



## **Michael DUANE (1915-1997)**

*A Biography*

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# **MD Duane (1915-1997)**

## **Dedication**

This book is dedicated to Risinghill School's (sometimes controversial) headmaster, MD Duane, now sadly deceased. The Risinghill Research Group (RRG) hopes that it will serve to recognise more widely the enormous contribution that he has made to education, and to the lives of so many children, in particular the children of Risinghill.

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## **Editorial and Research Notes**

The following text is an edited version from the original books published on Other education website in 2017. All information is from public records, family members or extracts from Leila Berg's book *Risinghill: Death of a comprehensive School*

## Introduction

The following text covers the life and achievements of William MD Duane first and last Headmaster of Risinghill School. Over a period of time from 1915 until his appointment as Risinghill's Headmaster in 1959.

## The Early Years

William MD Duane<sup>1</sup> (MD) was born on 25 January 1915 in Dublin, the only child of John Joseph Duane (1888-1922) and Mary Ellen Fogarty (1893-1975), both working class Irish Catholics. His father having survived the First World War, met his tragic untimely death in 1922, in one of the many bloody Civil War skirmishes, which followed the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921)

His mother Mary Ellen (known as Ellie) was at this time a domestic servant, taking whatever work was available when her husband died. Times were hard then; many people were unemployed, and Dublin was becoming a very dangerous place to live in.

Although MD was very young (approximately 6-7 years of age), at the time of the Civil war (1922-23), he remembered the fearful sounds of artillery fire, and of being carried in his mother's shawl as they fled from the fighting. They went to Portarlinton, a small town forty-five miles southwest of Dublin, where he was entrusted to the care of his grandparents (William Duane and his wife Mary) as Ellie's own parents were dead. As was the case with so many others of that era, Ellie was then forced to leave Ireland to look for work in England.

The next few years were extremely unhappy for MD. His grandparents resented having to take him in and they treated him badly, so badly that he often dreamed of saving enough money to run away. This dream was, in part, realised when, at the age of ten, he was put on a boat to join his mother in England. He made the sea crossing alone. Shortly after his arrival, Ellie applied for the position of housekeeper to two Catholic gentlemen in Hampstead, North London, taking her son with her to the interview. Although she did not get the job, these gentlemen offered to take young MD under their wing and he became a ward of sorts, remaining with these people for the rest of his educational life.

As to why Ellie had left her young son with two strangers as this, was something that MD either did not know or if he did had never discussed with anybody.-It highly likely that Ellie was forced into this decision as this was an era of considerable hardship, when many families were suffering from the effects of the 1926 General Strike

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<sup>1</sup> Duane rarely used his first given name William,

Ellie, however, did not desert her son. She had a very close and loving relationship with young MD, taking him out for trips to places such as the London Zoo and Lyons Corner House (renowned for its tea and cakes) when she could afford the money and time.

In more recent times, it has been suggested that MD's mother had a desire for him to enter the priesthood, providing possible explanation for Ellie leaving her child in the circumstances described. MD's early schooling also does point in this direction. As his first school was the Dominican School in Archway, North London. From there, at the age of eleven, he was sent to the Jesuits School, a few miles away in Stamford Hill. It was here that he began his ecclesiastical training, developing his views on indoctrination and punishment:

In an post Risinghill Interview with an R Laiken, MD is reported to remarked:-

*Fear of physical punishment in the education of children has a very long history! Dictators operate on exactly the same principle – fear! What did the Jesuits say? ‘Give me a child until the age of six then you may do with him what you will!’ I was educated by the Jesuits but, because I was eleven by the time I was in their hands, they didn’t have a real chance to indoctrinate me. I was only beaten twice in seven years, so either they thought me malleable enough, or I enjoyed my school. I certainly look back on it with some affection.*

*Contrary to what people believe of the Jesuits, their central teaching was that whatever you do, however trivial, you must do it to the best of your ability and if you fail to do what you sincerely believe to be right, then you are committing a grave sin.*

