

Jamaica College

The Old Breed by Ned Blennerhassett



In 1953 I left deCarteret prep school and came down from Mandeville to Jamaica College. It was a well-worn path, as many deCarteret boys went on to JC. The background gave you some advantage, as although many complained about JC food, the deCarteret alumni knew only too well what bad food was, and soon discovered they had entered the land of plenty.

Early Days at Jamaica College

Thus I was well briefed for that first day, willing to confess to having a sister of great beauty, and practiced a song for the initiation. When called on, with unbroken voice, in all the purity of boy soprano, I belted out the Marine Corps Hymn and was immediately drafted into the school choir. Despite all my preparation there was a totally unanticipated pitfall lurking in my path.

While pure of voice and enamored of music, I was devoid of any awareness of my condition. I was tone deaf and I could not carry a tune in a bucket, and was blind to my condition that I could not, and still cannot, tell that I am out of tune.

Small and insignificant, I avoided the attention of those in charge until we began to learn the settings to the Communion Mass by Merbecke, which had parts for sopranos. There were few of us, and so I came to notice, becoming a great puzzle to the choirmaster. I would be held back after everyone left practice, he would play our piece, I would sing it back I thought perfectly, and get slapped with a ruler. There was no solution until I invented lip-synching, which allowed me to enjoy the choir's outings until the onset of puberty left me with neither voice nor tune.

The choir was one of the few points where the younger and older boys worked together. The upper and lower schools divided the older students from the youngsters who were assigned to and lived in Hardy House. Their dormitory nestled in the farthest corner of the grounds, the junior classrooms nearby under Scotland House, and then not far beyond separate dining rooms under Simms. This was all well away from the senior classrooms, which were at the other end of the campus, and helped to keep a protective distance between the juniors and much harsher environment of the upper school. None of it presented much of a challenge to me, already hardened by years in a colder place, and my recollection is that for my Hardy year I was in limbo as I waited to move on.

Moving to Maturity



The sterling quality and goodness of my nature must have been evident to those who made the selection, for when the time came I was assigned to Simms, the residence most suitable for gentlemen. This move into maturity was like starting all over again. The new draft into a senior house had to make the beds and shine the shoes of those in their graduating year, and while this may today seem to be harsh, it was a rite of passage that leads to acceptance and integration. Once your year of novitiate servitude was complete, you had paid your dues and could move up through the ranks until you reached its pinnacle and became house monitor. This gained you the privilege of access to their private study, and even though I went on to the greater height of School Prefect, that lounge could not match the Simms study for quiet comfort and a constant supply of magazines and periodicals. There I was introduced to Time, The Economist and Manchester Guardian. The power your house had over your life is best illustrated in the negative, for in all my years at JC, not even when made a School Prefect, which in theory opened all doors, was I ever on the upper floor of Scotland and have never seen its dormitories.

This division into houses facilitated management of the school. In addition to the two for the boarders there were Drax and Cowper for day-boys. The students of each house were under the supervision of its principal Master and his assistants, who for boarders lived in the building with you. This allowed for a degree of personal knowledge and attention otherwise unattainable. Of course sometimes all that attention was unwelcome, particularly when it was at the end of a cane. Your housemaster was never a father figure, but in many cases he knew you far better than your parents did. There was fierce competition between houses on the playing field, which was basic and all encompassing. Everyone played at one level or another, with the whole providing the seedbed for the school's interscholastic teams. In the absence of much professional sport on the Island, the inter-school competitions were closely followed by the entire male population, almost all of whom had attended one or another competing institution, and with that level of attention they in turn became the source from which talent for the Island's international teams was raised. Thus a beginning at playing for your house could conceivably take you to the Commonwealth Games and beyond.

Simms was the central building on the campus. Quite beautiful with a wide balcony, and beyond the driveway which passed along its front there was a large shaded area under a row of huge ancient ficus trees. These are now gone but the building, which no longer houses dormitories, looks unchanged. There is a central tower, the base of which provides an overarching access to the building. Above that was a room for an assistant housemaster, and the room yet above extended beyond the ridge-line of the rest of the building. This could not be reached internally. A side door opened to the roof and a rickety wooden stairway, and once up that we could boost each other on to the very top. This was decorated with two stone griffons looking out across the playing field. Tradition required that the last school day of the year dawned to find them clothed, one in the school tie and a jockstrap and the other a brassiere. In my last two years I managed to find a place in the small party that outfitted them.

