

# THE SCHOOL AND ITS TEACHER.

A SKETCH WRITTEN FOR THE 'BOUQUET'

**By A.D. Murray, March 29, 1858 (age 18)**

*Alexander Davidson Murray went on to become Editor of the Newcastle Daily Journal*

## 1. The School

Oh! The old village school – the rare old village school! How does its childish adventures – its boyish reminiscences haunt my mind – not like those deeply graven incidents of life which stand out bold and clear on the pages of memory, but flitting across it in lusive glances – now clear and definite, now dim and obscure. Awake memory of by-gone days and assist me in arranging the dusky pictures on thy frontlet, that my eyes may again gaze on their fading features.

Now I see before me the village schoolhouse – the old quadrangular edifice; with its row of large windows and white painted shutters. The ivy and the honeysuckle are clambering along the old and time-honoured gable and shading the window with their graceful tendrils, liken the venetian blinded lattice of an old cathedral. At the other end is the old blue painted door that grated so often on its rickety hinges, as a crowd of scholars entered to pay their diurnal penance at the shrine of Minerva. And there in front of the building stretches the school playground, the scene of many a boyish squabble and many a noisy game.

But dear reader we must not linger in the outside of this temple of learning before which the present generation of the village inhabitants had done their homage, but enter and survey the interior. I can assure you we will be most welcome, as all generally are, provided they are not paupers come to complain about some alimentary grievance (for you must know our teacher is also a poor inspector). Do not shrink back, my dear friend. You may perhaps be a stranger to these parts, but its customs will soon get used to you. The noise is not indeed very pleasant, but when they recognise we are strangers, they will probably be quiet. The wonder is that business can be transacted properly in the midst of so much din. As to the general appearance of the interior of the school-room, we cannot help thinking that it is the best could possibly have been designed for undermining the constitutions of the young who spend the principal portion of the day within it. The roof is low, even for a dwelling house, and the ventilation most inefficient.

The scholars are of the common sort of the village youth, and rank from years of infancy to the time when bone and fibre give appearance of capability to bear a part

in the toil and broil of life. The modus operandi in this establishment is rather peculiar. The farther advanced into knowledge are divided into classes, while those who have not yet mastered the primer are in general drilled single file. At the time we enter an English class has formed a crescent round the Dominey, who sits in front, inhaling the united breaths of the whole, and comparing the degrees of correctness of the different readings from the first collection given before him. But this is not his sole occupation. He cannot afford to be occupied in this alone; for on his outstretched knees is lying an open primer with the a b c's in bold relief on the page, which are pointed to and pronounced one after the other in a nervous tone, by a little fellow, who has taken his first initiatory lesson in the ways of the great world a few days ago, at the village school. But even this is not the whole extent to which the teacher's attention is strained, for every now and then a cypher-covered slate is shoved before his gaze to elicit the Maister's approval of how the count has been done.

We now turn our attention from this part of the scene, attracted by a clatter of sticks near at hand which at first would seem to intimate that fencing is part of the instruction here inculcated. We are, however, at once undeceived. The noise proceeded from a group of boys gathered round a map of Scotland hanging against a wall. Each member of the class is supplied with a pointing-stick, and on the name of a certain locality being called out by one of the number the whole sticks rush simultaneously to the spot, each one striving to gain the centre of the cluster formed, which is likely to be the place required; to the imminent danger of punching a hole in the map.

We turn from these geographical operations with a smile, and are thinking about taking a stroll round the desk-tables occupied by the students of arithmetic, writing, etc. when our attention is again attracted to a form along the wall, densely populated by a row of tousy-headed youths, in a sort of transition state from a-b-c-ism to a more advanced rank. They are conning a double verse of a metrical psalm, and are engraving it on their memories in a rather singular manner. The arms of each one encircle the shoulders of his neighbour, and pendular-wise the entire row are vibrating backwards and forwards on their seats and half singing, half whining in concert the lines required to be learned. Speculating on the efficacy of this system, and initiated into the cause of at least a part of the noise which greeted our ears when we entered, we turn to examine a party of boys seated with slates before them. We are again at a loss to understand a phenomenon that meets our attention – the sort of humming sound omitted by each of the arithmetical student. On enquiry, however, we ascertain that the whole system of calculation is transacted audibly and this instantly takes away every feeling of astonishment at the hum that pervades the school.

But we must not criticise the faults without taking into account the good features of the seminary. And these are not a few notwithstanding all its discrepancies, and strange as it may seem our village school puts out better writers, better arithmeticians, and better geographers than many which seem to be conducted in better principal. The fact is the teacher of the school is in some respects a prodigy of a man; and I must say something of his character and capabilities, but it will have to be in another article as my space is completely full.

## **2. The Teacher**

A good old homely sort of fellow was the village schoolmaster. Honour to his memory and peace to his ashes, for now the cold earth enshrines his clay; and long will it be, I venture to say, are the remembrance of his existence will fade from the peaceful scenes which his stalwart form and good-natured laugh kindled into life. As a man the Schoolmaster was generally respected. He was a real specimen of the old school of Parish teachers. He made no pretensions to be more refined in manners or language than those among whom he moved. If there was any difference, it lay in this that few could give the Border Doric to such advantage as he could. His dress was plain and simple, and the material none of the finest or best. Indeed he could not at all be compared to the teachers of now-a-days, with their suits of broadcloth and stiff starchy collars, and desperate attempts at English. And yet he was a schoolmaster every whit, emphatically a Dominey. His whole manner testified his profession. The name he generally bore among the villagers was The Maister, and he gloried in the title. His intercourse with the inhabitants was increased by his holding the office of poor inspector, in addition to those of schoolmaster and session clerk; and with all these duties hanging on his hand you may be sure he was no idle man. Idle! No: he was never idle. Such a word was not to be found in his vocabulary.

