

JOHN DESMOND FISHER (1915 – 1919)

The *Voice* of Saturday 18th September, 1915, reports that Mr. J. Desmond Fisher, arrived from England on the mail ship the weekend before to take up the position of Headmaster upon the College's reopening on the 20th. Fisher is warmly remembered by the students of the period and their recollections are shared later. Fisher, who appears to hail from Cambridge, England, took up the post at the youthful age of twenty-three, after graduating with a B.A. Hons (Cantab.), from his hometown university (*Cantabrigiensis* is Cambridge in Latin). Later on, all references mention that he was in fact the holder of a Master of Arts Degree as well. It is also recorded in the 1911 Census of England and Wales that Desmond Fisher was a science student. However, we note that he was a Fellow of the Royal Geographic Society.

It is under Fisher that the first two houses were established: the Red House and the Blue House. Fisher also appears to have enhanced the event known as 'Prize Distribution' into 'Speech Day'. Presumably, it became a 'Night' affair later on.

Fisher was apparently amongst the boys of the time legendary with the cane, as captured in a reminiscence later on. During Fisher's time two very progressive undertakings in education occurred under the colonial government: a commission of inquiry into education and the institution of the Saint Lucia Scholarship in 1918. We will look at both later. As to any role he had in lobbying for the Island Scholarship, this cannot yet be ascertained. However, he was indeed a member of the Commission which generated what is known as the Lobb Report.

It appears that Fisher departed not for want of a new position but due to ill-health. Sadly, Headmaster Fisher lived a short life, as did many in those times. His life expired in England a mere four years after leaving St. Marys. His gravestone at Mill Road Cemetery, Cambridge, presumably placed by his parents William and Mary Fisher, has inscribed:

'JOHN DESMOND FISHER MA FRGS d Apr 25 1923 age 31 a kind and loving son formerly Headmaster of St. Mary's College Castries St Lucia BWI and of JOSEPH BASIL FISHER age 1 year & 8 months'

SPEECH DAY 1915

Fisher's first Speech Day 1915 occurred on the Wednesday 15th December, 1915, at the end of the school year, before the boys went on their 6 weeks Christmas break. Special mention is made of Ernest C.M. Theobalds, the first student of the College who achieved his B.A. Intermediate from the University of London. Theobalds had undertaken this programme as an external student, while he was on the staff at St. Mary's College. The proceedings of the night are captured in full, with all its fanfare and drama:

'The annual Speech Day of St Mary's College was held at the R.C. Boys' School on Wednesday afternoon. There was a large attendance of parents and others interest as well as of the general public. The programme consisted of a short French play by the Rev. Father Remaud, the French Master of the College, and who last year also supplied an amusing skit on the Kaiser. This was followed by a scene from "A Midsummer Night's Dream." Mr. Girard lent his valuable aid by performing some violin solos with his usual ability. The Orchestra which was to perform was unfortunately unable to do so owing to the illness of some of the member. The first piece on the programme was "Solo de Flute" by R.C. Edward Dix. This was in the nature of a "Sell," proving to be an amusing monologue, with a flute as only an illustration of how "not to do it." Master Dix acted with scene with much humour and aplomb. The little French play "Les Deux Volontaires" followed. This served to show by the eagerness of two children, armed with toy rifle and bugle, to volunteer for active service, the spirit with which France is waging the present war. The two little would be volunteers were impersonated by Leonard and Edward Devaux, who spoke off their lines with much spirit and effect, and were much better heard, we may say, in some parts of the room, than many of the bigger boys. After Mr. Girard had performed a violin solo the scene from Shakespeare was given. The costumes in this scene were really very effective and must have given considerable trouble to arrange. The "ladies" were draped with artistic skill, and by the way, it may be said that they probably reproduced the exact conditions in Shakespeare's day when the girls on the stage were not common. The only "lady" called on to exercise much elocution was Thisbe, personated by George Cadet, who maintained a "lalsetto" voice throughout, and plumped down beside dead Pyramus in true burlesque fashion. Every boy spoke his lines and entered into the spirit of the scene; the bear was especially effective. Fairies light of foot hopped in and out and maintained the liveliness of the scene. The members of Theseus' Court emulated that monarch in dignity of

deportment. After this another solo was performed by Mr. Girard, who assistance was invaluable, and then the serious business of the day began, the Headmaster's Report, &c. Before we touch on this, however, we must congratulate Mr. Gilkes, the Third Master, who superintended the rehearsals of the plays, organized the performers, corrected the elocution, and generally did every thing possible to make the show a success. The selections from Shakespeare are valuable to the boys, practicing them in English pure and undefiled, and filling their minds and imagination with the beauty and music of the language.

