to the Chum both because she has outgrown it and because "all the common girls read it." It's one of many scenes in which the characters discuss their reading likes and dislikes, and judge one another on this basis.

Elsewhere in the novels, characters rely on the more costly but still very popular school story books. In *The Upper Fifth in Command* (1928) a new girl says of her younger sister:

> She has been collecting all the school stories she can find, and I fully expect her to model her behaviour upon a sort of ideal, compounded of all the naughty girls she has met there (40).

Here Darch pokes fun at the didactic tradition of positive role models; the value of reading for girls as promoting a ladylike ideal. Modeling one's ideal on inappropriate or undesirable traits was something critics of the school story were worried about at the end of the nineteenth century. Stories might lead girls either to become naughty or, even worse in detractors' eyes, too brainy. At the same time, in Darch's novels, girls did "model [their] behavior upon a sort of ideal" found in fiction, and this was true in real life as well.[8] Whether or not this kind of modeling is borne out in British women's autobiography and other testimony, it may have operated on the level of a collective unconscious. School stories are not only about "how to be a girl" but also how to become a woman.

Teachers: Models of Independence and Usefulness

As Auchmuty has pointed out, the adult women represented in school stories are mostly teachers (1999). Unlike the inexpensive story papers marketed to a working class audience (though read more widely), which contained negative representations of teachers, Darch's books offer sympathetic characterizations of teachers. These representations—written by a career teacher—accord with Carol Dyhouse's view of the important role they played in mediating between students and their families:

> School or College life supplied girls with role models very different from their mothers; there they came into contact with women who had forged new lifestyles for themselves outside "the family circle," and a code of values which generally legitimated intellectual purpose. Women teachers often found themselves mediating between conflicting sets of values, intervening in family politics in order to defend their pupils' desire to study against a parent's accusations of selfishness, futility, or neglect of family duty. (*Feminism* 29–30)

Dyhouse's conclusion, based in part on a consideration of many autobiographies, would seem to suggest that the particular role women teachers could have in shaping their students' academic careers was not romanticized in Darch. Her representations exemplify her democratic orientation to school and the role of a school as a training ground for girls' active participation in democratic society.

Her novels confront the myth of the underworked, overpaid woman teacher head-on especially with her description and narration of the embodied work of teachers. The widespread mistrust and resentment of women teachers figures in *The New School* when townspeople cast doubt on the results of the work conducted "by over-paid teachers at the expense of the poor ratepayer" (125). In her last novel, *The New Girl at Graychurch* (1939), heads are treated as a species of teacher on the subject of overwork (not usually the case in school narratives). A pupil says:

> I think it is awful never to be able to call your time your own. I shall get a job that begins and leaves off when it says it does each day, and if anybody keeps me late I shall go on strike. The worst of it is that nobody thinks a Head works hard. If you don't come to our scripture lesson dead on time . . . they suppose you were having a cup of tea and putting your feet up!" (174)

In *Alison in a Fix*, an internationally known education theorist replaces a beloved and experienced headmistress, only to give it up after a year of instituting ambitious reforms: "I had no idea, Alison, of the piles of office-work a headmistress has to do" (221). As is common in some adult school fiction, some of the most viscerally represented scenes of overwork involve grading homework and exams: "It is a bad habit to drink tea after your meals, but one to which people who have to teach in the afternoon are apt to succumb. It is also bad for you to correct exercises at this time, and nobody was doing it except Miss Burns, who never wasted a minute" (*Poppies* 131). Apparently this was a mistake Darch chalked up to the inexperienced and the compulsive. Another teacher remarks, "Won't it be nice discussing plays and not exams with our coffee? My first term I got awful indigestion in exam week, and put it down to the fact that the marks got mixed up with my meals" (*Graychurch* 18). Given the high stakes of the myth of the over-paid teacher—the very long road to pay equity, the struggles with male unionists—Darch's interventions into this discourse should be seen as an important location of feminist class critique (see Oram; Owen; Summerfield).

Part of what girls learn at school is some knowledge of what their teachers do and what an academically trained woman looks like—different from the ogre of her detractors' imagination. Sometimes, of course, this means girls want to follow in teachers' footsteps, at least in terms of continuing past secondary education. Echoing the widespread hostility to academic training for women, orphaned Chris's stodgy aunt tells her that it's "quite unnecessary for you to go to college . . . your father has left you an ample income to live as a gentlewoman":

> Before . . . Chris rose an awful picture of herself 'living as a gentlewoman'—that meant . . . doing fancywork and going to At Homes.
>
> "But . . . I want to go to College. Why shouldn't I?"
>
> " . . . If you remain at the High School, you will go on with these useless subjects, and grow up a gauche, awkward woman." (*Chris* 179)

The struggle between Chris and her guardian exemplifies some of the struggles that even girls with some means experienced: lack of family support to continue with their studies and live independently. In an analysis of her survey of 1930s college graduates, Carol Dyhouse documents the make-or-break significance family support had on the university study of men and women across class. The negative myths about academic women as well as the social threat of "liberated" independent young women combined powerfully to limit even middle class girls' social mobility.

