

CHAPTER SEVEN

Rev.James Baird McFeeters, B.A. and the Opening of the New Building



Rev.J.B.McFeeters, B.A. (1905-1923)

MR.McFEETERS' EARLY CAREER AND APPOINTMENT

James Baird McFeeters was born in Raphoe on 5 December 1856. He was educated at *Raphoe Royal School* and at *Trinity College Dublin*, where he was awarded a Sizarship and Exhibitions, before completing his B.A. in 1878. On leaving Trinity he became Headmaster of *Waterford Diocesan School* where he remained until 1882, during which time he saw both the school buildings and the number of pupils grow. He subsequently received his theological training at *Union Theological Seminary* New York between 1883 and 1886, when he was licensed by the Presbytery of New York. (Mr.McFeeters clearly enjoyed his time in New York, for in 1922 he sent five shillings 'as my mite towards the Memorial to the five brave gentlemen of our beloved Theological Seminary, who laid down their lives for us in the Great World War'. His letter continued: 'I have nothing but pleasant memories of my two and a half years in the U.T.S., first in the ancient structure downtown and soon after in the modern building on Murray Hill'). He was received by the Derry Presbytery in 1887 and was ordained in *Brigh Presbyterian Church* County Tyrone on 22 February 1888 where he ministered until 1893, when he resigned to become Headmaster of *Rainey Endowed School*, Magherafelt. He was Headmaster of *Rainey* for twelve years, during which he again saw pupil numbers rise – from 9 to almost 100 – and supervised building extensions. While in Magherafelt, he married Emily Marcella Wilson, daughter of Rev.John Wilson who had been minister of the neighbouring congregation of Lecumpher. He was appointed Headmaster of *Bangor Endowed School* in August 1905.¹

Of the applicants who responded to the advertisement in June 1905, three were invited for interview in August. The other two were Mr.S.J.N.Mackinlay B.A., Assistant Master in the *Congregational School*, Surrey and Mr.J.Edward Maxwell B.A., Principal of the *Merchant Taylors' School* Dublin. Mr.McFeeters was chosen on condition that the School was opened in September by Mr.McFeeters or by 'a substitute approved by the Governors' in premises approved by the Governors, and that Mr.McFeeters take possession personally by 1 October. Mr.Mackinlay was second choice. Mr.McFeeters accepted on condition that the Governors equipped a Laboratory in the School.²

¹ *Fasti of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, 1871-1890*, compiled by Dr.John M.Barkley; a letter, dated 16 December 1922, held in the archives of Union Theological Seminary, New York; *County Down Spectator*, 12 July 1930.

² Minutes of the Board of Governors, 14 August, 17 August, and 23 August 1905.

His elder son Jack McFeeters, then aged seven, recalled:

'We prepared to move – my father and mother, my baby brother and I, our nurse and our cook. . . The move to Bangor took the best part of a day, with train journeys on two separate lines and drives to and from four stations by jaunting car. I remember, when we finally arrived at a road approaching the sea, the sweep of my father's arm as he turned to me and said, "There is your new home".'

Even after the new school building was opened in September 1906 the McFeeters family continued to live on Seacliffe Road, until *Crosby House* was built in 1914.³

THE NEW PREMISES TAKE SHAPE

In the interim, between Mr.Ashmore's resignation and Mr.McFeeters' appointment, plans for the new School building continued to be considered. In June 1905, presumably after initial plans had been submitted to them, the Governors asked the architect to prepare an alternative estimate 'without the wing' and a month later Rev.R.J.Morrell reported that members of the Committee were willing to become guarantors to the bank, if the Governors would appoint an equal number of guarantors. Having agreed, Lady Clanmorris subsequently withdrew her offer to act as guarantor, because not all the Governors had done likewise, but eventually tenders were invited, decisions to sell the Consols and to issue the builder with certificates worth £2,000 on account, had been made, the Committee having paid £1,000 on account.⁴



Mr.McFeeters (back right) and Mr.T.McBride (back left)
with 25 pupils outside College Gardens, presumably in 1905-1906.

Since the School Register records 26 pupils as having been enrolled by Christmas 1905, this must be the entire School population, minus a late arrival or an absentee.

In faint pencil, on the back of the photograph, along with the names of Mr.McFeeters and Mr.McBride are W.D.Weir and H.I.Mahaffy.

William Weir served, and Harry Mahaffy died, in the Great War.⁵

(Photograph in the School Archives)

³ J.McFeeters, op.cit., p.16.

⁴ Minutes of the Board of Governors, 23 June, 28 August, 18 December 1905, 11 June and 16 July 1906.

⁵ J.McFeeters, op.cit., p.14.

