



## "Slates Away!": Penmanship in Queensland, Australia

**History of Reading News.** Vol.XXI No.2 (1998:Spring)

by John Elkins

Recently in conversation with Jennifer Monaghan, I mentioned that I had learned to write on a slate. So I set out to record some memories of my school-day literacy learning.

I started school in February 1945, in a nation experiencing W. W. II rationing. The state of Queensland has been termed Australia's "deep north" and certainly was the last part of the country to encourage secondary schooling, with a major expansion not occurring until the early 1950s. My home town of Maryborough is celebrating its sesquicentennial this year (1997). In 1945 it was a city of 20,000 people, with an economy based on timber milling, ship-building and locomotives (steam and later diesel-electric). With sugar cane as the main farm product, it is not surprising that the city also exported sugar mill machinery world-wide.

There were four primary schools, and two secondary schools that were originally grammar schools for boys and girls. Financial difficulties during the 1930s resulted in their being subsumed within the public school system, which is a state rather than locally funded and administered system. There was also a technical college supervised by the Boys High School principal.

For reading, we used the *Queensland Readers* which had been prepared in 1914 by the Queensland Department of Public Instruction. Local educational historian Geoffrey Swan tells me that they were prepared using largely non-copyright stories and poems and contained illustrations reproduced from the collections of the Walker Gallery in Liverpool (UK) and the National Gallery, London.

We covered four preparatory books in the first two years while enrolled in an Infants School, and the Grade I through V books in primary school. The Prep books and the Grade VII *Reader* were introduced in 1930. General use of the *Readers* continued till the 1970s, although series such as Schonell's "Happy Venture" (remarkably like Dick and Jane) had also been adopted during the 1960s.

I think in Prep 1 that we had some paper to write on with pencils, but my memory of the routine use of slates is much more vivid. Each slate was framed in wood and one side was inscribed with lines to guide the limits for the upper and lower extremities of letters. The slate "pencils" were made of some pale gray mineral softer than slate which had been milled into cylinders some one-eighth of an inch in diameter and inserted into metal holders so that about an inch protruded.

Each student was equipped with a small tobacco tin in which was kept a damp sponge or cloth to erase the marks. Sharpening slate pencils was a regular task. We rubbed them on any suitable brick or concrete surface in the school yard. Teachers also kept a good supply of spares, all writing materials and books being provided by the school. It is possible that the retention of slates stemmed from the political imperative that public education should be free. I do recall being given a Copy Book for home practice of letter formation, a typical practice

until Grade 6.

The tables at which we used to sit in the Infant School were replaced in the primary Grades by long desks seating five or six pupils. These had slots into which the slates could be inserted vertically. When the teacher asked the class to clear their desks, the command issued was "slates away!" This was an occasion for a noisy expression of relief as we dropped the slates producing a sound not unlike a volley of rifle shots, and usually brought a request from the teacher to repeat the process with no noise by holding the frames throughout. Thus, I suspect we may still have used slates in Grade Three, though by then paper, which may have been scarce during the War, seemed to be used more routinely.

Indeed, the next step in writing was to use ink with a steel-nibbed pen. Ink was prepared by chosen students (ink monitors) who dissolved the ink powder using large glass bottles holding about 40 fl. oz. The ink monitors then filled each inkwell with the aid of a funnel. Needless to say harassment of girls with pigtails or plaits was not unknown.

In many respects this story is not unusual except for the time in which it occurred. I imagine that the use of slates was discontinued decades earlier in most western countries as it seems to have been in most other Australian States. There is however an interesting coda. In 1958, as a novice student teacher, I was sent to a school and assigned to a first-grade teacher. Knowing that my career plan was to teach high school, my mentor for a day decided to minimize the disruption of her class. She asked me to wait at the classroom door, took a large toffee tin from a cupboard (always referred to as a "press"), and said firmly "sharpen these!" I took the hint that I was not welcome in her room, and promptly found a shady mango tree and a brick, and adjusted my rate of sharpening so that at three o'clock I was able to hand back the tin of sharpened slate pencils. Did children in her class still use slates? I expect so, for I doubt she had hoarded those pencils for the day when she would need to occupy a misassigned student teacher! A colleague suggested that this practice was a form of initiation, like apprentice hairdressers sweeping the floor.

But my recollections are not confined to slate pencils or ink-wells. Gathering recently for the 40th (and first) reunion of my graduating high school class in a country town, we wandered the classrooms of our old school. Memories came back of one painful reading-related event during the 8th grade, receiving two strokes of the strap from the principal. The precipitating event took place in a reading lesson. Our teacher was conducting a typical session of calling upon students to read aloud, to define words, to name Latin or Greek roots, to parse and analyze. I suspect that the passage, something like "Horatio Defends the Bridge", was known so well that I did not expect to be called upon. Whatever the cause of my ennui, I did not escape the teacher's attentions. On being asked a question, I scrambled to find my 8th Grade *Reader* under the desktop. Duly admonished, I resumed my bored state, or perhaps I daydreamed, and the teacher moved on to question someone else. Some ten minutes later my daydreaming was interrupted and I was called upon again. This time I did not have my copy of the *Reader* open and I was dispatched to the principal's office!

These recollections are not the stuff of serious research, but perhaps they will provide some diversion.

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