Jamaica College is on the Old Hope Road in the Parish of St Andrew. When I came down from deCarteret it was still a rural setting with a large shady cow pasture across the road. The principal entrance was at the lower gate, the first you came upon coming up the road from town and also the location of the bus stop. The upper gate was less frequently used, usually as an exit. It lay alongside the Chapel, which was seldom occupied in the late morning and afternoon. Its garden lay between that building and the fence and was thickly planted, making it a private place, the very best to avoid detection and smoke your quattie worth of Four Aces, or if you had no money for cigarettes, puff on a dry fern stalk, the nearest we ever got to any kind of weed.

Escaping

If these two gates were the formal points of entry and exit, the watercourse that ran behind Jamaica College was the informal one. The trick soon learned was that if you were in training for Cross Country you could don some shorts put on your puss boots and be out this back door into trouble at Papine or down shopping at the grocery in Matilda's Corner in no time. The watercourse was also the gateway to the experimental farms and pastures of Hope's Botanical Gardens, rich in Bombay mango and pineapples, which by right of historic privilege belonged to any Jamaica College boy capable of outrunning the watchmen.

Jamaica College was porous, and despite the severe penalties for breaking bounds, the lure to get beyond the bars was irresistible to the caged. Not that it was hard to get permission to go out, the drawback was that to leave that way you had to wear your Sunday pants, a school blazer and the much reviled school cap, which once you were out, was traditionally left hidden in the bush beside the bus stop and forgotten. Going about in this regalia branded you school property, and you were leashed to decorum and good behavior. It was also impossible cut a swagger or cast a bad eye at the young Cuban boys who, exiled by parents beyond temptation into Castro's revolution, lounged about at the bottom of King Street, presenting a continuing territorial challenge to the likes of us.

The bus ride could be an adventure in itself. Papine, just a stop or two beyond us, was the interface between the rural or country bus and the city line, which ran down past the school into town. On Saturday morning, it was full of market women going to sell with their baskets of fruit, vegetables and ropes of tobacco. A group of well-brushed, shiny boys in school blazers were fair game for a considerable amount of teasing. In particular, I can remember one very crowded and busy morning I was standing at the back of the bus when one of these ladies pressed two very large breasts against my back, whispering in my ear "how dem feel, white boy?" Being then a young man of considerable rectitude, entirely without experience living in enforced monastic style, I was to my everlasting regret rendered entirely speechless.

I was not more than a year in residence before work began on the open fields across the road from Jamaica College. This would become a housing development and eventually require the re-routing of our cross-country run. The earliest stage was cutting and establishing the road network that would serve the new community. Once these were in place it was a while before the building began, and the many cars that began to park there after dark soon caught our attention and in short order a new term "interruptus en flagrante" had entered love's lexicon. I was then much too young to participate, but it seems there were several ways to achieve this. In one instance six or so young men armed with flashlights would silently approach a darkened vehicle, then simultaneously light up the occupants while shouting critical encouragement. In another they would make a similar creeping approach, but in this case stay out of sight by keeping below the level of its windows, then begin silently rocking the car side to side, trying to time that motion to the activity within but gradually increasing the force until the occupants were overwhelmed. In both cases choosing the right moment for a high-speed retreat was essential. This story

captivated me back when it was recounted to us youngsters, with the proud participants all fully identified and so despite lack of personal knowledge I have included it and to my credit resisted the tempting caption "Love's Labors Lost."

Jamaica College Cadet Corps



Jamaica College life was full of activities beyond the classroom and sports fields; of these I was most involved in the Cadet Corps. I joined the Cadets as soon as I was old enough because I knew they would give me a rifle to play with. On the very first day, in the small open area behind Scotland House, a group of us stood at attention and were each presented a weapon that had first seen duty around the dawn of the 20th century. A Lee Enfield 303 clad in wood from foresight to brass butt plate, it seemed in the moment far too long and heavy for my small frame. Nevertheless it was not long before I had mastered the manual of arms and learned to reduce the thing to its smallest component parts. Over the years I would rise in rank until I attained the top job open to students, that of Sergeant Major, a Warrant Officer entitled to wear a gold crown on a leather wristband and carry a brass tipped swagger stick.

Much of our time in school was spent on drills and learning enough soldiering to pass the tests for the military Certificates of Proficiency, but the work also brought the always-attractive reward of venturing beyond the school gates. The school was a favorite candidate for providing ceremonial honor guards and

over the years I participated in the 300th anniversary of the synagogue on Duke Street, the dedication of a statue to Marcus Garvey, Queen's Birthday parades and numerous presentings of the Keys to the City. My time also saw two camping trips; the first to Morant Bay where we set up tents in a field next to the button factory my uncle managed, and endured a four-day downpour. Then another in Port Antonio where no one had made provision for potable water, in consequence of which we consumed the whole year's crop of coconuts belonging to our hosts.



