

**D.W.J. WOODMAN:**  
**A personal appreciation**

Thank you for inviting me to join you and talk to you today. It is a privilege. I intend to talk about my father's life, about what made him the educator he was and about the influences he brought to Portadown College. I shall highlight a few important incidents and give some of my own assessments. I hope this will interest people who have come, some across much of the Earth's surface to celebrate, to reminisce and to take stock. It is eloquent of the affection you have for Portadown College that you do this.

My own experience of Portadown College is very different from yours. Indeed, since I grew up without siblings, it is unique. For you, Portadown College was a place of discovery, where you encountered other influences from those of home and locality. For me it was part of the air I breathed 24 hours a day from my birth in March 1951 until the day I went to Dublin in October 1969 to study at Trinity College. Much of this reflects the personality of my father who simply worked harder than any individual I have ever known. Fortunately he did not expect the same of the people round him. I grew up with a sense that we as a family were in some way different. It was a rich heritage but an uneasy one and what I say now represents part of my attempt as an adult to make sense of it.

Donald William James Woodman was born on 9 July 1911 in Willesden, North West London. He was the eldest of three sons. His parents were both remarkable people. Daniel (Dan) Woodman was a London bus driver, born in Chepstow, Monmouthshire. The Woodmans were a Devon family who, like many in the nineteenth century, crossed the Severn to South Wales in pursuit of the employment opportunities created by the industrial revolution. A not entirely reliable family tradition maintains that he served his apprenticeship as a carpenter in Cardiff Docks. During the Great War he served first in the Royal Naval Air Service (I have often wondered if Erskine Childers was one of his officers) and then in the Royal Army Service Corps, where he drove vehicles through minefields on the Western Front, achieving the rank of sergeant. He was a skilled craftsman and mechanic. I prize the bookshelves he made as a wedding present for my parents. He also repaired all the family's shoes. My mother did not know this until my parents were on a visit to my grandparents in the late 1940s. Daniel noticed that my mother's shoes were in a bad way. This was still the post-war era of scarcity. He told her to take them off. Rather surprised, she did so, whereupon he disappeared to return with them some time later beautifully resoled. It has to be said that these practical genes were not passed on to his eldest son or his grandson! He was a highly intelligent man. As a boy he had won a rare scholarship to a grammar school but his stepfather would not allow him to take it. This left him determined that his own children should take advantage of every educational opportunity they had and that he would assist them in doing it. He helped them with their homework. When my father had problems with his algebra my grandfather taught himself from the examples in the textbook and showed him how to do the sums. From him my father learnt that education was something to be valued and the birthright of everyone. Daniel Woodman died in 1949, before I was born, but I feel close to him. My mother said I looked like him and the Welsh border country is one of my favourite places.

I don't know how my grandfather met my Cockney grandmother. The family story is that to marry her he cycled all the way from the South Wales border to London. He had no money, ate nothing on the journey and fainted on his arrival. Maude Woodman came from that large class of Londoners who earned their living from domestic service. Her childhood was unsettled (her own mother married three times) and not very happy. She too was intelligent, very resourceful and very determined. She made good use of her education at a public elementary school and went to a nurse at Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital who gave her some basic nursing training. On the strength of this she became nurse to a cultured upper class family. The Hemmings treated her as one of the family and she imbibed their values. The mother of the two boys became a close friend. Mrs Hemming was a devout Christian who passed on her faith to my grandmother. She in turn passed it on to my father so that his Christian faith informed all he did as an educator. As well as being intelligent Maude was highly emotional and quick tempered. She was superb with children. My father got many of his gifts from her. He was close to her, the adored eldest son and he greatly resembled her. My grandmother was a much-loved, if rather formidable, presence in my own childhood.

