

Sex and the 1930s schoolgirl



Illustration from 'The Schoolgirl' adroitly combines exposure and concealment.

Among the least documented aspects of Britain in the 1930s was the sex-life of the average schoolgirl. Informal reports suggest that no such thing existed; others that there was more than met the eye. MARY CADOGAN here reviews the matter as reflected — often only obliquely — in the ephemeral literature of the time.

The spiffing British schoolgirl of the Thirties seemed to have become defunct by the end of the Swinging Sixties. In real life girls had largely abandoned navy serge gymslips and wrinkled lisle stockings for mini-skirts and sleek nylons, while their glowing complexions no longer owed everything to hockey and hearty outdoor exercise, but to cosmetics that could be used without concealment.

In literature — both hardbacked and ephemeral — the single-sex girls' school was dropped, and adolescent heroines had to concentrate on horses, ballet-dancing and kitchen-sink dramas for excitement, rather than on scrumptious dorm-feasts, secret societies and crushes on the games captain or head prefect.

Happily, however, those 'rosy, racy' schoolgirls and bosom chums have recently made a big come-back. The stories of Dorita Fairlie Bruce's *Dimsie* (who formed an Anti-Soppist League to put down kissing and mushy behaviour at her school) have all now been reprinted and are immensely successful with today's children. In more ephemeral form, Anne Digby's adventures of Trebizon school and Peter Glidewell's exploits of the girls of St Ursula's (both absolutely new series) are flourishing in paperbacks, and, as this is

written, Denise Deegan's *Daisy* still Pulls It Off to packed houses every night at the Globe Theatre.

A dip into my collection of ephemera shows the British schoolgirl as an archetype which ranges from the utter innocence of Angela Brazil's originals ('the school platform meant much to Lesbia. It was the centre of her little world... at one extreme, to the precocity of Ronald Searle's St Trinian's sextops at the other.

Every aspect of schoolgirl lore is vividly reflected in ephemera which, I am sure, provides wider and deeper insights into girls' real and fantasy worlds than any formal account can ever do.

Future historians who might want to consider the role of the teenage girl in Britain during the Thirties could have no happier hunting ground than the *School Friend*, the *Schoolgirls' Own* or the *Girl's Own Paper* of that decade. These convey, as well as the factual backgrounds of girls' lives, their aspirations and ideals, and — something that is often glossed over — their attitudes towards sex.

One reason why the heroines of these periodicals are so resilient is that not only their schoolgirlishness but their embryonic maturity is emphasized. The artists of Lord Northcliffe's Amalgamated Press were instructed to play down buttocks and bosoms (even to the extent of making the water come up to the girls' armpits whenever they were drawn in bathing costumes), but nevertheless, in common with the authors, they created extraordinarily attractive teenagers who appeared to radiate physical magnetism.

The girls of Cliff House School in the *School Friend*, and Morecove in the *Schoolgirls' Own* were all dreamed up, brought to literary life, and drawn by men. They used gloriously feminine pen-names, but tended — unconsciously perhaps — to project their own fantasies into these adolescent creations.

Barbara Redfern ('Babs'), the ripping and resourceful Captain of the Cliff House Fourth, and her charismatic tomboy chum Clara Trevlyn, for example, inspired adulation in boy readers as well as girls, and many men today still avidly collect these schoolgirl papers. In the stories, the girl



Frustration at a close encounter. "I say —" said a fat voice

and 'boy chums'. One of the authors, L E Ransome (now in his eighties), told me that although Northcliffe's editorial policy made sex taboo in the girls' papers, it stressed the importance of femininity and 'romance'.

In fact there is strong sexual awareness in these weekly papers, even in scenes where the boy and girl relationship seems overtly one of stilted chastity, as in the following snatch of dialogue between Jack Tollhurst and Babs:

'I say, might I trot by the side of your bicycle as far as the gates of Cliff House School? ...'

'I shall be pleased for you to accompany me, Jack,' Babs said.

Babs and Jack had a long-standing and almost desperate loyalty to each other that survived all vicissitudes. Later on (in the hands of a different author) Babs was to develop another boy chum called Jimmy Richmond, and their relationship was similarly intense. Jimmy — despite his steadfastness and decency — could occasionally be lured away from Babs by one of her scheming and sneaky schoolmates, and at such times our wholesome heroine had to endure absolute hells of jealousy and frustration.

There was little sentimentality in Clara Trevlyn's relationship with her schoolboy admirer, Ginger. He considers her a 'top-notch' and really puts up with an awful lot from her. When he offers Clara a lift in his motor bike and sidecar, she firmly announces that she will ride the motor bike, and he can be the passenger:

'You don't think I'd trust my life with your driving?'

said Clara scornfully. 'Boys can't drive motor bikes. I'll give you a few tips as we go along.'

Clara constantly scores him off in a manner that seems to indicate a subversion of the sexual urge. (This girl-putting-down-boy theme was frequently exploited in the Amalgamated Press papers, and it provided pubescent girl readers with some early if over-simplistic expeditions into women's lib.)

More straightforward romance cropped up frequently at Morcov School, mainly because the author (Horace Phillips) had originally specialised in love-stories for women's magazines, before being recruited to *Schoolgirls' Own*. An exotic Arabian girl called 'Rose of the Desert' floated in and out of Morcov, flowing veils, draperies and all, and fell passionately in love with the brother of the headmistress, whom she referred to as her 'Englishman with the heart that never quakes...'. Needless to say, Betty Barton and her fourth-form chums were intensely interested in this affair, and somewhat irritated that Rose's affections did not always get the wholehearted response that they deserved.