The Chairman, the Revd. Father Dugast, the Rector of the College, His Honour the Administrator and the members of the College Committees then proceeded to the platform. The Revd. The Rector, in a short address, welcomed those who had come to attend the ceremony, and spoke of the progress the College had made. He specifically mentioned the success of E.C.M. Theobalds in passing the London University Intermediate B.A. Mr. Desmond Fisher M.A., the Headmaster then read his Report:—

“Ladies and gentlemen, —First of all I welcome those who have accepted my invitation to be present today. I am very glad to notice such a large proportion of the parents of the boys, and I think that the large attendance shows a general and increasing interest in the activities of the College. I must ask you pardon if I have omitted anyone who should have been invited to today's gathering. As you know, I am not yet an old Resident of St. Lucia, and as yet I do not know who is who, in fact I do not even know who is married and who is not.

I heartily thank those who have so generously responded to my appeal for subscriptions to meet the expenses of today's gathering, and more especially since such a splendid collection in aid of the Red Cross Fund has just been made.

Coming now to the present state of the College, I am glad to say that the number of boys is greater than at any previous time in its history.

End of 1912	”	”	43 boys
		1913	” ” 57 ”
		1914	” ” 69 ”
		1915	” ” 74 ”

The attendance is also better, the average being approximately 70.

In connection with this matter, I would address a word to parents — not all of them but a few. Occasionally boys are kept at home for very paltry reasons — e.g., their son has bruised his knee in a football match or has to go out to tea. Now how can they expect their sons to progress if they are continually missing lessons? Of course if a boy is really ill by all means

keep him at home till he is better, but you may know boys are sometimes ill for the purpose.

I must also lay stress, as was done last year, on the necessity of sending boys to the College when they are small – I mean between the ages of 10 and 12. One thing which is almost essential for promotion in St. Mary's College is a ready and thorough command of English. In the case of the majority of the new boys who come to us, this command cannot be obtained in a day or even in a year, and some boys who do not come to the College till they are 14 or 15 never rise very high because they have not this command of English – they cannot grasp the meaning of questions quickly, and so on.

With regard to the Staff of the College there have been several changes lately as you know. In mentioning these, I must say what a great deal the College owes to Fr. Remaud. He was at the College many years ago and returned again as French Master and Religious Instructor in 1912. From that time he has obtained splendid results in French and in every direction he has done magnificent work. He is leaving the College this term, but I hope for our sakes that his interest in it will not cease. Father Picherie comes from Canada to take his place and I wish him every success. During the term Mr. Johnson of Codrington College has filled the post of Second Master. In this position he has been of considerable use, and it is a pity that we cannot retain his services as an additional master.

Reviewing the work of the past year, I refer to the Honours list on the backs of your programme. Ernest Theobalds has done splendidly in passing the London Intermediate; I believe I am right in saying that this has never before been done in the Colony, but although Theobalds is the first, I am sure he will not be the last to pass this exam.

The Local results are, on the whole, very satisfactory, though it is to be regretted that no one obtained honours. The detailed report reveals considerable weakness in history and geography, – however, a weakness we are trying to remove this year.

Mr. Moulder's report on the three lower divisions of the school was also satisfactory and very helpful to the staff. As it speaks for itself, I need not comment further upon it.

