

# EDUCATION

By Richard Glover



Gail, aged two.



Gail (fourth from left, second row) aged 11 in sixth class at Domremy College.



Gail, today.

## Harry Messel and cursive writing changed my life — by Gail Morgan



In the sixth form, aged 18.

HARRY MESSEL, the Wyndham scheme and modified cursive handwriting wrecked my life, says Gail Morgan, 30, who like many people her age experienced an education suspended between the old and the new.

When Gail started primary school at the end of the 1950s she was taught copperplate handwriting with dip-in pens, learned spelling and arithmetic by rote, spent several hours a week learning grammar, and was regularly beaten.

At her single-sex Catholic school she learned to plot the route of Dirk Hartog, parrot the catechism and sit straight-backed in class. The children wrote in immaculately ruled notebooks, inscribing on the top of each page the letters AMDG — all my deeds for God.

Sixteen years later Gail emerged from her education to become a primary school teacher at a Catholic school in Alice Springs.

She taught the children mathematics with cuisenaire rods, and science with self-teaching card systems; she took her charges on regular excursions, and was forbidden to hit them.

The school was co-educational. Grammar had been exchanged for poetry appreciation, the blackboard for audio-visual teaching aids.

The kids sat on the floor as often as at their desks.

Gail was educated at the Domremy Convent Primary School in Five Dock, and up to fifth class

experienced what was, even for the time, a most traditional education.

All the teachers were nuns, mostly old, all of them Irish. The children were told to wear bloomers down to their knees, to avoid stretch pants and shorts at home, and not to wear patent leather shoes lest the reflection reveal their bloomers.

There were few text books, and no use of film or television. Ballpoint pens were a privilege that came in high school.

There were four subjects in primary final — English, maths, social studies and religion.

English meant grammar and grammar meant parsing. Gail remembers at age 10, categorising words into transitive or intransitive, passive or active voice, nominative or accusative case.

Social studies and history were learned by rote just like the catechism: "What is a cape? A cape is piece of land jutting into the water. What is a prayer? Prayer is the rising of the heart and mind to God".

"You learned no Australian history, except for a few Europeans who visited Australia," says Gail. "Australia was a figment of our imaginations."

"We all saw ourselves as Irish Catholics against the English. We were taught that Ireland was the centre of the world, and England was just a small country near Ireland."

Spare moments were taken up by

endless sewing classes — the only craft subject.

Then suddenly came the first sign of change, of the invasion of new education. Having just mastered copperplate handwriting, the girls of Domremy were suddenly told to switch to the new modified cursive style.

As in schools throughout NSW, the teachers purged their own writing style of its ornate encumbrances and patrolled the aisles telling the children to stiffen their loops and straighten the slope of their letters.

"Ever since I've had this uncontrollable handwriting, which sometimes slopes, sometimes goes straight and has been known to go backwards. I still have problems at the bank getting even my signature constant."

The next shock of the new came with a move to secondary school. Grammar was dropped overnight and the hours spent parsing were forgotten — never to reappear in Gail's education.

And science was introduced in a form of two huge turquoise text books with an inside picture of the author, Harry Messel, looking like a beatnik, a relic of a European jazz club of the 50s.

But as Gail says, the flower-power cover belied the contents, which came as a big surprise to children whose only skills were adding, subtracting and repeating the rosary.

"We had done no science at primary school, except for growing plants in cotton wool and drawing volcanoes."

"Suddenly the new world of science was dropped in our lap and it made a big thud."

"You were about 12 years old and you were given this book which was the biggest book you had seen in your whole life. I don't think it would even fit in my suitcase. I had to leave it at school until I got a bigger suitcase."

"Can you imagine being given a science book that was going to last you four years? It was like being given the Domesday Book."

"I can remember endless hours doing things with Bunsen burners and having no idea what I was doing."

"We would draw up sheets with the headings 'aim, method and result', all underlined. The aim was always really grandiose, and the method always involved the Bunsen burner, the beaker and the measuring pipette."

"Then you would fill in the result — which would always start, 'due to a failure in experimental method'. It happened every time."

Gail believes that the educational system had, with the introduction of the Wyndham scheme, made maths and science into new gods.

It was an idea which was confirmed by the opening words of Messel's Science for High School Students, which talked of the importance of the "spirit of science" under the Wyndham scheme.

"English became second-rate" said Gail, "while putting electrical currents through the legs of toads was really worthwhile."

"If you did level one maths and science they gave you three units, but English and French didn't get a bonus."

"As for art, that was what simple girls did."

"I remember a lot of the clever girls a few years ahead of me were doing humanities and nobody thought less of them."

"Science was an incredible leap of faith, but the new maths was an impossibility."

"We suddenly learned about negative and positive numbers, and that was mind-boggling. As far as we were concerned numbers always went forward, there was no way a number could backtrack into negativity."

### Skinless toads

Wyndham also meant an extra year at high-school, which for Gail was the Santa Sabina Convent at Strathfield.

"The main problem with the extra year was another year wearing the school uniform. I was 18 in this gingham dress with a Peter Pan collar and when it was windy you looked like a flying tablecloth."

There were even school dances: the boys were bused-in from the neighbouring Catholic school and partners were allocated by the girls picking numbers from a hat a week before.

Gail remembers being less than happy with her beau and spending the night sitting with a plate of sandwiches on her lap.

After struggling through high school with maths and science (and repeating the final year because of them) Gail returned to humanities and read English at university.

"A long line of skinless toads must have been horrified to hear of their wasted lives, but there it was," she said.

"When I was 12 everyone had

jobs — if you were good enough you could be anything you wanted. That's what gave me confidence to head for an arts degree."

Gail went to Sydney University on a teacher's scholarship, which paid fees and gave a living allowance of \$19 a week, in return for which the student was bonded to the Education Department for six years.

A year later, the Whitlam Government abolished fees.

"As I went to university the degree was getting slowly devalued every year — it was very depressing," Gail said with a laugh.

"The talk was still all maths and science, although the English Department at Sydney University did not appear to notice it."

"The academics were still living in the years before Wyndham and before unemployment. They were encouraging English students to go on and become university tutors, and you had to point out to them that there were no jobs."

"At the end of my BA they asked me to do an MA and I was so flattered I said yes, and for a year worked at it."

But then Gail realised her degree was going nowhere and went to Alice Springs to take a job, finishing her MA part-time.

She taught in the Catholic primary school and completed some sort of circle. But now the kids were learning about a huge range of subjects, although remaining ignorant of grammar.

Sewing was taught, as it had been at Domremy — but the kids could also do other electives.

"Education has changed so much both for the better and worse, the kids are so adaptable and resilient they seem to be able to cope with anything the system does to them."

"Its only in later life that the chickens come home to roost and you find you've got terrible handwriting, you're scared of science, and feel like a failure because you never mastered maths."

But Gail says all her suffering at the hands of maths and science led her to an adulation of the English language.

Despite Mr Wyndham and Mr Messel and the new focus on science, Gail is now a teacher of English to the migrants at Endeavour Hostel and a prolific writer of poetry, novels and plays. She has recently been granted an arts council grant to complete a second novel.