Surprisingly, it is in the *Magnet* and *Gem* (the boys'

companion papers to the *School Friend* and the *Schoolgirls' Own*) that romance was to flower most fully. Charles Hamilton, as 'Frank Richards' in the *Magnet* and 'Martin Clifford' in the *Gem*, provided us with enduring examples of adolescent passion. In the *Magnet*, for example, Marjorie Hazeldene of Cliff House School was frequently starred. Way back in 1908 she began to inspire fervent admiration in those upright and manly boys, Harry Wharton and Bob Cherry. By the nineteen-thirties (when they were all still only fourteen years of age!) Harry had nobly left the field clear for the besotted Bob 'for whom the sun came out whenever the beautiful Marjorie wheeled her bicycle through the gate of Greyfriars School'.

There were no lengths to which Bob would not go for his beloved — even though in the stories he was never permitted greater intimacy than occasionally holding her hand and huskily muttering what a ripping girl she was. Marjorie



Jimmy Richmond turns away, Faith at his side: 'Babs bit her lip'

remained poised throughout, but she gave away her feelings by constantly biting her lips, and displaying a romantic protectiveness towards the bluff and often awkward Bob.

There seemed no doubt to those of us who were child fans of the *Magnet* in the Thirties that Marjorie and Bob were truly 'in love' in the conventional way that would one day lead them into marriage.

But there were of course other ways of being in love. Angela Brazil's Edwardian schoolgirls had set the vogue for 'flaming', though un-physical, intensities towards their teachers' Miss Jones is a stunt, as jinky as you like', and also towards other girls. Friendships positively 'flared to red-heat', the headmistress in one story having to cough warningly from the audience when love-making between two girls during a charade threatened to become too passionate.

Angela Brazil was one of a splendid quartet of famous 'schoolgirl' authors who, as well as writing full-length novels, contributed stories to periodicals like the *Girls' Own Paper*. Dorita Fairlie Bruce, Elsie Oxenham and Elinor Brent Dyer were the other three ladies. All remained unmarried and, one suspects from their writing, not wildly enthusiastic about the opposite sex. In her Abbey School stories, Elsie Oxenham expresses girlish passion for a teacher in her customary deathless and delightful prose. (The setting is a country-dance summer-school.)

'Cool' Joy murmured. 'Isn't she a treat? She looked jolly before, but in her gymmy she beats herself into fits.'

'You see so much more of her,' Jen remarked truthfully. 'And when she's as topping as that, the more you see the better!'

The same author makes no bones about girls being attracted



Adventure for the Senior Girls. Mistletoe at Trevlyn Towers



Sport provided an occasional brief opportunity for actual physical contact. This 'Schoolgirl's Own' illustration makes the most (but not too much) of one such happy accident.

to each other and pairing off: 'Con and Norah were a recognised couple. Con... was the wife and home-maker. Norah... the husband.' Her heroines have a strong reluctance to 'grow up' (Elsie Oxenham's euphemism for becoming sexually involved with a man):

'Growing up is fun, you know.'

'Is it?' Jen sounded doubtful. 'I'm not keen on it, Pixie.'

I want to go on playing cricket.'

Dorita Fairlie Bruce's Dimsie is similarly doubtful about the process of mating, and her response to her suitor's first marriage proposal is 'Oh Peter! How can you say anything so horrible!'

Surprisingly, too, the more mature, eighteen-year-old aviatrix, Worrals of the WAAF (created for the 1940 *Girls' Own Paper* by WE Johns, the originator of Biggles) fights shy of romantic attachments. When a dashing Spitfire pilot desperately tells her that she means 'an awful lot' to him, she sternly dismisses 'this sob-stuff' by saying, 'Be yourself. You'll laugh at this nonsense in the morning.'

Elinor Brent Dyer, whose stories were set in a glamorous international and trilingual school in the Swiss Alps, played down any kind of emotional intensity, but produced a succession of schoolgirls who grew up into remarkable models of fecundity. Jo, for example, produces eleven children, and she and her ex-schoolmates seem to compete in the business of wholesale reproduction. Elsie Oxenham's heroines go even further, and one of them achieves the remarkable distinction of producing twins twice in ten months...

A breathtaking feat — and, like all the examples mentioned here, something for schoolgirl readers in the Thirties to conjure with, as they read about Diana Royston Clarke, the teenage firecracker of Cliff House, who swanked in the presence of boys by tossing her platinum tresses, dilating her nostrils and yelling out 'Yoicks!'. Or Madge Minden, the musical genius of Morcove, who strolled down the school passages with a cricket bat in hand, 'whistling a César Franck Sonata', and inciting fervour in the breast of one of her schoolfriend's brothers.

Heady reading when we were real-life schoolgirls in the nineteen-thirties, and perhaps even more fascinating now, when we dip nostalgically into ephemera to savour these pearly quotes.

We glean much from literature that was intended to be so very transient; indeed these social-history insights come almost only from the ephemera of the time.

Miss Cadogan's latest book, co-authored with Tommy Keen, is From Warraton Lodge to Linton Hall: a Christmas Companion, a study of Christmas stories of the schools inspired by 'Frank Richards' — Greyfriars, St Jim's, Cliff House and Morcove. Available only from M. C. C. Press, 30 Tonbridge Rd, Maidstone, Kent. £5 incl p&p.