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incorporating The Kingsman

Margaret Hodgetts

Jane Emily Wills, who is commemorated at King's College, London, by the presentation of a book token to every woman student completing the Bachelor of Divinity course, was born in Exeter on 13th November 1879, the eldest of four daughters of William Skinner Wills, an accountant, and his wife Emily, whose maiden name was Brent.

Of Jane's early education there is little record, but at least part of it was in the care of the local vicar; an associate recalls having been told that Jane's parents decided that her eager and enquiring mind could best be trained by him and that he delighted in teaching the little girl Hebrew and Greek. From 1895 to 1897 Jane attended Grosvenor College, Bath, and from 1897 to 1898, the University College of North Wales at Bangor. There is no record of her having remained there beyond that date and detailed records of her course of study are not now available. We may perhaps speculate that in the days when there were no student grants, Jane Wills may have been forced to give up full time study for financial reasons. Certainly there can have been no lack of aptitude or diligence, for her whole life bears witness to her great intellectual gifts and her dedicated use of these gifts in her vocation as scholar and teacher. It is often observed that very few people—if any—ever reach their potential achievement, Jane Emily Wills must be an outstanding example of one of those rare spirits who come within grasp of it.

In 1900 she embarked upon a course of private study under the direction of the University Correspondence College, Cambridge; these studies were to extend over several years, with the result that in 1905 she passed the Intermediate Examination of the University of London Bachelor of Divinity Degree and five years later graduated as an external student, among the first of the very few women to gain this distinction. At the same time she was studying for the Lambeth Diploma (Student of Theology) which she gained in the same year. Even allowing for a certain overlapping of syllabus, the amount of study required must have been phenomenal; what makes it even more astonishing—certainly, it may be hazarded, to

our younger students—the remarkable Miss Wills was actually doing a job at the same time. From 1898 to 1906 she was engaged in teaching, for the most part in private schools, of which there were many at that time. But Miss Wills's attainments were not narrow or unbalanced, although Biblical and Religious Studies evidently took priority; it is recorded that in 1908 she was awarded the Diplôme de la Langue Française, degré supérieure, of the University of Caen.

In 1907 Jane Wills joined the staff of the Gravesend County School, then a mixed school, at premises known as Mayfield, where she held a position as form mistress. She was evidently a woman of many parts, and we may confidently assume that the entrusting of instruction to a teacher required rather more than the willingness on the teacher's part to teach an 'unpopular' subject. Miss Wills was responsible for the teaching of Holy Scripture, English, French, Latin and Music.

The school was re-organised as a school for girls only in 1910 when a separate Grammar School was opened for boys. In 1915 Miss Wills, who had remained in the girls' school, was promoted to the position of Second Mistress, with responsibility now for teaching Holy Scripture, Latin and Singing. In that same year she received a licence from the Archbishop of Canterbury to teach Theology.

The Headmistress at that time was Edith Margery Fox, and a close and lasting friendship was formed between her and Jane Wills, who was held in Miss Fox's highest esteem. When Miss Fox moved to the headship of the new Beckenham Girls' Grammar School in 1919, Jane Wills was appointed to the headship of the Gravesend School. There can be no doubt that whatever competition she may or may not have faced, she was in every way a most worthy candidate for this office, which she filled with such distinction for twenty-one years.

The school expanded and eventually was rehoused in a new building in Pelham Road (the present school) which was officially opened by the Duchess of Atholl in October 1929.

In 1935, the school's twenty-first birthday

year, Miss Wills had an opportunity to express in the school magazine foreword her gratitude to all who had contributed to the success of the school, making particular mention of the teaching staff: 'Words are insufficient to express my gratitude, appreciation and affection.' Mention was also made of the school secretary and the caretaking and household staff, who gave much ungrudging service. Jane Wills held the girls she taught in proud and affectionate regard and did not withhold praise when she considered it was deserved. She wrote. 'Apart from scholastic work, the school has bestirred itself valiantly for the needs of others and for the generations of schoolgirls who will follow . . . memory scarce recalls a girl who has in any way let down her school or failed in good days or bad to respond to its motto: "Per aspera ad astra".'

It was with pride and satisfaction that in 1938 Jane Wills recorded that a member of her staff had been successful in gaining the Lambeth Diploma. 'Few other women in Kent own this distinction and it is the fruit of much hard reading and sacrifice of leisure.' And the same foreword reports on a pupil going to King's College to read for a degree in Divinity.