While at the Jesuits School, MD and his peers were interviewed for the priesthood. All of his friends were accepted straight away, but he was not: instead, he was asked to finish his schooling first and then go to university before taking this final step. Unable to understand why he had been treated differently, this upset him terribly: As he reported to his second wife many years later: -

*For some reason, they must have seen something in me but I don’t know what – I don’t know what and why I was different to all his friends.*

It is not known what MD did immediately after leaving school, but in January 1935, aged twenty, he began a degree course at Queen Mary College, London, graduating three years later with a degree in English Language and Literature. Then, in 1939, he underwent teacher training at the Institute of Education (IOE), after which he joined Dame Alice Owens School in Islington, North London. It was around this time that he

married his first wife (Margaret Banks), whom he had met at university. The first child from this marriage (a son) was born on 14 October 1940, which was also the year in which MD began his army service – more children arrived in 1943, 1947 and 1955 respectively, MD and Margaret Banks divorced in 1978 and he subsequently acquired two stepchildren when he was married to Margaret Johnson.

## The War Years

MD joined the Royal Armoured Corps in 1941 as a Second Lieutenant. In 1942 he was promoted to the rank of Captain, where he was second in command of a squadron of tanks. In the same year, he became Staff Captain of a Brigade. Other advancements followed; the most significant being his promotion, on the battle-front, to Major in 1945; a title that he never used in civilian life. He served in France, Belgium, Holland and Germany, and was also the Liaison Officer between the British and the American forces, working under Field Marshal Montgomery and General Miles Dempsey, Commander of the Second Army.

His war record is impressive: mentioned twice in despatches, receiving the ‘Croix de Guerre Avec Palme’, Belgium’s highest honour, and made a ‘Chevalier de l’Ordre de Leopold II Avec Palme’ for his services in France and Belgium. One of his decorations was for leading his platoon across a stretch of river, under cover of darkness, and through enemy lines. By commandeering a number of small paddleboats from a lake in Brussels, he was able to get his men across, under the noses of the German soldiers, without making any noise. His Croix de Guerre and promotion to the rank of Major was “for the courage and bravery displayed during the glorious battles that led to the liberation of Belgium.” Whether he considered the battles as ‘glorious’ is a moot point; however, he did play a key part in the D-Day Landings by providing British Intelligence with crucial information (about enemy firepower) prior to the assault. His brief was to obtain surveillance of German munitions in Antwerp Harbour, no easy task when one considers he was in occupied France when he received his orders. To get to the harbour, Duane drove through the enemy lines at night (with headlights switched off) and rested up in the woods by day.

After the war, he joined the United Nations Association of the UK (UNA-UK) and was its chairman for a time. On discharge from the army, he was given an impeccable testimonial from the then Brigadier V FitzGeorge-Balfour, who himself had a distinguished military career. †Extract}

*He has undoubted organising ability and powers of leadership, while his independent character ensures the capacity for original thought and sound judgement. . . .*

*His many interests are reflected in considerable independence of opinion and character, but he gets on equally well with those who do not agree with them; though he enjoys putting over his views,*

*he never rams them down other people's throats and is quite broad-minded enough to appreciate the point of view of others.*

Whilst on active service MD had produced some poems. One entitled 'The Camp' deals with the liberation of *Buchenwald Concentration Camp* where MD, as Liaison Officer between the British and the American forces, witnessed first-hand the plight of the Buchenwald inmates.

### **The Camp**

*The Corps centre-line ran  
alongside  
Beech Wood. The leading  
division  
Paused. Urgent calls crackled  
Demanding medics, food,  
ambulances pronto*

*Behind barbed wire skeletons  
with skins  
Stared out from shaven skulls.  
Around us neat piles of  
Dead and dying, like logs  
Layered criss-cross with  
dangling heads*

*Bursts of fire from pale soldiers  
Ended the slouching arrogance  
Of guards who failed  
To leap to instant orders  
Officers turned a blind eye.*

*In this camp, poised on the tips  
Of bayonets, hate and madness  
swayed,  
Outraged love burst from the  
barrel of a gun.  
There remained only tears  
For the dying in Buchenwald*

