

Headteacher's Founder's Day Address 2019

Every Spring we remember our founder, Frances Mary Buss, and the people who influenced her and who worked with her to transform, forever, the education available to girls.

In preparing my address for this Founder's Day I wanted to understand more fully what motivated Miss Buss to do the work she undertook and how she explained her purpose and values. Each of our Head students has explored aspects of Miss Buss's legacy in their speech this morning. They have recognised that our understanding of the past is critical in enabling us to improve our future. My theme is also how our school still reflects one of Miss Buss's most powerful ideas - that a truly successful teacher sees students not as flawed individuals in need of discipline, but as young adults, able to act with justice, kindness and liberality.

Miss Buss was not from a wealthy family, and she had to work hard to gain an education. We have three images of her in the school; an oil painting in the headteacher's office, the marble bust on the first floor and the stained glass depiction in the Founder's Library. These, perhaps, make her seem rather remote from twenty-first century Britain; a middle-aged Victorian woman, slightly stern-looking, a little distant and very formally dressed. She appears to be the very picture of conformity. But accounts of her life from her own letters and those of her friends and family reveal a very different character – a woman who was an innovator, a pioneer, a campaigner, a reformer and an original thinker. Her purpose in founding her schools for girls was to enact radical change, to challenge the status quo and to establish a model for other girls' schools that was imitated in her lifetime and beyond.

In order to make changes, we must first identify the problems we see with our current situation. What is it that we reject, what do we see as inadequate, perhaps even damaging? In the case of education, Miss Buss felt angry about the treatment of girls, and about three injustices in particular. The first was that many girls received virtually no education at all. The second was that those girls who were educated received far fewer opportunities than their brothers; expectations in their schools were far lower and the curriculum was much narrower. And finally, in some girls' schools, children endured real hardship and deprivation, deliberately inflicted upon them as a reminder of their status as poor or, to use the phrase of the time, 'charity children'.

One of the most famous examples of the harshness and inadequacy of some Victorian schooling appears in 'Jane Eyre' by Charlotte Bronte. Many of you will know Jane's story. Orphaned soon after her birth, she is looked after by an aunt, who has three children. Her aunt does not care for her and does not protect Jane from bullying by her own children. When Jane is hit by her cousin, John, who then throws a book at her head, his mother, Jane's aunt, believes her son's story that it was in fact Jane who hit him - a terrible lie. Jane's aunt locks her in a room called the red room, believed to be haunted by the ghost of her uncle, as a punishment. Terrified, Jane begs to be let out, but her aunt refuses, and she remains there, alone, all night. She is comforted the following morning by a housemaid, but cannot forgive this act of undeserved punishment.

Eventually, Jane is sent away to a boarding school called Lowood by her aunt, who wants to be rid of this inconvenient child. Jane leaves, hoping never to see these relatives again.

The school is run by Mr Brocklehurst, a harsh man who provides the girls in his care with entirely inadequate food, clothing and heating. In a scene of real cruelty, perhaps one of the most famous in the novel, Jane is accused of lying about the incident that prompted her aunt to send her to the school, and humiliated in front of the pupils, teachers and all of Mr Brocklehurst's wealthy, well-fed and well-dressed female relatives.

Jane is made to stand on a stool in front of everyone. The scene in the book continues like this in Jane's own voice:

'Ladies,' said he, turning to his family, 'Miss Temple, teachers, and children, you all see this girl?'

Of course they did; for I felt their eyes directed like burning glasses against my scorched skin.

'You see she is yet young; you observe she possesses the ordinary form of childhood; God has graciously given her the shape that He has given to all of us; no signal deformity points her out as a marked character. Who would think that the Evil One had already found a servant and an agent in her? Yet such, I grieve to say, is the case.'

A pause – in which I began to steady the palsy of my nerves, and to feel that the Rubicon was passed; and that the trial, no longer to be shirked, must be firmly sustained.

'My dear children,' pursued the black marble clergyman, with pathos, 'this is a sad, a melancholy occasion; for it becomes my duty to warn you, that this girl, who might be one of God's own lambs, is a little castaway; not a member of the true flock, but evidently an interloper and an alien. You must be on your guard against her; you must shun her example; if necessary, avoid her company, exclude her from your sports, and shut her out from your converse. Teachers, you must watch her: keep your eyes on her movements, weigh well her words, scrutinize her actions, punish her body to save her soul; if, indeed, such salvation be possible, for (my tongue falters while I tell it) this girl, this child, the native of a Christian land- this girl is – a liar!'

At the end of this scene, Mr Brocklehurst leaves with the order that Jane must remain on the stool for a further half an hour, and that no-one is to speak to her for the rest of the day.

This striking example of harsh punishment stays in the reader's mind, along with accounts of inadequate or inedible food, insufficient heating and clothing and cruelty inflicted on students by teachers. When Charlotte Bronte published her novel in 1847, under the name Currer Bell, it was entitled 'Jane Eyre: An Autobiography', and she drew on her own experience, aged eight, at the Clergy Daughters' School in Cowan Bridge, Lancashire for the sections depicting Lowood. But how accurately is this kind of boarding school portrayed? A respected colleague of Frances Buss, Dorothea Beale, was appointed as headteacher of the Clergy Daughters' School in 1857, and commented as follows on the punitive, Calvinistic regime:

'..its direct results on the education of the young were disastrous indeed. Hearts...were turned to stone, or depressed into hopeless terror.' In addition, '..the constant restraints, the monotonous life, the want of amusements led to a spirit of defiance.' Miss Beale saw only punishment, never reward. She tried to make improvements to the school, but was prevented by the authorities from doing so and she left in 1858.