Whilst the attainment of a high academic standard was a matter which lay close to Jane Wills's heart, and although she herself was a first class scholar, with the scholar's love of learning for its own sake, she realised that not everyone was cast in the same mould. She wrote: 'In all walks of life, sound knowledge and a training in obtaining further knowledge for oneself are essential if, as we hope, our girls are to serve their generation in the future.' In writing of the Sixth Form, she refers to its immense value, not merely on the academic side, 'but in the training of character, in developing powers of readiness and service, and especially that power of leadership and vision which will be of the utmost importance later in life.' Later, in the same foreword. 'The duties of the home and care of children and sick will always be the natural outlets of women's energies and I am glad to note that our girls are responding to their natural vocation'.

This dedicated woman, who might by modern standards be regarded as having lived a narrow sheltered life, never coming into contact with the real world, was nevertheless gifted with that insight which allows of understanding without

experience. She was well aware of the dangers involved when life was going too smoothly. Thus, in 1935. 'I look forward for the school, that its lines may not fall in *too* pleasant places, but that its difficulties may be those which may be courageously surmounted, so that generations to follow may be yet more courageous, yet more steadfast, girls gracious in manners, courageous in disposition, steadfast in trial, generous in success.'

There was an austerity about Jane Wills: it shows in her photographs, with her classic, rather beautiful face and severe hair style ('Gothic' was how one of her staff described her). But behind this austerity there was surely a warm heart, capable of deep affection. For example, the death through accident of a pupil is movingly recorded: 'with sorrow and sympathy for her sorrowing parents . . . in the short space of one term she had won for herself a good place in her form and in the esteem of her companions.'

The Gravesend School celebrated its Jubilee in 1964 and questionnaires and invitations were sent out to former pupils and members of staff. It seems that there was a good response and it is interesting to learn what a deep impression remained after many years of Jane Wills's influence on the girls who had been taught by her. One, who had made nursing her career and who had left the school in 1938 wrote: 'Miss Wills was Headmistress when I was at school and I have realised through the years since I left what a very fine woman she was. She tried to help all her pupils to develop the sort of character which would help them to be good members of the community in which they lived.' Another wrote from Canada, having been married in the War to an officer in the Canadian Army: 'Perhaps the most important of my memories is of the splendid standard of education offered which I only realised after I had left. The Headmistress was Miss Jane Wills . . . we all went in awe of her . . . she was a wonderful woman of great intelligence and the school ran like clockwork under her administration. She taught Latin, Greek and Scripture to the Sixth form'. Yet another, who left the school in 1925 and was herself on the point of retirement from teaching, wrote of 'Miss Fox's and Miss Wills's outstanding scholarship . . . the frequent prayer reading was from Ecclesiasticus "Wisdom cometh from the

opportunity of leisure". Miss Wills claimed that all her staff were ladies and I think we should all have subscribed to that. There was nothing shoddy about anything in the school.' This contributor recollected with gratitude the way in which the girls were encouraged to appreciate the arts, particularly those of music and painting. The picture in Miss Wills's room of St Genevieve watching over Paris by the nineteenth century French painter Puvis de Chavannes had given her particular delight. This same 'old girl', herself unmarried, also records Miss Wills's view of matrimony as a career which needed as much preparation and excellence as any other. She remembered, too, how Miss Fox and Miss Wills worked for the recognition of Religious Knowledge and Music in public examinations, both of which were taught to a high degree of excellence at Gravesend.

One former member of Staff, writing from Cheltenham, where she was teaching Classics at the Cheltenham Ladies' College, recalled with pleasure the happy atmosphere in the staff room at Gravesend and quoted one of the many verbal pearls which fell from Miss Wills's lips: 'The British Empire was never built by girls who were afraid to sleep away from home.'

Some light-hearted reminiscences of Jane Wills are related by former members of the staff: hats and gloves were required to be worn in the street at all times by all girls attending the school, these items being an essential part of the school uniform. Nor was the indulging in the purchase of ice creams to be tolerated, for it would not have pleased Miss Wills to meet a girl walking down the street with 'her hat in her hand and an ice-cream on her head'. Girls from the Gravesend School were forbidden to walk on the same side road as the boys from the Grammar School. Jane Wills was most solicitous for the correct behaviour of her staff at all times. One young teacher happened to stand on a desk to look out of a window at what was going on in the sports ground and the reprimand from Miss Wills came promptly, with the reminder that 'no lady ever looks out of a window'. With her undoubted command of the respect and affection of staff and girls, the school carried on its daily life with calm efficiency. However, Jane Wills was, like everyone else, human, and had been known on very rare occasions to lose her temper, it is significant to know that she had the humility to apologise to the member of staff concerned.