The main London bus depot was in Willesden, which is why my grandparents settled in that part of London. It was an area with a fair social mix of skilled workers and lower middle class, neither poor nor particularly prosperous. The North West London triangle of Willesden, Harlesden and Kilburn came to be rather Irish areas after the war. Now very multi-ethnic, they always had a cosmopolitan feel. In the 1960s, when Dr Hastings Banda emerged as an African nationalist leader, my father could remember him as a GP in Harlesden. There was a strong Jewish population. In 1944 when she went to live there my mother was struck by the number of shops with German names.

This was the community served by Kilburn Grammar School where my father went on a county scholarship in 1922. He was to be associated with it for about 17 years. As will be seen, it shaped my father and in turn Portadown College bears its stamp. In 1922 Kilburn Grammar School was relatively new, about 25 years old, and still developing. It was designed to give boys of modest means the education to take them into the professions, or to university. In an age of limited scholarships the former was the higher priority. Kilburn had a strong house system with enthusiastic house competitions. It claimed to be the first school outside public schools to adopt a house system. Many of you will have memories of house championships in Portadown College. These owe everything to Kilburn, as one of my father's first innovations after his arrival in Portadown in 1946 was to set houses up. Kilburn provided a sound, if culturally rather conservative, academic education. In 1925, when my father was 14, a new headmaster, who was to prove one of the great influences in his life, arrived. James McLeish was a London Scot, a man of 34, who swept through the school with a fresh wind of enthusiasm. He was a handsome man, who had served with distinction in the 1914-18 War, a fine cricketer and a more than competent footballer. Money was raised to build a new pavilion. Sports and school societies were developed and enhanced. He made it compulsory for all pupils below the sixth form to wear gym shoes in school. He was an enthusiast for community singing who made a singsong part of every final assembly. All this will sound familiar to you! He was a chivalric figure. During the Great War he had commanded Porton gas station where gas masks were tested. This was done by releasing gas into an area where a

soldier wearing the mask was. Unhappy with the design on one mask, he insisted that it should be tested on himself rather than any of his men. His fears were justified and he was severely gassed, leaving his health poor and, probably, his life expectancy shortened.

My naturally enthusiastic father blossomed in such an atmosphere. By 1927 he was football secretary, an editor of the school magazine and captain of Radcliffe House. In a tribute paid to him when he left Kilburn to come to Portadown a colleague who also remembered him as a pupil said of his games playing:

He may not have been the most skilful player in the game of cricket and football, but his spirit and his will-power trebled his worth to the side...  
In his final year at school he became head boy.

There were other influences as well as school. The Parish Church of All Souls, Harlesden played an important part in his life. When he was 17 he told his mother that he wanted to be ordained. This was not well received. The vicar had no money, the cuffs on his jacket were frayed and she hadn't slaved all these years for him to finish up like that! He was devastated but his mother had spoken and that was the end of the matter. Yet a clerical aura always hung round him and he tended to find himself in quasi-clerical roles.

Linked to his Christian faith was the development of a left-wing political consciousness. He grew up in the era of the Depression. The General Strike and the Hunger Marches affected him deeply. His father was a supporter of the Labour Party before it became the norm for working people and a trade unionist. While Kilburn was to outward appearances rather a conservative school the instinct behind it was highly radical, concerned to extend educational provision beyond the socially privileged elite. James McLeish expressed this explicitly and several members of his staff were active members of the Labour Party. Concern for social justice was an important element in my father's development as an educator.

Both James McLeish and Howard Gould who taught Latin at Kilburn Grammar School encouraged my father academically. Gould also produced the school play and developed his dramatic interests. In 1929 he became the first pupil from Kilburn to win a state scholarship to read Classics at King's College London. The examples of McLeish and Gould and his mother's heredity meant that there was only one career he would follow.