The College magazine "The St. Lucian," has been restarted this term, and the first number of the new series will be issued tomorrow. I think you will find it of great interest and well worth the sixpence charged for it. It contains an account of the doings of Old Boys and therefore I do not propose to say much about them now. Our Roll of Honour bears at present 15 names is a considerable number for a school situated at such a distance

from the war zone. We are also connected with the war in another way Mr. Porter, late second master of the College has recently been promoted to Captain. It is evident that he carries his vigorous methods and manly personality into warfare just as he did into school.

I am sure you are all interested in what has been done lately in connection with the Cadets. I am anxious to put the Cadet Corps on the same footing as the School Officers Training Corps or O.T.C. in England, and certainly Mr. Gilkes, the master in charge, is doing magnificent work in this direction. Out of the 74 boys in the College, 70 are at present in the Cadet Corps; 50 of these are provided with uniforms and the remainder constitute the Reserve.

The School Library has been used a great deal this term but several books need rebinding and none have been added lately. Any gifts of books would be much appreciated.

With regard to the games this term, great interest has been manifested in football. It is quite evident to me that the game can be played and enjoyed even in these latitudes, and moreover with no danger to health.

In conclusion, I thank you all for giving me your attention for so long a period and assure you that it will continue to be my endeavour to meet your wishes in every direction and to make the College the most successful in this part of the world.”

(Applause)

On the conclusion of Mr. Fisher's address he called on the Administrator to address the audience. The Hon. Mr. Murray who was warmly received, then came forward. After a few appropriate words of welcome to those present and of appreciation of the interest shown in the proceedings His Honour announced his intention of presenting a yearly prize to be won by the best all round scholar. He did not mean by this only scholastic efficiency, but the boy who had set, by regular attendance, general good conduct, proficiency of studies and games a standard of conduct and proficiency. He had asked two or three gentlemen connected with the College to form a Committee of selection and as their verdict was he would abide by it. He urged on the boys to follow the Headmaster's advice and not to be content with an average pass in the examination for which they sat but to strive to gain the distinction of honours. His Honour then pointed out the importance of hard work and determination to win, illustrating his remarks by a reference to the attitude of England in the war; at first,

with the exception of her navy, unprepared, but now daily and hourly growing stronger and more determined to win, at whatever cost.

Thus the boy who set his heart on winning success in his studies was cultivating valuable traits of character which would serve him well in after life. His Honour asked those boys who had an inclination that way to seriously take up the profession of an agriculturalist; he pointed out that the island was being developed and the future of those who worked with a view of making a living by agriculture could find ease and independence at home instead of forsaking their native land for an often precarious living and forfeiting all prospect of a hopeful future among kindred and friends. He had planned out a visit of the school to the agricultural centre at Choiseul, and intended to give them all a trip coastwise after the holidays and let them see for themselves how much good work was being done there. (This prospect of a spree was most enthusiastically acclaimed by the whole school.) His Honour then touched on the future of the school and prophesied that with Mr. Fisher's determination to secure an honour's list at the next Exams, he was certain that success would follow. Complimenting the scholars on the full membership of the College Cadet Corps, he congratulated Mr. Gilkes on the success attained.

The Administrator's speech was heartily applauded and the general feeling was one of appreciation at the keen interest he manifested in the affairs of the College.

The Hon. Mrs. Murray then ascended the platform and distributed the certificates to the successful boys whom she congratulated in a kindly way on their success.

PRIZE LIST, 1915

Head Boy of the School, J.A. Theobalds.

Senior Prefect, I.F. James.

Top Boy in Senior Local, 1915, J.A. Theobalds.

Top Boy in Junior Local, 1915, R.L.J. Gilbert.

Top Boy in Preliminary Local, 1915, Vanderpool.

Regular Attendance and Punctuality, E.L. Auguste.

Mathematics, R.L.J. Gilbert.

English Essay, J.A. Theobalds.

Botany, C.J.A. Arthur.

English, Form IV, J.L. Vanderpool.

History and Geography, Form IV, G.A. Beaubrun
French, Form IV, G.L.M. Cadet.
French and Latin, Form III, G.N. Myers.
English, Form III, R.C.E. Dix.
Religious Knowledge, Form III, H. Bernez.
Arithmetic, Form III, T. Devaux.
Composition, Form II, A.L. Kirby.
Arithmetic, Form II, R. Harris.
Religious Knowledge, Form II, R. du Boulay.
French, Form II, P. George.
Latin and French, Form I, R. Branch.