MD Duane

(undated)

Another, equally haunting, poem of MD's is about Falaise, claimed by some to be one of the fiercest battles of WWII. Around ten thousand German soldiers are thought to have lost their lives at Falaise with fifty thousand or more taken prisoner:

### **After Falaise**

*His men, flung like discarded  
dolls  
Lay close around the young  
captain.  
Old in war beyond his years he  
lay  
Tranquil*

*Ghouls, stealing among the  
bloated dead  
Emptied wallet and holster and  
hacked away  
His ring finger*

*On the grey tunic, tight with  
corruption,  
Campaign medals and an Iron  
Cross flashed  
Indifferent pride*

*Around his stinking corpse  
snapshots  
Of a young woman and two fair  
children  
Lay scattered  
Larger than death his sex had  
risen  
Still yearning for his new, young  
Widow*

MD Duane

(undated)

As was (and still is) the case with many war veterans, MD never spoke about his war experiences. It was not until the 1990s, when he was in his twilight years, that the effects of the war, became apparent and noticeable with spells of depression. Clearly, he was a changed person after the war; so too was the world that he returned to.

## The Post war Years

Following the war MD spent a short spell back at Dame Alice Owens, then he tutored at the IOE for a year. It was at the IOE, in 1947, that he first met John Newsom, who would become influential in his career<sup>2</sup>.

### *Howe Dell County Secondary School*

In September 1948, MD; then thirty-three, was appointed headmaster of Howe Dell, a new County Secondary School in Hatfield, Hertfordshire. John Newsom, who was the County Director of Education at the time, had encouraged him to apply for the job<sup>3</sup>. When Newsom asked him how long it would take to put Howe Dell on its feet, he replied that he would need at least three years. He was told that he would be given five years — with no questions asked.

Because Howe Dell was not quite ready, Duane was asked to take the headship of Beaumont Boys' School in St Albans for one term. He agreed willingly and, judging by the praise from the Divisional Officer, this temporary role was very successful:

*“This School is so very different from the one you took over in September that anyone connected with the former establishment would scarcely recognise it as the same School now”.*

*(Extract from a letter to MD Duane from the Divisional Office circa spring 1949)*

John Newsom was also pleased with Duane's efforts, writing to him to say that, with his headship, Howe Dell could become one of the greatest jewels in Hertfordshire's educational crown.

However, the Howe Dell headship was to prove far more challenging and would end in disaster. When the school opened in January 1949, not all of the accommodation was available: some lessons had to be taught in a school that was four miles away, and this situation continued until the summer of 1950. Staffing was another serious issue. After the war, there was a chronic shortage of experienced teachers, and problems with the recruitment of administrative and domestic staff too.

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<sup>2</sup> John Newsom was knighted in 1963 for his report 'Half our Future'. This report was about the 'average child' and was one of the milestones in the history of comprehensive education.

<sup>3</sup> He was also on the interview panel with the Divisional Education Officer and the Chair of Governors, a woman, who was in tune with Duane's progressive ideas and welcomed the policies he put forward for the school.



The pupils, from relatively poor, working-class backgrounds, were drawn from six village primary schools, and the intake included some older children from a nearby orphanage. These children were barely literate, having been educated in elementary schools where different age groups were all taught together. Their IQs ranged from fifty-one to one-hundred-twenty. Many could not read at all.

MD believed that, if he and his staff were to educate these children successfully, it was necessary to adopt some of the newer, educational methods that were emerging at this time. In short this was a friendlier, less structured, approach to teaching which included the removal of fear from the classroom. This, though, went against the traditional view that discipline could best be maintained through Corporal Punishment (CP)<sup>4</sup>.

Despite the many difficulties, he developed a good working relationship with his teaching team and with their support abandoned CP. Together they introduced a system where the children were asked to take responsibility for their actions: key to this approach was involving them in considering appropriate, alternative forms of punishment.

