

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Feature Address delivered by a past student at the opening ceremony of the 2005 Bishop's In Heritage Week

I should like to start by asking you to imagine Tobago 1925. At that time there was not a single secondary school in Tobago. Those persons who were gifted found their way into the Civil Service or into Teaching via the Monitorial System. Much of their study was done at home, with a few hours of lessons after their duties as Monitors in school. Those boys, whose parents were affluent, would have been sent to Trinidad to enter one of the secondary schools in and around Port of Spain. Generally speaking, the girls were not so fortunate.

Such a course of action had implications; first of all, board and lodging to be provided, not to mention the inevitable school fees. Neither of these was high by today's standards, but they constituted a substantial demand on the resources of the parents. Then, there was the circumstance of the young Tobagonian being partially uprooted for shorter or longer periods; and this may well explain the presence of so many persons with Tobagonian roots in the sister isle. It may also explain the pattern of migration to Trinidad, whose greater opportunities existed for those with talents. Today that problem does not exist; there are some six public secondary schools in Tobago, along with a number of private ones, meeting the needs of the island's adolescent population.

Breaking the trend of migration and uprootedness was Bishop's High School, as it came to be called. The school was started at the instigation of Bishop Arthur Anstey, Bishop of Trinidad in the early decades of the twentieth century. Bishop Anstey had showed an interest in education and had demonstrated that interest in his building of the first Teacher Training Institute in Barbados, which he named after his predecessor as Principal and Bishop of Trinidad – Bishop Richard Rawle. In Tobago, Bishop Anstey entrusted the execution of the task of starting a school to an energetic parish priest, H.R. Archdeacon Davies, who had been working in the diocese since 1909. Davies managed to get the work started notwithstanding his own serious reservations about the capacity of the black person to achieve or to excel.

This requires a brief explanation. In 1909, the year he entered the ministry in Tobago, Davies expressed disfavour at the emergence of independent small proprietors in the island, preferring instead to see the Estates receive regular labourers so that they might prosper. In 1929, four years after he started the school, he was saying essentially the same thing. In another report to the SPG in London, he spoke of never seeing any sign of originality in any teacher. Believing such a characteristic to be alien to them, he predicted that such a drawback would always prevent them from rising very high. This and other negative views, taken together, suggest that Davies was an unwilling agent in the enterprise. There appeared to have been others in Trinidad, who did not see the necessity for such a school as this. Archdeacon Davies made reference to the negative views of persons and institutions in Trinidad, who, presumably, felt that the migration should continue. They did not understand what we wanted, and why things should be different; but they did not have their way.

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Bishop's High School did start, and its development owed much to those persons, who believed in its worth as well as the worth of the people, who were to be current and future students. From a small beginning in a little cottage called "Peru Cottage", the school moved subsequently to the site called Sans Souci, on the other side of the road. The initial expansion simply continued, and eventually the school moved to the ten acre site at Mount Marie, where it continues to the present. But it was not the buildings that mattered most. The need for additional, as well as larger buildings, bear eloquent testimony to the fact that Tobagonians appreciated the opportunities given them to expand their children's education. Among the first students of the school were Flora Ross, Vera Ottley and Dorothy Hislop. The names of male students are not immediately to hand, but they always outnumbered the girls by two to one.

The early teachers of the school were all foreigners, led by Mr. Rawle Jordan of Barbados, a graduate of Codrington College. Mr. Jordan was followed in the office of Principal by another Barbadian, the Reverend Ivor Jones. Along with these came a corps of teachers from outside the island – some good, some bad. Students of the 1950s will remember the tenure of Mr. David Beecham, the first and only English Principal, who held office for just over two years. In those years, persons of the same family were put in the same house; it also happened that members of one house were of the same or nearly the same, light complexion. As a result, Bishop's High School reflected a division that was as visually glaring as it was otherwise, annoying. That tenure was mercifully ended when Mr. E.C.R. Blackette was appointed to guide the school. Other principals followed in due course, until the school welcomed in 1975, the first Principal, who was a Tobagonian, Mr. Cecil Caruth and in 1994, it welcomed the first graduate of the school to be Principal, Mrs. Gwyneth Armstrong. *(It is to be noted that Mrs. Evuna St. Clair, a graduate of the school and its substantive Vice Principal acted for some time between the departure of Mr. Blackette and the appointment of Mr. Caruth.)* Under their leadership, the school demonstrated its resilience in the face of adverse circumstances – a resilience such as our ancestors demonstrated, when others thought they had put them down for the count.

The good reputation started and maintained by the school is attributable to the quality of heads it has had over the years. They infused into the thinking of the staff and students, their desire for excellence in all areas of endeavour. Thus it was that very early in its existence, the school began to produce great results, compared with national standards. It had a good record in the School Certificate (O' Level) and Higher School Certificate (A' Level), at a time when the majority of the staff were not university graduates. And when one looks at the instability of staffing, which the school went through at critical times, that performance could only be regarded as remarkable. This speaker remembers the time when students for the Higher School Certificate in Spanish had to send their exercises to Mr. W.S. Naimool at Q.R.C. to be marked, because he had just moved there from Bishop's and there had not been a replacement for him. From all accounts, the academic performance has continued in the effort to have excellence.