The Jamaica College armory in which our rifles were stored came under the command of a Cadet Sergeant, who loved everything military, particularly the bits that went bang. He along with others of his ilk had managed over time to restore to pristine state several of our arms all of which, prior to being given to us, had been rendered safe by removal of the firing pin. Replacement pins managed to fall out of rifles at Corps headquarters and live rounds migrate from that camp's firing range, and soon we too were potently armed. Into this setting stumbled a group of former students who, having ventured out in the world, were sowing their oats and watering them with rum. They decided it would be great fun to invade the old school in the wee dark hours and ring the large bell that ruled our lives. This they did and put the school, roused by what was in that context a fire alarm, into great upheaval. Not content with getting away with this once, these foolhardy individuals not only planned to do it again but let it be known when it would happen. What followed is a study of what ensues when an outside threat presents itself to a small, close-knit caged society. In a wave of insanity boys gathered stones, climbed out of their dormitory windows and laid them out as ready ammunition on the roof of the porch over the bell. Mr. Chabba, a teacher who lived in Simms, completely lost his mind and persuaded the good Sergeant of Arms to lend him a fully functional rifle loaded with a clip of live rounds, then stationed himself at his bedroom window which overlooked the bell. The invading force drove in at the appointed time; breaths held the stillness of the night remained unbroken until the first ding, upon which a storm of stones began pelting the car and the ringer, running for his life, dived into it just as it began to speed away. That was the moment when the warrior in pajamas, having fumbled his way through the simplicities of the safety catch, fired. Missing the car he hit the road behind it and the bullet ricocheted up into it, striking the frame of the rear seat and sending shrapnel into the ass-end of the occupant, who fortunately escaped brain damage. The vehicle, its several occupants shaken and stirred, continued its race into the night now bound for the hospital and explanations of how it came to suffer hail damage in Jamaica. The most remarkable element in this tale of idiocy is that somehow Mr. Chabba's career was not ruined and he lived to teach another day.

These are but samplings; the school was rich in tradition with a life so full of activities that many stories remain in reserve. There was of course also a harsher side to things, the gauntlet, enforced scrubbing of those who did not wash and even greater bullies who tormented the young and weak and got away with it.

There were good teachers and bad, and some like the assistant housemaster who should have been shot, because he would wait until we were all asleep, then on turn on the light to see if we were. There was an end of term rule that established that, if you dared to sleep you had candle wax dripped in your hair with intent to create a complete covering called a “snow cap.” This was virtually impossible to remove and the only defense to stay awake and afflict rather than become afflicted.

Looking back on my days at Jamaica College it is remarkable how much we all did. In my final years, in addition my basic class work and studies, I was the senior Cadet, an active member of the Drama Society, and organized and programmed the films, running the school projector for the weekly movie. I was on a winning shooting team, a championship swimming team, ran cross country and mile for my house all the while having duties as a house monitor and school prefect which carried with them responsibilities for supervision and maintaining discipline. Many of these, like the Cadet parades, the drama presentations and exchanging the films took me away from the school and of course the sporting activities required many hours for team practice and training. There were others with skills and talents greatly exceeding mine who would add to this list the choir, debate, tennis, football, cricket, and far greater achievements in track. Life for those who participated in this way was full and rewarding. I enjoyed returning to it and felt a keen sense of loss when the time came to go out earn a living in the real world.



We all had our circle of close friends, but beyond them was an ever-widening grouping of housemates, classmates, teammates and acquaintances. Hours were spent in discussions of philosophy and religion, which stimulated and taught as much as our formal classes. Our experience then is impossible to evoke in a world of television, computers and cell phones. Jamaica suffered a great diaspora, and the boys of the fifties were right in the middle of it. Today there are Jamaica College Old Boys groups in Toronto, New York, and Florida, as well as back home where they all belong. The internet has allowed many of us to reconnect and it is wonderful to see how well everyone has done. The old school prepared us so well that many like myself with no schooling beyond it have been able to stand their ground with little effort. A well-developed sense of self-reliance and above all an overriding confidence in our self worth is the hallmark of its legacy. That and the continuing bond of a shared experience that is unique to us, the Jamaica College old breed.

See more at: <http://www.jamaica-no-problem.com/jamaica-college.html#sthash.FtnUfybh.nIwTjK2r.dpuf>