

WINIFRED WEST'S ARDOUR
FOR THE CREATIVE COMMUNITY

Penelope Nelson

If anyone were to draw up a list of Australia's leading creative thinkers in religion, literature and the arts, Winifred West would deserve a place. Her leadership and vision inspired many creative Australians, poets, musicians, painters and craftspeople. A passionate conviction of the link between spirituality and creativity and an ardour for the creative community permeated the work of the founder of the Winifred West group of schools at Mittagong, New South Wales – Frensham, Sturt and Gib Gate. The rural location of her schools and the cultural climate of the middle years of the twentieth century meant that West received less than her due as a visionary, mystic, champion of the arts, and campaigner for creativity in education.

Frensham and Gib Gate are boarding and day schools for girls; Sturt is a craft workshop with an international reputation in weaving, glass, woodwork, pottery and jewellery.

If leaders are predominantly dreamers or managers, Winifred West was definitely in the first category. West had entrepreneurial flair and liked to plunge ahead when she had the chance. When a friend was willing to invest a thousand pounds in her dreams, West founded a school. I am unaware of any other individual in Australia in her generation who founded a successful boarding school with no institutional backing.

All three schools are set in spacious grounds where Australian eucalypts, English shrubs and flower beds form

a harmonious background. West had progressive views about education and did not like much of what she saw in other schools. She hated the emphasis on what she saw as 'control' – obedient pupils dutifully absorbing information. Her vision was broader. She wanted schoolchildren to enjoy the freedom of the countryside and to take responsibility for managing their own time. Their academic, artistic and sporting pursuits should be a source of joy rather than a preparation for an endless round of competitions and exams. Above all, a school should be a place where individuals, staff and students, willingly gave of their best to foster a sense of love, community and service. A teacher's work, she believed, was not to dominate but to inspire, not to mould but to awaken, not to control but to set free.¹

West, who was born in England in 1881, grew up in a loving family in the country, where she went to the Frensham village school. Later she attended a boarding school, St Anne's, followed by Newnham College, Cambridge. After teaching in Guernsey for four years, she left England by ship in 1907 not because she had a burning desire to found a school, but because she intended to marry an Australian. Fate decided otherwise. After a shipboard romance with someone else (an Antarctic expedition member) she broke the engagement.

West did not waste time on regrets or take the next ship back to England. She found work as an illustrator at the Australian Museum, drawing shells. She also joined a hockey club – she had played hockey in England. Through the Wanda Hockey Club Winifred West met Phyllis Clubbe, the athletic daughter of a Macquarie Street doctor, who was to become her lifelong companion: her friend and supporter throughout her career.

¹ Winifred West, *Addresses and Talks*. Angus and Robertson, 1973, p.98.

After another year of study and work in England, the young women returned to Australia, determined to found a non-denominational boarding school in the country. Gathering a handful of staff around them, they raised some capital from a fellow hockey player, rented premises near Mittagong, placed an advertisement in the press, and began operating a school in 1913. West was thirty-three years old. The school had three pupils and a staff of five. Fortunately, enrolments rose rapidly as parents responded to Winifred West's vision of a new kind of education for girls.

The school promised 'a thoroughly sound education on modern English lines; to develop to the full the capacity of every girl and help her to become a useful and gracious woman in whatever position she may have to fill.' There is a distinctly imperial note there, but if West was on a civilizing mission in the colonies, it was a very liberal-minded one. West had absorbed the progressive ideas then current in England, which included allowing as much freedom possible so that behaviour would be based on self-reliance and respect for the community rather than rules. In addition to the academic curriculum, her school offered divinity, outdoor activities and sport, self expression through music, drama, art and handcraft. Nor would the school supervise every moment of the girls' time – it was up to them to make the most of their leisure. Not surprisingly, this liberal curriculum, which was in marked contrast to the narrow offerings of many schools at the time, led some outsiders to the conclusion that little serious work was done at Frensham.²