On 25 August 1905, the *County Down Spectator* announced that work would be resumed at 'Bangor Grammar School' on Monday 4 September at 10.00 a.m., until which date enquiries were to be addressed to Mr. McFeeters in Magherafelt. When he took up his position, the eleven pupils were taught in 'a large terraced house on the seafront, which also served as the Headmaster's residence', from Jack McFeeters' description, clearly College Gardens. In October 1905 Mr. E. L. Woods submitted detailed drawings and when, in December 1905, the sketch of the proposed new building appeared in the local press, it was accompanied by a description of the building, which was 'to be situated at the far end of the new unnamed road which branches off the Ballyholme Road'. The newspaper reported that, in designing the school, provision had been made for future extension should the necessity arise. Of the design, it was said:

*'The exterior is of a style most adaptable for a building of this class; the windows are mullioned, the top portions being made to open, and special attention has been given to the complete ventilation of the entire school. The walls will be finished in rough cast of natural cement colour and with Douling stone dressings. The handsome tower, surmounted with a bell turret forms the principal feature of the façade. On the ground floor is a large hall suitable for examinations and other special purposes, a reception room and two large classrooms, and on the upper floor is a fine laboratory and three other good sized classrooms, and a room for the use of the masters. Ample cloakroom and lavatory accommodation have also been provided.'*⁶

The 'large hall', remembered by generations of pupils as 'A' Room, remained the main room in the School until 1960, when 'the necessity' arose for the first of several extensions to the building for almost half a century.

THE OPENING CEREMONY

By the time the new school building was opened in September 1906, the road had been named *College Avenue*. In its report of the ceremony, the *County Down Spectator* gives further details: the architect was Ernest L. Woods, the Town Surveyor (who was also responsible for the design of the *Carnegie Library* and the Golf Clubhouse - later *Connor House* - as well as a number of houses throughout the town), and Mr. Hutchinson Keith was the builder, (although, initially, the tender of £2,646-0-8^d, by local builder, James Savage, had been accepted). The plumbing was done 'excellently' by Mr. M. Morrow, and 'the sanitary arrangements are excellent'.

Interestingly, Hon. Somerset Ward, who acted as Chairman, remarked that shortly after the drawing up of the Scheme by the Educational Endowments Commissioners in 1893, 'Dr. Conolly, a very able teacher, was elected to the mastership'. There was no suggestion that the School had ever been 'defunct', as maintained by Mr. Milligan. Nor did Mr. Ward make any reference to the 'nomadic' nature of the School.

'Under his [Dr. Conolly's] guidance, the establishment prospered very much indeed. The buildings were then found to be altogether inadequate and the difficulty was how to provide, out of a small endowment, suitable accommodation, but that difficulty was eventually solved by Dr. Conolly renting two small houses facing Ballyholme Bay, where he carried on the School very successfully. In the course of time, these buildings became too small for the requirements of the large numbers of pupils attending them, and it became necessary for several gentlemen of the town to form a committee and arrange for the erection of the School, which was to be opened that day'.

The Dowager Duchess of Dufferin and Ava, on behalf of the architect and builder, presented Mr. W. K. Crosby, the School's generous benefactor, with a solid gold key. Before performing the opening ceremony he alluded to Bangor's long history as a seat of learning, but said that it was

⁶ Minutes of the Board of Governors, 27 October 1905; *The Irish Builder and Engineer*, Vol. 47, p. 914, 16 December 1905.

'cause for humiliation and a sense of mortification on the part of the natives and all the residents of Bangor that in the recent past many boys and girls had been obliged to go to Belfast – or even to a smaller town like Holywood – to complete their education, because of the paucity of educational advantages' offered in Bangor. That, he hoped, would no longer be the case. With reference to Mr.McFeeters, he said that he had,

'heard very nice things about him, as to his high character, fine scholarship and his ability as an educator. I understand he is a man who will not only instruct the mind, but will look after the morals of his pupils as well. I believe he has the teaching gift, for I have long felt that teachers are born, not made. . . . I feel very sure that this School in the future, under the leadership of Mr.McFeeters and his coadjutors, will stand for the highest ideals and the best things in education for boys. . . . I do hope the parents of Bangor and surrounding district will patronize this School by sending their boys to it as pupils. I think I am safe in saying that this building can accommodate at least three hundred pupils'.

Then, surrounded by a host of local dignitaries, Mr.Crosby declared the School building open. It is interesting that present at the opening of the **SCHOOL** were Mr.**CROSBY**, Mr.**WARD** and the Dowager Duchess of **DUFFERIN** and Ava, thus providing the School with the names of its four modern 'Houses'.