FORM PRIZES

Top Boy of Form IV, C.P. Spencer.
Top Boy of Form III, H.N. Myers.
Top Boy of Form II, I. Lorde.
Top Boy of Form I, G. Spencer.

SPORTS AWARDS

HOUSE FOOTBALL CHALLENGE CUP

*Winners Blue House by 11 points to 7. Captain J.A. Theobalds; Vice
Captain T. Alcée; Secretary C.J.A. Arthur.*

FOOTBALL COLOURS FOR 1915-16

*Ivor James (Capt.), T. Alcée (Vice-Capt.), C.E. Devaux (Sec.), G.L.M.
Cadet.*

MARTINEZ CUP FOR SHOOTING, &c.

Coy. Sgt. Major I.F. James.

HONOURS LIST, 1915.

*London University Intermediate B.A.
E.C.M. Theobalds*

CAMBRIDGE SENIOR LOCAL

J.A. Theobalds, A.R. Palmer, A. Belmar.

CAMBRIDGE JUNIOR LOCAL

*R.L.J. Gilbert, O.R. Richmond, E.L. Auguste, C.J.A. Arthur, C.G. Devaux,
C.E. Devaux, E.A. Gabriel.*

CAMBRIDGE PRELIMINARY LOCAL

J.L. Vanderpool, A.F.A. White, A.K. Monplaisir, G.A. Beaubrun, R.J. Devaux, T. M. Alcée, P.H. Lagouterie

On the conclusion of the prize giving, the Rev. Father Tapon said a few sympathetic words. He who had originated the College and remembered its modest commencement could not regret that although he had surrendered active control to other hands, yet was he able to make in St. Lucia, his home, and watch the continued and growing success of St. Mary's College. The number of boys now on the roll was the highest that the College had ever had, and he pointed to the success of Theobalds in passing the Intermediate B.A. Exam.

▣ John Desmond Fisher, Born 1892, England and Wales Birth Registration Index, 1837-2008

REMINISCENCES OF THE OLD BOYS

A few old boys provided 'Reminiscences' of their days in the College's Annual Magazines of the 50s and 60s. These give a picture of the life, activities, traditions, problems, challenges and achievements of the college during its early days.

Sir Garnet Hamilton Gordon C.B.E., Q.C. writing of the period towards the end of the Great War and the early 1920s, recalled:

"... My first headmaster was John Desmond Fisher, a Master of Arts of Downing College, Cambridge. He laid a sound foundation and as boys we were sorry to see him go, especially in the circumstances of health which imposed an early retirement and death; but his work lives on. It was during the First World War with its insatiable demands for manpower and apparently a good English Roman Catholic Headmaster was hard to come by, a fact which gave opportunity for West Indians to show their mettle; for it was still the accepted thing that Englishmen should normally fill such posts. In the hands of Harry Carrington and later of J. E. Blackman, both

worthy sons of Barbados and men of no mean calibre, the challenge was more than met, and though neither was confirmed in the post, probably because of the ancient tradition, they left their imprint, all for good, on the school and Scholars. At least, in my case I have always had a sense of deep obligation. I recall, too, H. A. E. Guard, a gifted musician with great interest in dramatics. He was a scientist without a laboratory, as St. Mary's of my day had no laboratory. Shortage of money has always been a chronic problem and the future career of many a boy has been conditioned by what the school could offer.

Victor Alleyne Alfred Archer entered the College on the 18th September, 1917, until December 1924. He went on to teach at the Grammar Schools in St. Vincent and Grenada and later became Headmaster of the Dominica Grammar School) who passed through the hands of Headmasters Fisher, Carrington, Gard and Easter gives a glimpse of the character of these early headmasters when he wrote

'Jack Desmond Fisher, M.A. (Cantab) was a splendid teacher, a great disciplinarian and a lover of football. Fisher it was, who started St. Mary's on a period of development and it was always a matter of regret with him that his plan ended only in the addition of a verandah to the old building.