The school had been open for about a year when it was asked to participate in a UNESCO research project whose aim was to determine how children would react to two black teachers in the school. (James and Tenen, 1953) The following extracts from the UNESCO report provide a flavour of the school's policy and what MD stood for: -

*The headmaster and his staff were enthusiastic believers in the new method of education. The headmaster had previously been a lecturer in educational method, and had taken over this school in an attempt to translate principles into practice.*

...

*They interpreted learning in this widest sense, so the emotional needs of the children as individuals were considered to be as important as the more conventional academic requirements . . .*

...

*The headmaster and his staff made it their business to know as much as possible about the home life of each child, and to help each to understand and resolve its personal problems. In his spare time the headmaster visited the villages from which his children were drawn, and talked to the parents in their homes and at village meetings, explaining to them his aims in the school.*

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<sup>4</sup> Although Duane's plans for the school were endorsed fully by the Education Authority, the rejection of CP was a contentious and divisive issue. For many teachers, the cane was seen as an essential work tool; some even considered the practice of flogging to be a contractual right. Corporal Punishment was also viewed by many to be an aid to education itself, and was used unashamedly in this context.

*In the daily life of the school the aim was self-discipline: not authoritarian, imposed from above by more powerful adults, but collective, and the few general rules there were had been arrived at after discussion with the children and evolved from their common experience, not without dust and heat. There was no corporal punishment . . . Because the aims of the headmaster and staff were to free the children from the distortions caused by fear, and to help them to acquire self-confidence and the ability to live harmoniously, the treatment of misdemeanours aimed at being constructive rather than retributive. Relations between children and staff were very informal and friendly.*

Although MD had the support of his staff and the parents, the governing body (GB) was a different matter. Here there was a lot of opposition to his ideas, and in particular to the concept of self-discipline. A big blow for him and his staff was the replacement of the progressive chair of governors with one who was very much a traditional authoritarian. This man, Alderman G. Maynard, was a powerful member of the local Conservative Party. He had considerable influence in the area and on the mainly Conservative GB.

In contrast to the previous chair, Maynard was apparently opposed to Duane's progressive ideas, and had strong views on CP too. He insisted that Duane be made to use the cane — which Duane refused to do. The two did not see eye to eye and this was because Maynard believed he (MD) was a communist. MD was, in fact, a socialist at this time and had no communist leanings whatsoever. A fact confirmed by family members years later.

Within months of Howe Dell opening, rumours and complaints about the school started to circulate. Fears about communists were rife at this time, and one rumour was that some teachers were spreading communist propaganda. Other complaints were about inappropriate sexual behaviour amongst the pupils (a girl's knickers had been pulled down when the children were playing boisterously on a pile of hay in a barn) and the supposed fact that the pupils had seen a sex education film showing a black man and a white woman. This, however, was a well-known filmstrip on human physiology by the biologist and educator, Cyril Bibby, in which the male figures were shaded more strongly than the female.

There was also a formal complaint from the Royal Victoria Patriotic School orphanage at Essendon, near Hatfield, that the children attending Howe Dell were taking a different view on life compared to the children who attended other schools in the area. It seems they were not being taught to 'know their place' in society.

These complaints resulted in several small school inspections, and a special inquiry to investigate the 'knickers' incident. The inquiry committee comprised just two people; one was Alderman Maynard. Interestingly, no evidence of indecent interest was found. However, the committee took this opportunity to express its concern about other matters that were unrelated to the investigation, in effect challenging MD's methods and his leadership in general.

The parents and teachers, however, were perfectly happy with MD and what was being achieved in the school. In a questionnaire that he sent to one-hundred-fifty parents, many of whom were said to be semi-literate, he received one-hundred-thirty-seven replies (a commendable 91% response rate). Some results:

- 72% said their children were happier
- 62% said their children had become more interested in school work
- 57% said their children had become more self-confident.

But this parental involvement did not impress some of the governors, who considered MD's actions to be inappropriate and ill-advised. He was instructed to never again communicate with the parents in this way.

