

# *An Exchange Teacher— and Human Relations*

LILLIAN WAKEFIELD

The author of this article tells of her rich experiences as an exchange teacher in English schools. She found many opportunities to learn, to observe and also to interpret America and Americans for English children and teachers.

I HAD a wonderful time in England. As a visiting American exchange teacher, I was invited into so many homes that my social calendar was booked for months in advance. I think I drank enough tea to make up for what my belligerent ancestors helped dump in Boston harbor. I had an excellent opportunity for travel too—I managed to see a good portion of Europe. But more important than the good time and more important than the travel was the liberal education which I received. I am sure it would equal that of an added degree at any university.

How well I remember that last afternoon in New York before sailing! A representative of the U. S. Office of Education gave us a very inspiring pep talk before we set out. He told us he hoped we were good teachers but that teaching would be our secondary job. Our major task would be to make friends, to make people like us and in liking us to like the United States of America. As I went back to my hotel that afternoon I was a little bit sick inside for how could I, who had spent most of my life with six-year-olds, make the people of another nation like me and thus like my country?

As it so happened, my job turned out to be almost entirely that of an ambassador. Mr. Wilkinson, my director of education in Birkenhead, which is really only a suburb of Liverpool, had the idea that I should come home at least on "speaking terms" with English education. Consequently he set up a program for me whereby, after eight weeks of teaching, I spent the remainder of the school year in going about from school to school. I spent a week in some schools, two weeks in others and three weeks in still others depending upon the size and type of the school. Perhaps this sounds like a Roman holiday—but let me tell you just a little bit of what I was doing in Birkenhead.

I went into all types of schools. Mr. Wilkinson certainly made no attempt to put his best foot forward for he sent me into all sections of the town where I observed all kinds of teachers whose rooms were filled with all types of children. I began at the bottom with the Nursery Schools and worked

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*Lillian Wakefield is a first grade teacher in the Public Schools, St. Paul, Minnesota. As an American exchange teacher in 1950-1951, Miss Wakefield taught and observed in the schools of Birkenhead, England.*

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my way up through the technical college with an occasional regression so that I wouldn't forget what had gone on before.

The Nursery Schools reminded me of our kindergartens except that the activities were a bit more informal and the children stayed all day, having their lunch and afternoon nap at school. The reception classes which are composed of the four-year-olds in the Infants School reminded me of our first grades. These children had few large toys. They did have lots of free activity but many of their games involved the use of numbers to develop a number sense and they even learned a few reading words. Since I was classified as an Infants teacher, I was sent into several Infants Schools. I visited one on Pilgrim Street where the home conditions were deplorable and I visited one in Upton where the parents were of comfortable means. When I think of the school in Upton, I remember how my arrival happened to coincide with that of a huge parcel of food from Australia. The children, being young, confused the situation beautifully. They went home and told their parents that an American teacher had arrived and that she had brought a parcel of food to each and every one of them!

### **Eleven Is An Important Age**

There are no report cards and no failures in English schools. The children are merely passed on according to age and when they reach the age of eight they leave the Infants School and go into the Junior School where they stay until they are eleven. It was in the Junior Schools where I learned about the "streaming." Streaming is

dividing children according to their ability and achievement. I learned too that in most instances the better teachers are put in charge of the A classes for of course these children are most likely to pass the scholarship test. I heard a lot about this test and soon came to realize that upon it hinges the entire future school career of an English child, for if he gets one of the top marks in it, he goes on to a Grammar School, which is the key to the colleges and universities, and if not he goes to what is called a Secondary Modern School. The test is given at the age of eleven. Eleven is important too in that after this age boys and girls never attend the same school. In Birkenhead, the scholarship test took two complete mornings and the two sections of the test were administered about a week apart. The Infants Schools were dismissed and the Infants teachers together with the Junior teachers played the role of policemen to see that no sleight of hand tricks were pulled.

As I went about the Secondary Schools, I kept asking whether these children are ever given a second chance. I was assured that they are—that another test is given to the outstanding ones at the age of thirteen-plus. If they pass it, they are transferred to Grammar Schools. Of course I don't know about the rest of England, but in the northern part, where I was, the percentage was indeed small. It is my impression that it is less than two per cent. I learned in the Secondary Schools that the school leaving age is fifteen. On their actual fifteenth birthday these boys and girls walk out into the world to seek jobs.

Then came the Grammar Schools. The first Grammar School I visited happened to be a boys school. I knew it was staffed entirely by men and I was a bit reluctant to be the only woman in the place. But I had a lovely week in that school! The headmaster had a secretary who was a woman. She and I became quite good friends before the week was out and imagine my surprise when on Friday morning I was invited into the staff room and the twenty-seven men served tea and cakes in my honor! The Grammar School children stay until they are sixteen when they sit for the school certificate test. If they pass it and if they wish to go on to a college or a university, they stay a couple of years longer, when they sit for the higher school certificate test. The second test seems a bit pointless, however, for application for college or university must be made a year in advance—the boys and girls know by March whether they are accepted and the test isn't administered until May.

The Art Schools are for boys and girls who are especially gifted in art. The schools in Birkenhead were kept at temperatures between fifty and sixty degrees. Although I wore far more clothing than I do here at home in sub-zero weather, I was often a bit chilly. One morning as I walked into a classroom of the Art School I couldn't help noticing how delightfully warm it was. But my surprise was soon explained—I had stumbled into the Life class!