When one teacher, after having taught scripture for two terms, was asked whether she really wished to teach the subject and replied that she did indeed, Miss Wills told her that she must get herself qualified. It seems that Scripture, by whatever name it is called, was even then something of a Cinderella subject, but Miss Wills would have none of that. She suggested that the teacher should study for the University of London Diploma in Theology and in her business-like way arranged with the Classics mistress for coaching in Greek. The subject was considered by Miss Wills to be of great importance and the majority of girls took it as a subject in the School Certificate Examination. She would have been gratified to know that this tradition was carried on in the school in the years which followed.

Jane—as she was referred to by staff and others who came in contact with her, although few would have dared to address her in this way—had a real concern for the welfare of all her staff. If she could see that a young teacher was in difficulty, she would give every help and encouragement; if, however, she recognised that a member of staff would never really be happy or successful in a teaching career, she would unhesitatingly advise her to give it up. This outspoken advice, painful as it was for both parties, was for the ultimate good of the young teacher, hard though it may have been to accept at the time. Ambition for her staff was another of Jane's characteristics; she would urge the most able members of her staff to seek promotion, even though from the point of view of the school she would have preferred to keep them.

School prayers were an important part of the day. The school had a splendid organ and the music was supervised by Jane's sister Maude—so well remembered by one of the 'old girls'—a highly talented musician and an eccentric character who frequently gave way to exhibitions of temperament. Perfection in this daily observance was the standard expected by the Wills sisters; the psalms were sung to plainsong and all knelt for prayers, when collects from the Book of Common Prayer were used. There was a Bible reading and a hymn from 'Songs of Praise' was sung. A former member of staff also observed that 'the service would be punctuated by asides to any one of the assembly who coughed or flourished a handkerchief.' This same member of staff relates that her mother

frequently reminded her that in her first letter home she wrote: 'If I broke all the Ten Commandments, I'd be forgiven, but heaven help me if I drop my hymn book in prayers.'

Jane Wills's interest in Biblical and theological studies extended far beyond the confines of her school. A Hebrew scholar of some distinction, she contributed a commentary on the Book of Genesis to the first edition of the Teachers' Commentary, published by the Student Christian Movement in 1932. Throughout this study she emphasised the theme of the sense of the divine purpose and man's response, which she considered to form the contribution of the book to permanent religious thought. With her friend Edith Fox, Jane Wills kept abreast of modern scholarship by attendance at the Vacation Term for Biblical Study which was then held each summer alternately at Oxford and Cambridge. Miss Wills was a member of the Lambeth Diploma Committee for a number of years and is on record as having made the suggestion that no candidate should be allowed a First or Second Class Grade if her Greek was poor, no matter what marks she may have gained in other subjects. It is also recorded that she gave her whole-hearted support for the admission of men to work for the Diplomas and this did, in fact, come about some years later.

Members of the Vacation Term whose attendance goes back to the era of Miss Wills and Miss Fox, recall her as an 'outstanding personality, always kind and encouraging... a great lady who never hesitated to express her opinions.' One member, who must have been very young at the time, remembers two very dignified and rather unapproachable ladies—obviously headmistresses and obviously Miss Wills and Miss Fox. It is somewhat refreshing to be told that Jane once lost her place in the Magnificat when she was conducting prayers at the Vacation Term.

Descriptions by those who remember Jane Wills show a remarkable consistency. 'She had', writes one former member of the staff, 'a presence which commanded respect immediately, but a lively and humorous twinkle in the eye belied the first impression of sternness. Not everyone was aware of the twinkle because she was without doubt a keen disciplinarian as far as girls and staff were concerned.' This assessment of her is endorsed by others. One writes. 'She

was a good-looking, well-dressed, very dignified person. She had the highest standards, both for pupils and staff and could show her disapproval in a very marked way. The staff, particularly the younger members, were really frightened of her, but came to realise her high aims and respected her for them.'

Although Jane was held in such high esteem, it is recalled that she was somewhat lacking in tolerance for those less able than herself; she was not one who suffered fools gladly. She was also insistent upon the observance of the barriers which existed between the teaching staff, office staff and domestic staff.

Jane Wills's gifts were not only of an intellectual nature and she was well aware of the need for a vital spiritual life. She was a regular worshipper at All Saints' Church, Perry Street, Gravesend and an associate of the Community of All Hallows, Ditchingham, which she visited from time to time.