King's College London had been founded in the 1820s as an Anglican riposte to University College London which (shock, horror) gave degrees to men who were not members of the Church of England! My father always enjoyed the founders of King's' description of UCL as 'The godless institute of Gower Street!' It retained a strong religious ethos functioning as a Church of England theological college as well as a university. In addition to his classical studies my father took a modified version of the ordination qualification, entitling him to teach religious instruction. He worked hard and won many prizes. Church and home, a short tube journey away from the university buildings on the Strand, were both more important to him as social worlds than King's. However, he involved himself in the worship and activities of the college chapel. Like many idealistic young Christians of his generation he acquired pacifist convictions. He developed an interest in animal welfare. The books he bought in the

second hand bookshops on the Charing Cross Road became a valuable resource for my own classical studies some forty years later. Maude was uneasy about these books thinking they must harbour germs, so she insisted on putting them in the oven when my father brought them home. I have never worked out how she managed to do this without burning them or indeed setting fire to her entire kitchen. In 1932 he gained a first class honours degree. After a year spent acquiring a teaching diploma at the University of London Institute of Education he gained his first job.

His three years at King Edward VI School, Bury St Edmunds were as painful a learning experience as our first jobs tend to be. It was an historic foundation, a boys' boarding school. It had enjoyed a great era in the later years of the nineteenth century but by the 1930s there was a sense of the glory having departed. My father exchanged the comforts of home for the austere life of a junior boarding school master and London for a Suffolk market town in the worst years of the depression. He learnt to look after boys in a domestic environment. In later years he looked on this as an unhappy period and he gained a deep and lifelong loathing of boarding schools. However in the 1980s after he was mentioned by Richard Baker, of whom more will be said later, on one of his radio programmes, my mother was very surprised to receive a warm and appreciative letter from someone who had been one of his Bury St Edmunds pupils. From Bury he clearly gained an increased awareness of the life of pupils outside work and games. He always acknowledged his debt to the headmaster, Colonel Wadmore, for his wise advice.

In September 1936 he returned to Kilburn to assist his former mentor Howard Gould in teaching Classics, taking responsibility as well in the following year for religious education in the school. James McLeish had died in December 1932. When playing football he had caught a chill which developed into pneumonia as a result of the weakened state of his lungs. His legacy and his spirit lived on. Kilburn was a lively place and my father's boundless energy and enthusiasm found their full outlets. He made up rhymes to the tune of popular songs to teach Latin grammar. He founded a Junior Dramatic Society which performed regular evenings of one act plays. He was modest about his own acting skill. He said that as a producer he over-acted all the parts and that the cast in attempting to imitate him got it about right! The theatre was something he enjoyed and if he was watching a play on TV he would analyse the acting.

His concern for the individual is something he gave to Kilburn. It was something he gave to the school. Once in an RE lesson when I was at Kilburn he described the Orthodox Jewish boys going in their skull caps for their own religious education, writing the sacred name of God as four blanks----. He must have talked to them or to their teacher about what they were doing in a way that was very unusual in a schoolmaster of his generation. He would have responded well to Portadown's present vibrant multicultural society.

One very different Jewish boy (not from a religiously observant background) was a bright but troublesome pupil, whose parents had fled Berlin after Hitler came to power. This boy came to my father and said that he did not wish to come to RE any more as he was a Communist. Most schoolmasters would simply have bawled him out. My father listened to him and started to demonstrate how Christianity provided what he looked for from Communism. This started a process leading the boy to

baptism and a career as a distinguished educator and a priest of the Church of England. Gunter Helft is now 87, still politically and theologically radical. I am proud to have him as a friend. Another pupil, and keen schoolboy actor, was Richard Baker, who went on to a distinguished career as a broadcaster. Both Richard and Gunter play an important part in the next stage of the story.