"You're getting a regular orator": Schoolgirl Parliamentarians and Agitators

In headmistress's autobiographies from the 1920s and '30s, comments such as "our girls will make useful committee women" often appear. The "committee woman" is a name for a woman who took an active part in public life, perhaps on the community level but maybe even on a national scene.[9] The phrase indicates someone who has taken on the voluntary responsibilities of citizenship. It also has the connotation of bureaucracy: women who participate in bureaucratic structures that had been dominated by men. Darch's novels are full of "committee-women"-in-training.

In *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, published in 1961 but set in the 1930s and based on her own experience at school, Spark's narrator opposes "committee women" to progressive and feminist women. She tells us that the "the progressive spinsters of Edinburgh were not committee women. They were not school teachers. The committee spinsters were less enterprising and not at all rebellious, they were sober churchgoers and quiet workers. . . . Those of Miss Brodie's kind were great talkers and feminists." This definition does not exactly accord with Darch's representations, since the committee women and girls are also "great talkers and feminists." In an early feminist reconsideration of the girls' school story, Gill Frith writes:

> There is no taboo on public speech: in innumerable school stories, girls hold and address a tense, packed meeting. The ructures and rewards of romance are replaced by the ructures and rewards of friendship, and pop stars by idealized head Girls. . . . Away from the family, girls are free; domestic

> tasks are invisibly performed. . . . what matters is to be in the team, in the play, etc . . . "the group" itself has almost unlimited license. The institutions within the school . . . are initiated, organised, and controlled by the girls themselves. . . . teachers' presence is discreet and not infallible. (123)

With this, she overturned decades of criticism that took issue with the girls' school story genre because of the stereotypically feminine roles for women and girls it purportedly endorses. Darch's heroines are by and large outspoken, independent-minded, creative, political in their realm, and unafraid of addressing a crowd. The novels advocate for girls' and women's participation in public life, not just to further one single agenda.

For example, in *The Girls of Queen Elizabeth*'s (1932), the Head Prefect of the school, Laurel, is "not afraid of the sound of her own voice, nor was she scared that the idea of addressing the school" (29).[10] When the prefects are told that the crumbling old school, which has lost students to the new county high school, is in danger of closing, the students form into "two parties": one follows Laurel, who is determined to "fire every one . . . to do something" to save the school or at least go down with "colours flying" (25). Her opponent, Louie, who is not loyal to the school, and whose crowd violates schoolgirl decorum by breaking rules not out of a sense of fun but rather "cold-bloodedly," is campaigning to resist Laurel's optimism. Louie gathers an audience before the official student meeting and tells them—in slang which sounds more like an American gangster than a British schoolgirl—that her adversary is:

> Try[ing] to make us promise to be good little girlies till the end of July. For why? . . . I'll tell you why. It was just to save the prees [prefects] trouble. They're a lazy lot—and some of them . . . are scared stiff of standing up to us when we choose to stick together. . . . If you start being milky and watery, the only result will be that we have a bad time and the prees a god one. As for Bessie's [Queen Elizabeth's school]—it's in the soup. (35)

Although Louie is a negative example, she is a revealing doppelganger of the heroine. This is a remarkable speech to emerge from the mouth of a fictional schoolgirl even by 1932, and it anticipates Ronald Searle's thuggish cartoon schoolgirls a decade later, as does the next event in the narrative. Outraged at the insults Louie hurls at the school at the end of her speech, a girl who belongs to what could be called the loyalist party, pushes Louie off of the vaulting horse on which she was perched, swings herself up, and wins over the crowd with her plan to save the school. What is at stake is not just the school's survival but the girls banding together to fight the authorities, who want to shut down their school.

Sometimes even "positive role models" must resort to rebellious measures. In *Alison in a Fix* (1938), students stage a "stay-in strike" to protest

perceived injustices committed by their inexperienced replacement teacher. In adult school novels, students often think of themselves as an overworked or oppressed proletariat in opposition to a tyrannical staff. In *The Black Sheep of Rexborough: A Play of School Life in Three Acts* (Ironside and Graham 1931), girls strike because of the unfair punishment of a popular girl. A house mistress who is hired to crack down on the rebellious girls says "Now are you going to help me run this house properly? Or are you going to continue your policy of Against the Government?" (49) In fact, the so-called longest running strike in British history involved schoolchildren who together with their working class parents protested the school board's firing of a head teacher and one other teacher. In support of their headmistress who had protested the unhygienic conditions of the school—and her husband, who had fought for the rights of farm laborers—most of the families withdrew and eventually created their own alternative school (Scobie).

Kim Reynolds has written that girls' fiction between 1880 and 1910 was "monoglossic: adult authority was not questioned." Darch began publishing a full decade after the period covered in Reynolds's study, and her characters—like other school story characters of the interwar period and beyond—question adult authority frequently.