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The goal of excellence has also been set and maintained in the areas of sports, as the records of the school will show. Over the years, outstanding performances have been recorded in cricket (where one of our students was a member of the West Indies Under 15 Team that toured England.), football and athletics to name a few. There has also been excellence in music and other extra curricular activities such as scouting and cadets. In the latte, we note that one person (Julien Spencer) was selected to train at the prestigious Sandhurst Military Academy, ending his career in the Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force in the rank of Major. Also, the school's No. 1 Platoon won the Trinidad and Tobago Cadet Challenge Shield on numerous occasions. The observation of the late Dr. Eric Williams that "There is a Denominational School in Tobago whose Pass Average is higher than the overall National Average or the average for Denominational Schools" is one we must remember. It was not stated carelessly for Dr. Williams did not hand out plaudits easily.

The school did not only depend on teachers from overseas – principally Barbados. Very gradually, it produced teachers from among its first and later graduates. Among the many, whose names might be well known to many young persons today, are: Flora (Ross) Jordan, Badrol Armstrong, Moulda (Beache) Archie, Evuna (Elliott) St. Clair, Noel Sosa and Angela (Walters) Sosa and Marva (Scipio) Henry. There have been many others in recent years. The point is that the school was providing for its perpetuation in the persons of those of its sons and daughters, who returned to share their knowledge with their alma mater. However, it did not only generate its own leadership, it also provided persons to give leadership at national and international levels.

Bishop's High School is also to be know by its illustrious graduates – chiefly A.N.R. Robinson, who served throughout his long career as Member of Parliament, Government Minister, Chairman of the Tobago House of Assembly, Prime Minister and President of this country; but also, to name a few: Basil Pitt, who served as Attorney General and Ambassador; Victor Bruce, who was the first local to serve as Governor of the Central Bank; Ithnel Beckles, who served as CEO of the fledgling Industrial Development Corporation; Henry Sealey, who pioneered the Unit trust Corporation; Edwin Carrington now serving as Secretary General of CARICOM; Orville London the current Chief Secretary and Rawle Titus, now Deputy President of the Senate of Trinidad & Tobago. The list can go on and on. No Tobagonian could have aspired to such office or leadership position in 1925. Other schools have their achievers but the point here is that Bishop's served to unlock potential that might never have come to realization and that makes it an institution worthy of commemoration. Indeed, it is difficult to find an institution comparable in size and resources at that time – say 1925 to 1975, which has produced such leadership in such a short time. Leadership which has achieved so much, within and outside the confines of the island.

Bishop's has also been fortunate to have been served by men and women in its governing body, who wanted to see the institution develop and flourish. Theirs could not have been an easy task to manage the school with nothing more than fees and goodwill. But manage they did, under

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trying circumstances, and helped the school to grow. Bishop's High School has also been fortunate in having the generous benefactor, Dr. Sylvan Bowles, come to its assistance at a critical moment. A successful Tobagonian, Dr. Bowles contributed to education at the secondary level and subsequently, at university level – providing an example, which persons of similar affluence might do well to emulate.

Today the work of secondary education extends beyond Bishop's High School and now includes a variety of other players. This is a natural development and augers well for the community in the future. It is not an expression not just of a desire for another school, but an extension of the fact that this school, Bishop's, gave to the people of Tobago, an opportunity they did not have before. It opened the door to persons, who otherwise would not have been able to make the kind of contribution they did, under the then prevailing circumstances. We must thank the visionaries of the past, who made this possible.

But the work has not ended. There is still more to do to position Bishop's to respond to the developments taking place in our CARICOM region and across the globe. The demands of quality in education means that other areas of endeavour need to be developed so that our students get the best that can be offered, despite our small size. I believe that Bishop's and other secondary establishments in Tobago can become models for educational delivery and provision. There is also need to move education into new areas, which have not formed part of traditional studies. The evolution of Information Technology and related subjects opens a wide door for Tobagonians as for anyone else. Preparation in other areas leading to professions needs to be examined. For example, preparation for studies in Architecture as well as Marine Studies for those interested in being competent officers on ships, both of which can now be done in nearby Jamaica. These are only some of the things that may be given consideration; and if there is any thought I may leave with you, it is that we never give into the idea that we are small and that nothing can happen here.

The door is open again to Tobago, to this and other schools here, to make a vital contribution to life for our people. There will still be those who ask: What is it you want? There are those, even in the Church, who believe that there are too many Tobagonians in high places and who use their office to destructively – as I have found by experience. Bishop's was reviled when it started; but it persisted to be successful and to be a model for others. In the words of the late Eric Roach, "Bishop's High School elevated the sons and daughters of the peasant proprietors, first into clerkships, later into universities and professions, and thrust the island's strongest peasant conscience into the Trinidad administration". It stands as an icon for education in Tobago and as a beacon for the future – saying to the sons and daughters of Tobago: "there is hope and if we try, we shall overcome".

Reverend Canon Professor Noel Titus

July 2005.