The outbreak of war in September 1939 coincided with the start of a new school year. Immediately Kilburn Grammar School was evacuated to Northampton, along with two neighbouring schools. Classes took place in local schools and the pupils were billeted in accommodation round the town. The headmaster was in the Territorial Army and so was called up as soon as war broke out. The second master took his place. He was in his 60s and in poor health. Donald Woodman stepped into the leadership gap. Kilburn desperately needed a centre of its own. On his own initiative, he hired a house with 10 rooms owned by the Baptist Church. Thus Youth House was born, with Don Woodman as its warden. He lived there with some of the pupils, notably Gunter Helft and Richard Baker. Later, after he had left school, Gunter became assistant warden. Youth House became a centre for society meetings, dances and socials. There was a library. Plays were produced. There was a strong religious core with regular services. It was at this time that my father widened his previously all-male experience of education. The other evacuated schools also used Youth House, including a co-educational school and Kilburn's sister girls' school. The young people would listen to records. Richard Baker kindly acknowledged my father's contribution to his musical education. Don Woodman was constantly at the centre, listening to the young people, guiding them in their thinking and their relationships and seeing them off as they left to join the forces. The contact did not stop there. After they left they wrote to him and he advised them. This went on long after he himself left Youth House. All his energy and enthusiasm were on tap, 24 hours a day. There was even more. The entire school had not been evacuated, with the junior forms remaining at Kilburn. Two days a week he made the difficult wartime journey from Northampton to London to teach RE to the pupils there. There were many people who felt that the survival of Kilburn Grammar School as a unit owed everything to my father.

Two years of this regime took its toll even on his formidable reserves. Like many other pacifists of his era, he decided that pacifism was not an adequate response to Hitler. The sight of so many of his pupils entering the forces made him feel that he too should play his part. For a variety of reasons he decided to leave the intense environment of Youth House and join the Navy.

From 1941 to 1945 Donald Woodman served as a Naval Telegraphist on two aircraft carriers, *HMS Liverpool* and *HMS Tracker*. His naval service had two direct effects on him as an educator. He said that it was from the Navy he learnt how to administer summary justice. He also had the novel experience of mixing on equal terms with young men not long out of school. The level of ignorance shown by some of them convinced him of his duty as a teacher to provide an adequate level of sex education. He served on the Arctic Convoys protecting merchant ships bringing supplies to the Soviet Union. Once in my teens I fell several times on an icy winter's afternoon. When I came home, feeling rather sorry for myself, he tried to teach me how to walk on ice. Many years later I discovered some photographs and realised that he had learnt to do this on the deck of an aircraft carrier inside the Arctic Circle. Once again he

proved influential. There was no chaplain on the *Tracker* so he became an unofficial one, conducting services. He produced a ship's newspaper. When the ship went to America in 1943 he spoke to groups about Britain in wartime. He was urged to seek a commission but refused. He remained enough of a pacifist not to wish to be part of prosecuting the war. I suspect that after the years of Youth House he enjoyed a holiday from a sense of responsibility for others.

*HMS Tracker* also came to Belfast. Here one evening he visited the Royal Overseas League in Howard Street, which provided a base for off-duty servicemen. He took part in a debate on the advantages or disadvantages of the married against the single state. He defended the single life. So too did a nursery school teacher called Flora James. They got into conversation and started writing to each other. To cut a long story very short indeed, they got married on 10 July 1944.

My mother had been educated at Methodist College, Belfast, and Queen's University. At the time of her marriage she taught at the Arelian Nursery School on Utility Street, close to Sandy Row. She had grown up in small towns in the North, South and West of Ireland where her father, Rev. George James, served as a Methodist minister. She shared my father's involvement in education. One of the first things that struck her about him was the sympathetic interest he took in her work with young children. This was not something she expected in a grammar school Latin master. The sense of responsibility for others instilled by life in the manse and the strong social ethic of the Methodist Church chimed with his outlook and influenced it. She was also rather good at intelligently questioning pieties. When he came as headmaster to work as a manager with women staff, an area where his experience had been limited, her advice and good sense were important. She also helped develop his already strong awareness of the needs of the less academically able.

In 1945 my father was awarded the British Empire Medal for his war service. He was demobbed and returned to teach in Kilburn. My parents set up home in Willesden. A daughter, Kathleen Maude, was born in July 1945. She had a cleft palate and struggled to survive her early months. She seemed to have turned the corner when she succumbed to pneumonia and died on 26 December 1945.