The teachers, who wanted to express their support for MD, sent a letter to the GB requesting permission to take part in the meeting to discuss the inquiry's findings. They did not receive a reply. At this meeting, the governors denounced MD's policies, stating very firmly that "a five-year programme as envisaged by the headmaster at the expense of the children could not be tolerated." The meeting was stormy, at the end of which MD offered his resignation; however, this was ignored.

Maynard and the governors appear to have been in a very powerful position, more powerful in fact than the Local Education Authority (LEA) which had appointed MD and approved his policy for the school. By the autumn of 1950, the GB had engineered a formal inspection of the school. although it was very unusual to inspect a school formally that had been open for only twenty months. New schools were normally allowed a far more generous time frame (up to seven years) in which to settle and become established before any formal examination took place.

The inspections were made on 20th September and the 7th, 8th and 9th November 1950. The printed inspection report by HMI was issued in January 1951. (Ministry of Education, 1951) The conducting HMI was a man who believed in CP. When this inspector presented a verbal report to the GB of the inspectorate's findings, he denounced MD's policies despite some of his colleagues finding areas of work in the school to be 'good', 'very good' and even 'outstanding.' It seems the children blossomed in the arts and crafts, but did not measure up in the more academic subjects such as English and mathematics.

While the inspectorate appears to have acknowledged the effects of the poor accommodation and staffing problems on the smooth running of the school, the inability of the children to perform to the required academic standards, because of their low IQs, was strongly rejected.

By now MD was a well-respected figure in the district and was selected as a Labour candidate for a seat on the Rural District Council (RDC) albeit that he did not pursue this. He was also a Justice of the Peace (JP), often sitting on the same bench as Alderman Maynard, who was Chairman of Magistrates. Maynard had already expressed his concerns about MD being a JP, and the RDC nomination infuriated him even further. Four months after the inspection report, the GB met again to discuss progress. At this meeting the governors called for MD's dismissal, citing poor inspections and his election to public offices while employed at the school as their reason.

John Newsom must have been completely taken aback, if not embarrassed, by the GB's decision. In the summer of 1950, he had taken MD with him on a trip to Holland, visiting a number of secondary schools and attending an international conference on secondary education at which MD was a speaker. His contribution to the symposium was well received, and Newsom was particularly pleased because he (MD) had drawn on the successful work at Howe Dell.

The GB's resolution to dismiss MD did not go through the Divisional Executive, largely because Maynard considered this unnecessary. Many of the Howe Dell governors were also on the Divisional Executive so in his view this stage of the dismissal process was unimportant. But those members who were not Howe Dell governors objected strongly to the manner in which the dismissal was being handled, and at a council meeting formally claimed the resolution as their right:

*They stated that there was not sufficient evidence to make a recommendation concerning dismissal and by eleven votes to two recommended that no action be taken against Mr MD pending an early full inspection of the school by the Ministry.*

Meanwhile, both the parents and teachers appealed the GB's decision, sending petitions to the Divisional Education Officer and the Minister of Education. There was plenty of support for MD from outside too - from prominent educationalists, leaders in the community and others who approved of his work at the school.

MD had also started legal proceedings against the governors and was supported in this by his union, the National Union of Teachers (NUT). He did this, fully aware that a headmaster who appears in a court case, even if he were to win, would have difficulty finding another job. He was probably torn at this time as he had a young family to support and could not afford to take too many risks. Even if he was successful in his claim for unfair dismissal he would still have to work with the same people, so he was

in a no-win situation. It was at this point that Newsom intervened and advised him to resign, which he did, and on tendering his resignation was immediately suspended with pay.

On leaving the school, MD was given a glowing reference by Mr Bowmer, a member of the Divisional Executive:

*I was a member of the interviewing committee at the time Mr Duane was appointed Headmaster of Howe Dell School, and was very much impressed by his personality.*

*The effect on both children and parents was even better than our wildest hopes. Apart from his exceptional educational ability and experience, Mr Duane has a quality of leadership which is rare even among headmasters*

Howe Dell closed in 1954 but was reopened as a primary school in 1955.