Dorothea Beale and Frances Mary Buss are often spoken of together as the most powerful and successful pioneers in girls' education in the nineteenth century. Miss Beale went on to be headmistress of Cheltenham Ladies College, and she worked with Miss Buss to transform opportunities for girls and women. Her view of the Clergy Daughters' School must therefore be seen as reliable, and we should respect the accuracy of Charlotte Bronte's fictionalised account of conditions there. In fact, Bronte was to tell her biographer later in life that conditions were far worse than those included in Jane Eyre, but she feared her readers would not believe this. Since Miss Buss and Miss Beale regularly met and corresponded, we may assume that, in setting up their own schools, they aimed to create something entirely different from the fictional Lowood, and the real Clergy Daughters' School. By encountering school systems that they found objectionable, they were able to create the humane, stimulating and positive environments we are familiar with today.

Miss Buss was an innovator, a reformer and an original thinker. She had the drive and courage to establish expectations that made her schools radically different from the one endured by Charlotte Bronte. She insisted on equality of opportunity for all girls. Not only did she plan for girls to have the same chances as their brothers, but, amongst themselves, there were to be no class distinctions. Victorian society was very conscious of class difference, so this seems especially brave.

An additional torment suffered by Jane Eyre at school is her experience of being labelled a 'charity child'. Helen Burns explains this to Jane:

'(Lowood) is partly a charity school: you and I, and all the rest of us, are charity-children. I suppose you are an orphan: are not either your father or your mother dead?'

'Both died before I can remember.'

'Well, all the girls here have lost one or both parents, and this is called an institution for educating orphans.'

Such discrimination was unacceptable to Miss Buss, who said:

'All the pupils who enter are considered as upon the same equality. The same high tone of feeling is expected from all, the same attention to instruction, the same advantages offered to every pupil.' These are fine words, but how was such equality delivered? By making sure that all pupils had access to the same curriculum, the same physical education and the same routine in school, Miss Buss sent a message that all were to be treated equally. She made it clear that there was to be no expression of prejudice in breaks between lessons, stating:

'Mutual forbearance and kindness towards each other are inculcated in the playground.' Miss Buss knew very well that, if equality were to be established in the school, it must lie within the heart of each pupil, so that it was expressed even when at leisure and under relaxed supervision. As a result, one of her pupils wrote:

'No-one asked where you lived, how much pocket-money you had, or what your father was - he might be a bishop or a rat-catcher.'

It was very important to Miss Buss to make sure that her own schools, and others, would keep these values in the future. We have heard from Maya that Miss Buss founded the Headmistresses Association; she also fought for teacher training courses as a way of making sure that her legacy was secure. Through supporting opportunities for women in the teaching profession, Miss Buss contributed to the growth of schooling for girls. By contrast with the unequal, punishing and narrow schooling brought so vividly to life in *Jane Eyre*, Miss Buss established a commitment to equality, reward and breadth of vision. The most powerful evidence for her success in providing continuity into the future, is to be found here, in this hall.

We have listened to three inspirational speeches this morning from our head students. Each has recognised their debt to Miss Buss, while capturing the life and energy that the school now possesses. During March, we celebrated International Women's Day with a wider range of events than ever before. Some students went to Camden Council to discuss business opportunities for women in Camden. As a school we have our own connections with three leaders in the borough who have driven forward opportunities for women; the council leader Georgia Gould, who came to speak to our students about her own journey as a woman in political life, our Mayor, whom are delighted to welcome here today, Councillor Headlam-Wells, and Councillor Angela Mason, one of our governors and a national campaigner for equal rights.

And last week our two Head Girls, with their friend Mia and many others, staged a remarkable benefit and celebration of International Women's Day. They raised money for Solace Women's Aid and Bloody Good Period, two charities doing vital work to support vulnerable women. They had asked along a brilliant group of guest speakers, dozens of students performed, and the whole event was stage-managed and organised by the students themselves.

This was a large event, but many clubs and fund-raisers are run by students all year. Money has been raised this year by students for many charities, including Women in Prison, the Windrush Foundation and Greenpeace. Farnida, in the Head Girl Team, writes regular articles for the Friday News about mental health and resilience. The fact that so many activities are initiated by the students themselves must provide us all with enormous hope for a kinder and more equal world.

Miss Buss established the conditions which allowed this school to flourish and today enable its students to work alongside teachers in promoting her values. Miss Buss said of girls' education: 'We may not get there, but others will.' I believe that if she saw the school today, she would consider that her core aims and values are now being fulfilled in this community. So finally, today we recognise

Miss Buss's role in banishing the kind of schooling endured by Charlotte Bronte and creating an education based those values - a challenging curriculum, justice and equality.

Elizabeth Kitcatt, April 2019