Though our teacher was in general a good-natured easy-going sort of fellow, there was one peculiarity in his character which all observed and all criticised. Had you chanced to enter the house of a villager some morning, immediately after a visit from the Maister, when he had probably been in a mighty hurry or been crossed somehow, you would be sure to have heard such expressions as "he's a strange man, the Maister – ye dinnae ken when ye hae 'im or when ye want him," etc, drop from the lips of the inmates, which would seem to imply that our schoolmaster was rather an impulsive sort of individual, and the inference would be quite correct. His life was just in fact a succession of impulses, which often carried him to the two extremes of manner in an incredible short time. And this characteristic extended to all his occupation and pursuits. If anything struck his attention, it was instantly received and pursued for a time with enthusiastic ardour and then entirely neglected. If a popular movement was started in the village it was no uncommon thing to see the Maister a leading mover in the cause for a short time, and a dead member ever

after. And yet many good men have been impulsive in their disposition, and certainly he was one of them.

But now it is expedient that I say something of the professional character of the village schoolmaster. I have already described the character and appearance of the seminary over which he presides, and also stated that notwithstanding the peculiar manner of the mode of proceeding the end was accomplished remarkably well. There was a secret in this. The fact was that the Maister was well cut out for his profession. He had a decided knack of instilling knowledge, and all who were willing to learn made rapid progress under his tuition. Many said he kept no discipline in his school; but this was scarcely true. It was true, however, so far, inasmuch as he took no pains to teach his pupils civility or politeness, either towards himself or any other person. Whether it was that he thought this no part of his duty, or whether from sheer incapability, I know not; but certain it was that he did not take pains to cultivate the better qualities of refinement and politeness among his scholars. This was perhaps his greatest drawback, and its effect upon the juvenile portion of the village population was but too apparent. Yet notwithstanding all this no teacher ever kept better command in his school than he did; and few pupils stood in greater awe of their guardians than did those of the village school. And if this charge was not true, that of over severity and cruelty towards the scholars brought against him by some was still less so. Those who were really earnest in their pursuit of knowledge met with his cordial sympathy and encouragement and soon learned to love and respect as well as fear him. The great secret of his more than common success in his profession, I conceive, lay in the real interest he felt in the pursuits of his pupils. If a scholar found himself puzzled with an arithmetical question, or had wrought out his problem in a quite inverse manner, instead of merely telling him it was wrong; to go and do it right, he explained the fallacy and revealed the secret in a most patient and encouraging manner, and the result was that his scholar had more progress in arithmetic than those at most schools of the same pretensions.

In the teaching of geography he used no books whatever. All the maps he used.. and he had a pretty extensive stock, were of his own manufacture and far more fitted for utilitarian purposes than any the School Book Association ever put out. By a constant practical study of those his geographers were soon well acquainted with the shapes and positions of all the countries on the globe, and the names and positions of the towns in each etc., It was in fact by dint of indefatigable personal attention that the village teacher gained his character for ability in his profession, and without the exercise of which the most talented will never succeed..... His role of teaching English was a drawback and arose from his own style of reading and pronunciation. I do not excuse his inability for teaching to read, for the rapidity with which his scholars travelled from the primer to the New Testament, and from the New Testament to the Second Collection was highly creditable; but the bad mode of reading and pronouncing possessed by all his scholars. He was a regular old

school-hand, and this was in nothing stronger than in his reading. The fluent English was badly faltered and strangely vernacularised when it passed through his voice and into the ears of his scholars.

But I must stay my criticisms, for my time and space are both expended. The village schoolmaster is no more. One of a past and swiftly passing generation, he has abdicated this scene of life, that his place in its busy drama might be filled by another, just as we must all do sometime ere long. Strong, massive, and vigorous had been his frame in youth and middle age (six feet some inches he stood in his shoes) and though cares and troubles not a few had loosened the beams that supported the tabernacle, and left their deep traces on his brow, yet when his sturdy back had weathered the storms of more than three score winters, it still seemed sound and strong. But on a sudden the stern unflinching messenger visited the teachers dwelling. A fever laid the strong man prostrate, and quickly fled away from the sum of his duties and his toil with the spirit of the village schoolmaster!

**A.D.Murray, March 29, 1858.**

***Younger brother of Sir James Augustus Henry Murray (lexicographer)***

*(Note – The above is an account of Denholm School under the mastership of Mr. George Scott.)*

### **More Info from the Hawick Word Book**

*Alexander Davidson (1840–1907) son of Thomas, clothier in Denholm and Hawick, with his mother being Mary Scott, daughter of Charles Scott, Hawick linen manufacturer. He was younger brother of Sir J.A.H. He was an apprentice at the Hawick Advertiser and was local correspondent for the Southern Reporter. He was a prominent member of the Hawick Mutual Improvement Society.*

*He left Hawick in 1862 to become editor of the Peeblesshire Advertiser. He later was editor of the Fife Journal and Dumfries Courier, before becoming editor of the Newcastle Daily Journal, a position he held for 37 years. He read four papers to the Archæological Society in the early 1860s. He married Elizabeth Stuart Honeyman of Cupar, and she died in 1926, aged 81. They had 7 children. He published a story 'Charnwood; or, lost, found and faithful!' in 1876, set in the Borders in the mid-19th century, and a novel 'The Barringtons' in 1908.*