My father was looking for a headship. The post-war years were an exciting era in education and he wanted to play his full part. Understandably, my mother was not happy in London and a move away, at least for a time, seemed desirable. So he came to Portadown College in September 1946. His plan was to learn to be a headmaster and then go back to London, where new schools were being created. Somehow these career intentions never quite work out. As he wryly put it to me in the late 1960s he came to Portadown to make his mistakes and he was still making them!

Donald Woodman found Portadown College a school of about 200 pupils. When he retired in 1973 there were more than 800. Portadown College became fully a part of the state system in 1948, leading to its expansion throughout the 1950s. In 1950 the school management committee bought Prospect House on Killycomain Road as the site of a new school. This was built and opened in 1962. In the mid-1960s the 'Dickson Plan' led to Portadown College becoming a Senior High School. His last years as headmaster were darkened by human problems within the school and the onset of the Troubles. Even his phenomenal energy began to give out. In April 1973,

shortly before he was due to retire he suffered a major heart attack. In June 1973 he was made an MBE for his services to education. His recovery was complete enough to allow him after retirement to be involved in church work, in the devising of a new RE curriculum and also to do some Latin teaching in Killycomain Junior High School. He developed stomach cancer and died on 27 October 1975. It seemed appropriate that he was teaching until a fortnight before his death.

I have told these events quickly because Portadown College is your story and I do not want to get in the way of it. I will merely highlight some incidents and make a few comments.

At the end of his first term he wrote and produced a nativity play. It concluded with the children of the World doing homage to the Christ child. Japan and Germany were given prominent parts. It was not what a cautious newcomer to the highly patriotic town of Portadown would have done in December 1946!

My father's profound belief was in the potential of each individual pupil and he would do everything to maximise that potential, whether in work, sport, drama or any other field. In one important respect he had an easier time than principals today. He operated in an optimistic, expansive era for education, with generous public spending. He never had to worry about funding or face the decisions about priorities that are commonplace in schools today. He would not have been happy in the world of business plans.

Many memories of old boys seem to involve corporal punishment. He would have found this disconcerting. In the era when he started teaching corporal punishment was simply part of the way things were done and he would not have seen himself as using it excessively. Gradually his views changed. He used it less as he got older and after he retired he said that it was better to succeed without it. He did not live to see its abolition but I do not think he would greatly have resisted its disappearance.

The Dickson Plan is now so much part of educational orthodoxy that it is difficult to remember the ferocious opposition it aroused on its launch in 1965. My father piloted it through facing the opposition of virtually his entire staff, all the other grammar school headmasters outside the Portadown/ Lurgan area and a large number of the parents. To do his with so little animosity was a major achievement. His concern had always been with the education of all rather than those pupils who made it into his school. He always followed closely developments in the local secondary schools.

From the dark years of the Troubles two incidents stand out in my memory. His response to the growing community tension in 1969/70 was to arrange a joint meeting for his sixth formers and those from St Patrick's College in Armagh. Nowadays such contacts are commonplace. However at the time they were so unusual that my father was personally congratulated by Dr Robert Simpson, the first minister for community relations in Northern Ireland, as this was the only example of such contact that had taken place. Serious riots took place in Portadown in March 1972 at the start of Direct Rule in Northern Ireland. Stones were thrown at houses in the Nationalist area of the town, causing broken windows and other damage. My father was distressed to discover that boys from the school had been involved. The next day he went into the

area, alone on his bicycle, and visited people to apologize for what had happened. This should be known and remembered.

My father's overriding concern was to create a community where everyone, pupils or staff, could find himself or herself as an individual. He valued nonconformists (or dissenters!) as much as those who were part of the school or house establishment. He wished to shape these individuals as moral and caring beings in an atmosphere where the Christian and social values he believed in could flourish. His legacy is in the lives that he influenced- in the people like your selves who have come here today.

**GEORGE WOODMAN**  
**9 December 2010**

*(This is a revised version of a talk given to former pupils of Portadown College who met to commemorate the 50th anniversary of their leaving school in 1960, at the Seagoe Hotel, Portadown, on 5 June 2010).*