The Dean of Down, Rev.Edward Maguire, a Governor of the *Endowed School* from the foundation of the Board until his resignation the previous year, remarked on how the town had grown during that period, and he recalled how, thirty years before, the School had *'not much to boast of'*. Rev.R.J.Morrell pointed out that although the old premises had been sold for £1,200, about £1,600 or £1,800 remained to be raised. A vote of thanks to Mr.Crosby was proposed by John McMeekan. After further votes of thanks and acknowledgements, the proceedings were brought to a close and *'the company proceeded to inspect the buildings, after which tea was served'*.⁷

Four years later, the *Official Guide to Bangor* boasted that,

'The amplitude of the new school and its elaborate fittings reflect unmistakably the growth of Bangor and the greatly-increased demand for secondary education. The new institution, with all its modern advantages and its improved equipment, fully sustains the fine traditions of the old Bangor Endowed School. Many men of note, some of whom have become famous, received at the Endowed School that training which moulds the mind at its most plastic and receptive stage. Can we doubt that, under the present able and accomplished headmaster, Mr.James McFeeters, B.A. (Dub.), and his efficient assistants, history will repeat itself in this respect?'

THE LIQUIDATION OF THE DEBT

Despite Mr.Crosby's generosity, the building of the new school had incurred a large debt. Quite apart from the cost of the building itself, £39-10-8^d had been spent on furniture, laboratory apparatus had cost £57-13-7^d, and lockers £33-10-0. Thomas Matthews J.P., who had been the first Chairman of Bangor Urban District Council, offered to pay for a clock in the bell tower, and his obituary in 1916 records that he did so, thus providing *'a finishing touch which had been lacking since the new school was erected'*.⁸ Nevertheless, a considerable amount remained to be raised, and so on Friday 2 November 1906 a meeting was held to consider how best to liquidate that debt. It was decided to hold a *'Bazaar'* the following summer. The meeting was attended by a large number of interested parties, including local clergymen, businessmen and district councillors. Apologies were received from, among others, Lady Clanmorris, Lady Dufferin, and Viscount and Viscountess Bangor.

⁷ *County Down Spectator*, 7 September 1906; Minutes of the Board of Governors, 29 December 1905.

⁸ *Belfast Newsletter*, 9 December 1916, p.7. Thomas Matthews was the uncle of the grandfather of George Matthews (1965-74), who drew this article to my attention.

Mr.McMeekan, acting as Chairman, explained that the building, its furnishings and laboratory had cost £3,000. The sale of the old schoolhouse to the Urban District Council had raised £1,200 and Mr.Crosby had promised £300 provided the remaining £1,500 was raised within two years. A further £100 would be required, he said, to purchase a strip of ground adjoining the School, to make the playground sufficiently large. A number of unnamed gentlemen had signed '*a joint and several guarantee bond*' to the bank, making them liable for the full amount. He spoke of the '*worthy cause*' of promoting the education of boys, to equip them for the battle of life, and said that the School had already turned out some splendid men, who had succeeded in the commercial world and in the learned professions, not least Sir John Newell Jordan, an old school-fellow of his, and now H.M.Ambassador to China.

Mr.W.Irwin Mahaffy, Secretary to the Board of Governors, pointed out that all those who subscribed £1 a year would be entitled to vote for the School Governors, and each donor of £10 would be entitled to vote permanently, as provided for in the Scheme for the management of the School. Rev.R.J.Morell explained that the original endowment, by that time amounting to some £2,000, yielded only £56 per annum, which had been used for the payment of rent and the upkeep of the School; whatever little was left went to the teachers. Praising the new school building and the Headmaster, Rev.John Waddell, minister of *First Bangor Presbyterian Church*, remarked that they now had everything – except the money!

THE BAZAAR

A Committee was duly formed to organize the Bazaar. Among its members were all the local clergymen, including Father McKenna, the Parish Priest, Mr.McMeekan, Hon.Somerset Ward, James Crosby, brother of W.K.Crosby, and Mr.McFeeters.⁹

And so, on 12 July 1907, the *Spectator* carried an advertisement announcing a '*Grand Carnival and Fancy Fair*' to be held the following Thursday, Friday and Saturday. Lord and Lady Clanmorris had made an exception to their usual rule by allowing the grounds of Bangor Castle to be used, since the School had been founded by Lady Clanmorris's great-grandfather and since she was a member of the Board of Governors. The Bazaar featured a range of stalls and many '*mirth-provoking amusements*'; concerts were given by the bands of the 1st Battalion Rifle Brigade, the Royal Sussex Regiment and the West Yorkshire Regiment, and a '*good photograph of the new Endowed School*' was on sale. '*There was nothing wanting, to make the Carnival and Summer Fair a grand success*'; it was a '*magnificent spectacle*', due in large measure to '*the organizing genius of Mr.McMeekan*', ably assisted by Mr.James Milliken, the Town Clerk. A highlight (no pun intended) was the illumination supplied by sixty 600-candle-power lamps, supplied free by the Welsbach Company. They almost didn't arrive from England because of a dockers' strike in Belfast, but local ship-owner Thomas Matthews made special arrangements. The lights were powered by a specially laid supply of town gas.