The Technical College also was staffed entirely by men. I was much impressed by the work being carried forward in this school. While much of the program was over my head, I did sense the fact that they were getting an excellent training for future trades.

I was amazed at the work done for the handicapped—the blind, the deaf and the mentally retarded. I made up my mind that upon my return to America I was going to get into some of our



schools of the same type and find out what our method of procedure is. Tom went to the school for the deaf. Fifteen-year-old Tom was more interested in me and the country I represented than was any other person I met in England. As I walked into his classroom he met me with a geography book opened to the map of the United States. He asked me to show him where I lived and then shot at me such a barrage of questions that I was almost at a loss to know how to answer him. As I attempted to do so he watched my lips very intently so that he wouldn't miss one syllable of what I was saying. As I was leaving the school I mentioned Tom to his headmaster and was told that his I.Q. was over 140 but that he had never heard the faintest ripple of a sound.

No matter where I went I was received most graciously. Headmasters, headmistresses and teachers all made me feel that they regarded my presence among them a pleasure rather than an imposition although, as a teacher, I know the latter must sometimes have been the case. And to the children I was someone set apart for, to them, I came from a land where the sun always shines, a land that has never known heartache or poverty.

**"Please, Miss, . . . ?"**

What did Mr. Wilkinson intend for me to accomplish in a set-up like this? Well, first and foremost I was to learn. But my job wasn't entirely learning. The second part of my job was to acquaint young England with life in these United States. When I was with the children I listened to reading classes and often took over the story

hour. The children loved my American books with their brightly illustrated pictures. Then too I taught American songs and games and rhythms. I taught a lot of Mrs. Ray's songs, particularly her cowboy songs, since the children loved them so much. Perhaps I wasn't playing quite fair with my little English friends but I got a terrific kick out of hearing American cowboy songs sung with a Merseyside accent!

When I was with the older children I was expected to talk to them on everything under the sun that had to do with America. It was not unusual to go into a school on a Monday morning and, after being introduced to the various members of the staff, to be greeted with, "Won't you talk to our boys about the War between the States?" or "Would you mind telling our girls a bit about the geography of Minnesota?" or some such question. When I met the history master in one particular school, he said, "Oh, yes, Miss Wakefield, we've been expecting you. Won't you come in and talk to my boys about the American War for Independence?" I was stunned! I thought this a pretty tall order but I did my best. I tried to present the Revolution from an American viewpoint. I stressed the fact that the colonists were English too and felt they were entitled to the same representation in Parliament as their brothers and cousins across the sea, particularly if they were to be assessed such heavy taxes. Perhaps I made my plea a bit too strong for when I had finished one young lad said to me, "Please, Miss, have you ever forgiven us?"

This questioning was a part of the procedure. When I finished talking to

a group, the boys or girls were allowed to ask me questions. I never knew what was going to be flung at me. These are some of the questions I got, "Please, Miss, just what is the procedure for amending the American Constitution?", "Please, Miss, just what are the major differences in the two political parties?", "Please, Miss, just why doesn't the South want to grant full franchise to the Negro?" Of course, in some schools the questions were easier. They were such as, "Please, Miss, have you ever seen a real live film star?" and "Is it true that all Americans are lazy?" Oh, yes, I got an education all right. I not only learned in some small measure how the English run their schools but I also got some good refresher courses on the U. S. A.!

Nor was my education limited to the schools. I learned that there are definitely two brands of English, one as spoken by an Englishman and one as spoken by an American. While I was still new to England I learned that I was becoming known as a very quiet person. I'm not really quiet but how could I intelligently enter conversations when half the time I didn't know what people were talking about? If someone told you he was fair mithered, would you know what ailed him? If a little girl told you she'd lost her fair isle pixie, would you know what to look for? If you were asked to put the flex in the kettle, would you have the faintest notion what to do? I learned these expressions and many others. I learned that the man who was fair mithered was troubled; the little girl had lost a woolen hood knitted of a special kind of yarn; and a flex is nothing more or less than an electric cord!

### Pride and Courage

I learned that if there are two ways to do a thing, an American will do it one way and an Englishman the other. The most glaring example of this is the left-handed traffic, though this didn't disturb me much, perhaps because I expected it. But I could never get used to the hot water tap being on the right, door knobs turning to the left, and the doors of public buildings opening in. A friend of mine here in St. Paul asked me to get her a china clock. After searching through several antique shops, I found a lovely one and had it posted to her. She of course was delighted to get it and set about starting it running. Since it was apparently wound, she shook it and did all the other things one does to start a clock but nothing happened. So she decided that somehow in transit something must have happened to the mechanism. She set the clock aside to take to the jeweler the next morning. After she had gone to bed that night, she got to thinking of a letter I had written her. In it I had facetiously said, "If I am confronted with a new situation, I think of what I would do at home and then do just the opposite and nine times out of ten it works." She jumped out of bed and wound the clock in the opposite direction. It started ticking and has been going ever since!

But I learned some more basic things too. I learned that the British are not aloof. They are sensitive and proud. They are friendly and kind and hospitable. I cannot speak too highly of those people who took me into their hearts and their homes.

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