The evacuation of the school to Diss in Norfolk at the outbreak of war in 1939 greatly distressed her. She wrote of the devotion of the staff, ensuring that the work of the school would be steadily, thoroughly and efficiently carried on during the period of exile. In fact a considerable number of pupils and the headmistress herself returned to Gravesend when the exiles began to drift back to London during the early 'phoney' war days when the uncanny calm gave no hint of the destruction which was soon to descend upon the capital. She was not to remain for long, for with deteriorating health she retired at the age of sixty in July 1940. Already ill, she moved to Brixham in her native Devonshire, where she had a house. Some while after this she suffered a stroke. A friend recalls seeing her once after this and found her hand-capped and very unhappy. Jane Wills died on 29th July 1944 at the age of sixty-four. The last photograph of this distinguished headmistress in the school's collection is a charming informal snapshot of her with her beloved little dog; she is kneeling on the grass beside him, smiling happily and her hair is slightly ruffled in the breeze. What a contrast to those formal groupings showing her as the stately lady sitting in the midst of her devoted and admiring colleagues—a formidable and awe-inspiring collection. The conscious dignity of her position has been shed; the dignity of her person is innate.

In the Gravesend and Dartford Reporter dated 12th August 1944, there is an obituary which pays tribute to Jane Emily Wills and her work. 'Miss Wills, a scholar herself, was quick to detect and foster good academic ability. Gravesend will never be able fully to estimate how many of its girls owe the fulfilment of cherished ambitions to her encouragement and to her efforts on their behalf. . . She sought in her selection of staff scholarship with evidence of ability to teach, but personality and character above all, and she seldom made a mistake.'

A memorial service was held at All Saints Church, Perry Street, Gravesend, where Miss Wills had regularly worshipped, on 14th October 1944, and at this service a prayer desk with an engraved brass plate bearing the name of Jane Emily Wills and date of death was dedicated. Perhaps the most fitting tribute was made by the Reverend Samuel Lister, her friend and associate, headmaster of the Boys' Grammar School and honorary assistant priest at All Saints' Church. In the Parish Magazine he wrote: 'She was intensely and increasingly concerned in the improvement of Divinity teaching in schools and colleges and she was ever willing to help those, both men and women, who took up the study and teaching of theology. Many a school and many a home owe much to her old girls, who have gained their first knowledge and guidance in religious matters under her inspiring teaching and leadership. . . A gracious and vital personality, who practised what she preached, she was loved and respected by all with whom she came into contact. . . We had hoped that when Miss Fox also retired and joined her, they would have had many happy years of retirement together in her quiet Devonshire home. It was symbolic of her consecrated scholarship when, on the last Sunday of her life, she followed Theodore Robinson's broadcast on the Psalms by reading the passages in her Hebrew psalter.'

A Jane Emily Wills Divinity Prize was instituted as a result of a trust made by Miss Wills, the Trustee being the Kent County Council, and any boy or girl at a Secondary School in Kent was eligible to enter. Such eminent scholars as F.F. Bruce and R.F.G. Tasker accepted invitations to act as examiners and subjects set over the years covered a wide range of topics, from 'The Bible and Archaeology' to 'What is Man?'

In her Will, Jane Emily Wills, after a few small bequests, left the residue of her estate, which was not large, to her married sister, Dora Foster, with the provision that if this sister pre-deceased her, the money was to be used in connection with the King's College, London Theological School (Women's Department). It is evident from subsequent events that Dora Foster survived Jane Wills, so that King's College did not inherit the money. In 1946 a group of Jane's friends subscribed a sum of money which it was agreed should be used at the discretion of the Dean of King's College in consultation with the Tutor of Women Theological students. The secretary of the Memorial Committee was Jane's friend and executrix, Edith Margery Fox: Miss Fox, herself keenly interested in encouraging the Theological education of women and realising that King's College would not inherit the money, must have taken it upon herself to raise a memorial fund. And so every woman student at King's who completes the Bachelor of Divinity course—whether she graduates or not—has the pleasant surprise of receiving a book token with a commemorative plate.

What kind of world was it in which Jane Wills carried on her work in Gravesend? 'Another world', observed a member of the Gravesend School staff; it was indeed.

Those of us who grew up and were educated in the 'long week-end', between the two great wars, the second of which was finally to put an end to the old order which had been tottering on in increasingly unsteady fashion for twenty years, owe much to the band of dedicated women, virtually all of them unmarried, who taught us. The men whom many of them undoubtedly would have married lay dead in the war graves of France and Belgium, victims of the wholesale slaughter of the 1914-18 war which decimated a generation. Miss Wills insisted that all her staff should be ladies and it is to these gallant ladies who by their example passed on to their pupils something of those values which they held dear that a great debt is owed.

Acknowledgments to:

- The Gravesend and Dartford Reporter.
- The Vicar and Churchwarden of All Saints' Church, Perry Street, Gravesend.
- The Headmistress and past and present members of Staff of Gravesend School for Girls.
- The Headmistress of Langley Park School for Girls (formerly Beckenham Girls' Grammar School) and past members of Staff.