⁹ *County Down Spectator*, 9 November 1906; Minutes of the Board of Governors, 8 October 1906, 19 June 1907,

BANGOR ENDOWED SCHOOL.

GRAND

Carnival and Fancy Fair

In aid of the above will be held

IN THE GROUNDS OF BANGOR CASTLE,

(Kindly granted by Lord and Lady Clanmorris),

On THURSDAY, FRIDAY, & SATURDAY, 18th, 19th, and 20th JULY.

Opening Ceremony at One o'clock each day.

First day—Mrs. W. K. CROSBY ; Chairman, G. HERBERT BROWN, Esq., J.P.

Second day—Miss CONNOR ; Chairman, Col. R. G. SHARMAN-CRAWFORD, D.L.

Third day—Mrs. G. HERBERT BROWN ; Chairman, Sir OTTO JAFFE, D.L.

Stalls and Grounds Beautifully Decorated. Decorations by Peck & Co., Leeds.

Tents and Grounds brilliantly Illuminated by Self-intensifying Gas Lamps (kindly lent by the Welsbach Incandescent Gas Lighting Co., London). Military Band Daily. Half-hour Concerts, Gipsy Encampments, Punch and Judy Show, Shooting Gallery, Putting Competition, Aerial Flight, and many other Mirth-provoking Amusements.

Hot and Cold Luncheons, Teas, Suppers, &c.

Admission—Opening Day, up till 6 p.m., 1s; after 6 o'clock and remaining Days, 6d.

Season Ticket, 2s. Cheap Fares and Late Trains.

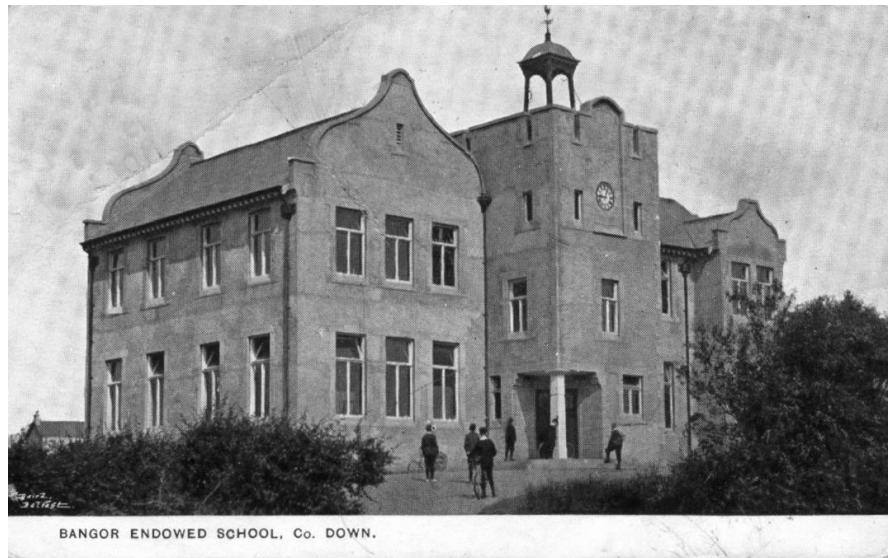
The advertisement in the *Spectator*, 12 July 1907

A thirty-four-page 'Bazaar Book' was on sale, containing literary contributions by local people, including 'The Old Endowed' and 'To a Schoolboy' by Mrs. F.M. Wilson. The book also served as a programme, listing the stallholders and musical items; it was priced at 3d.¹⁰



A postcard view of the School from the collection of W. Harding Watson [1944-1950], postmarked 1907. Note the absence of the clock..

¹⁰ *County Down Spectator*, 19 July 1907.



Another of Harding Watson's postcards
Also postmarked 1907. The clock has now been installed.

MR.CROSBY'S FURTHER GENEROSITY

With interest accruing, the final debt was £2,128 and despite a number of substantial donations, including £50 from Mr.Herbert Brown J.P. and £25 each from Miss Connor and Col.Sharman-Crawford, the Bazaar raised only £900 and so failed to earn Mr.Crosby's £300. He increased his offer to £400, and extended the deadline. By June 1908, £540 had been promised as a result of thirty people pledging £18 over three years. At a meeting in the Pickie Hotel on 26 June, Mr.Crosby more than doubled his original offer, to £614 - *'half of the required amount'* - provided the remainder was raised before September. Mr.McMeekan urged the thirty benefactors to increase their donations to £20, and to make them by September, which they duly did.¹¹ This left only £14 outstanding and so in December 1908 Mr.McFeeters was able to report that the School was *'untrammelled by the incubus of a heavy debt'*.

But already there was talk of adding *'a teacher's residence to those fine buildings'*.¹²

¹¹ *County Down Spectator*, 3 July 1908.

¹² *County Down Spectator*, 18 December 1908.