### **Alderman Woodrow Secondary Boys' School**

MD had no difficulty securing another headship; once again getting John Newsom's support. His next headship, in 1952, was at Alderman Woodrow Secondary Boys' School in Lowestoft, Suffolk. It was at Lowestoft that he met Margaret Johnson, who would later become his second wife. At that time, Margaret's youngest son was a pupil at Alderman Woodrow.

During his time at Alderman Woodrow, MD had one or two brushes with authority but managed to put his stamp on the school without too many problems. This was Labour country albeit that the town of Lowestoft was in the middle of a Tory-controlled district. Consequently, there was less opposition to the comprehensive concept (something Labour was championing at the time) and to his progressive ideas.

One of the key issues that he wanted to tackle was CP. As with most schools in the country, the boys at Alderman Woodrow were caned regularly. It was even reported in that one teacher at this school habitually threw hammers at the children. MD, of course, was not prepared to allow this state of affairs to continue and approached the matter in the same way that he had at Howe Dell, calling a staff meeting to express his views about CP and then trying to win the teachers around.

In the interim, his way of getting over the problem was to insist that, if any caning was to be carried out, it should comply strictly with the regulations. By making this stipulation, only he, as headmaster, would be allowed to use the cane.

After years of flouting the rules, some teachers were not happy about this and deliberately ignored his instructions. As one time he heard a boy cry out in pain, and walked into the class-room and found a master beating a boy with the blackboard ruler:

he took the boy straight out of the class and into his own study. Later he discovered that this particular teacher, when following an addressed the school at assembly, had taken his class into his room, shut the door, and say, 'Well you can put all that right out of your minds. He thinks he runs the school but he doesn't. He's only been here a year and he doesn't know what he's talking about. I'll deal with you the way I like, not the way he likes, and I want that understood!'

However, once again, slowly but surely, MD started to win over the hearts and minds of the majority of teachers. Those who were persuaded began to appreciate that there were alternatives to CP while others realised that, despite their personal views, they had to abide by the rules.

Over time, the school adapted to MD's policies and routines, but he was becoming increasingly restless. On the surface, education appeared to be moving in the right direction but where the 'big' issues were concerned, nothing much had changed. In a published letter to the editor of the *Lowestoft Journal*, he airs his frustrations quite forcefully:

*Sir – Good discipline exists in a school when the parents and the teachers are agreed about the aims and the methods of rearing children. The most educated seven percent of our population pay for well-educated teachers in private nursery, preparatory, public and direct grant schools to teach their children for 16 years in classes of under 20 to become literate and intelligent . .*

*..*

*. . . Less fortunate teachers struggle to teach the forty-one per cent at the "bottom of the pile" for barely 10 years in classes of over 30. No wonder they do not speak, read or write as their teachers would wish; nor do they go to the university....*

*Language (including maths, science, music, art ...) is intelligence; that is why the wealthy keep their young in education for 20 years. And they now do this the more easily because three quarters of the population, through taxes, pay for the very expensive institutions like grammar schools and universities that are attended by less than a quarter of the population, while the rest have to make do in secondary modern and so-called comprehensive schools, so they are doubly suckers! Is it, therefore, an accident that the least educated do the deadening jobs that require little initiative?*

*It (corporal punishment) has been almost universally out-lawed in other western countries. It can be associated with psychological perversion affecting both the beater and the beaten and it is ineffective in precisely those cases in which its use is most hotly defended. (W. M. Duane, N.D.)*

It was around this time that MD decided to look for a more challenging role. He had made no secret of his desire to return to London at some point as this was where he had always wanted to be: He is recorded as saying

*I want to work in an area where the problems have not yet been solved where the children are being pulled by their environment into completely impossible shapes. I have to be in a job where I can be used and burnt out, with nothing left in reserve. This means London. London is a battlefield.*

This was when he applied for, and was appointed to, the post at Risinghill. In contrast to his difficult ending at Howe Dell, he left Alderman Woodrow on a positive note: the last school inspection report was a good one.

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