Covering a similar period to Reynolds (1880–1915), Sally Mitchell writes:

> Although these stories had little relation to most girls' reality, they spread school mores, the image of girls in groups, and the culture of schooling as an institutional separation of adolescents both from their families and from the world of paid labor. It was thus primarily in fiction that school became a privileged space for girls' interactions and ethics. (74)

With the work of Gill Frith, Sally Mitchell, Rosemary Auchmuty, Sheila Ray, and the contributors to the *Encyclopaedia of Girls' School Stories*, there has been a resurgence of criticism of the genre, increasing scholars' awareness and respect for the large readership past and present of this body of literature. There is still much scholarship to be conducted investigating the importance of these reading practices.

Winifred Darch's books are heteroglossic, not monoglossic, texts. They are tales of rebellion. Scholars have made a distinction between the critical and rebellious tone of most adult school fiction written by women and school stories for girls. The writers of the "Adult School Fiction" essay in Sims and Clare's *Encyclopaedia* reference "Charlotte Brontë's swingeing attack in *Jane Eyre* on her old school . . . [which] is written in vitriol." They write, "'Look Back in Anger' would fit the majority of the serious novels mentioned here" (341). The stakes for rebellion are higher for

schoolgirls, of course, than for the adult woman looking back. Darch's girl characters choose their battles carefully, since consequences might include expulsion—exile from the "world of girls" back to the lonely domestic schoolroom or, for the scholarship girl, an abrupt unprepared entry into paid labor, or back home to help raise her siblings, or both.

Darch did not construct a monolithic adult authority under which girls had to succumb or against which they launched their "sit-in strikes." True, there are some fairly flat villains—a grasping and hypocritical uncle in *The Lower Fourth and Joan* who resembles Pip's relatives in *Great Expectations*—but the women characters who run and work in the school are not usually painted with such broad brushstrokes. They are represented as fallible humans. If adult authority were a monster, then girls would have no choice but to never grow up. Indeed that is Gill Frith's insight about the appeal of school stories to her students, who were supposed to have grown out of them: they provided a fantasy of continuing girlhood, insulated from the pressures and stresses of young adulthood, like sexuality. In Darch's novels, girls become women. Sometimes the transformation occurs when recent graduates return to school as teachers (Judith in *The New School* and Prudence in *The Lower Fourth*). Whereas growing into adults can often be an extra-narrative event—characters appear who have recently made the transition—just plain growing up is always part of the plot: for girls, for young women, and for experienced and older women as well. Schoolgirl rebellion is part of Darch's narrative of development—a marker not of childishness but of emerging grown-up-ness.

All of this rebelliousness takes place in the context of 1930s radical agitation, which has a shadowy presence in these texts. The figure of the striking worker as a trope for mistreated schoolgirl and schoolmistress alike recurs again and again in school fiction (for children and for adults) and memoir. The fact that Darch was apparently not a militant teacher unionist herself testifies to the way in which teachers and other workers' agitation resonated beyond those it directly involved. The theme of rebellion has been a near-universal feature of feminist movements, and feminism's interconnectedness with labor movements has been examined by scholars like Pat Thane, who have taught us that women workers' docility is often an inaccurate construction imposed in retrospect.

Similarly, there is more work to be done in understanding the rebellious tenor and the critical tendencies in women's writing for girls. At stake is the stereotype of the childish and "sexless" historical woman writer of children's books, marginalized as much for her often unmarried status as for the content of her work. Also at stake is the strange polarization in constructions of the twentieth-century schoolgirl as alternately passive or

barbaric. Darch's plots often animate a struggle between rebellious youth and authority, which brings about the growth of all parties involved. Often girls reconcile with a more just authority in the end—an authority they have educated. What sticks in readers' minds is the tenor of rebelliousness and the questioning of authority in the first place. Seven decades after her original publication, Darch's books can certainly be viewed as historical artifacts. But her promotion of girls' agency through self-knowledge and public speaking remains relevant to readers today.

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Notes

[1] Historians have written extensively about the implications and impact of the 1902 Education Act and have debated, among other things, its reactionary status.

[2] Auchmuty counts fifty-nine; my HarperCollins edition of *The Chalet Girls in Camp* lists sixty-two titles.

[3] This is based on my reading of nineteen of Darch's twenty-three novels.

[4] In her entry in *The Encyclopaedia of Girls' School Stories,* Sue Sims suggests that Darch "may have taken a post as unqualified Junior Mistress described so feelingly in *Jean of the Fifth* before attending teacher training college." The feeling of her description refers to the plight of the unqualified and exploited young teacher.

[5] Gill Frith writes that in the school story, "to be in the same form is to be in the same class; to be part of the group is all that matters, and acceptance is presented as meritocratic, based both on 'proving yourself' as an individual and on sharing the 'common-sense' values of the group."

[6] Harrow redundantly lays claim to its own cultural capital on its website: "Forty Years On' with its football allegory has been adopted by schools—many of them girls'—all over the world. Very few can know what they were actually singing about."

[7] See Mitchell's engaging and authoritative discussion.

[8] It recalls Rachel Brownstein's *Becoming a Heroine*.

[9] See Regenia Gagnier's discussion of "company women," a designation she gives some Victorian and Edwardian middle-class women autobiographers.

[10] In *Cicely Bassett: Patrol Leader*, Mirth says, "They better have chosen me [for representative]. At least I'm not afraid of my own voice" (54).

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