As a country boarding school, Frensham appealed to prosperous grazing families as a place to give their

² The history of Frensham may be found in Susan Emilsen, *Frensham, a historical perspective*, Winifred West Schools, 1988. Winifred West's career is outlined in Priscilla Kennedy, *Portrait of Winifred West*, Fine Arts Press, 1973. Frensham and Sturt websites also have information about West: www.sturt.nsw.edu.au

daughters a rounded education in a healthy setting. But West never pandered to the prejudices of the rich. The consistent thread of Winifred West's public speeches was that pleasure does not create happiness. 'If you live easily, selfishly, you will miss the great things and life will become unhappy,'³ West told her students. She had no time for families who favoured 'useful knowledge' for boys and 'ornamental knowledge' for girls: 'These people are grievously wrong. A man's life is more than his business and a woman's life is more than her social activities.... Our education should aim at helping us to develop into human beings spiritually complete and free from material bondage.'⁴

Winifred West had charisma. She was a good looking woman whose face expressed an intelligent intensity. She had an outdoor ambience – her energetic walk and non-sense clothes were not those of the pallid beauties of her generation. She was often seen in gardening gloves, carrying a trowel. Her formal clothes, rarely worn, were somewhat bohemian – the rich mix of silks and colourful shawls more Bloomsbury than Darling Point. Her voice was clear, strong and compelling: her English accent had nothing over-refined about it. Her confidence, presence and ability to appeal to people's deepest hopes gave her considerable influence over others.

Recurrent themes in West's speeches are community, service to others, using one's gifts, and the importance of socially useful work. Equally striking is a spiritual strand, often linked to the beauty of nature, to music or to friendship. Few people are eloquent about the ineffable, and school principals who can make spine-tingling speeches on the topic are rarer still. West was able to evoke peak experiences:

³ *Portrait of Winifred West*, p.39.

⁴ *Addresses and Talks*, p.34.

Great music, perfect moments in our friendships, a moonrise while we are holting [picnicking in the bush] and bonfires in the twilight – things which move us deeply – are so soon over. There is the tree at the bend of the creek, a shaft of gold reflected in the water – the wind blows, the leaves fall, and the glory has gone.

But though we cannot seize and hold these individual beauties, we know that others will come, as splendid as any that have passed. Thoughts of great musicians will live again when their works are played or sung; spring will follow autumn and autumn spring in the recurrence of the seasons. And in a more important way these precious things should survive, stored up in our souls, a strength to us in times of difficulty and an incentive to the creation of fresh beauty. Joy above all things should be productive.⁵

The argument is vintage West: despite the fleetingness of joy, it should provide spiritual sustenance for difficult times. It is interesting to compare this passage with the core ideas of English psychologist, painter, mystic and creativity theorist Marion Milner. In her book *Eternity's Sunrise*⁶, Milner writes of the importance of fixing in the mind what she calls 'bead memories', the key images that strike the eye or ear, however insignificant each one may seem. These 'beads' can later be strung together until themes or patterns emerge. I am not suggesting any influence by Milner on West – West expressed these ideas from 1917 onwards while Milner's books did not start appearing until the 1950s – but there are fascinating parallels.

Avoiding the speech days and prize-givings that she found objectionable in other schools, West made the school's birthday the occasion for annual celebration and taking

⁵ *Addresses and Talkst.*, p.29.

⁶ Virago, 1986.

stock. Three years after the founding of Frensham, in mid 1916, during World War I, she was at pains to link personal sorrow and hardship to the meaning of life. For West, that always involved using one's talents for the benefit of others:

Now there is a great difference between pleasure and happiness. We are meant to be happy, but pleasure-seekers are normally unhappy – discontented and unsatisfied – and the reason is that life is too big and too beautiful a thing to be frittered away.... We are here to do work in the world, and unless we work out our destiny, we shall be restless and unsatisfied... Each sorrow we endure, each temptation we overcome, strengthens our character and makes us more fit to help others – which, of course, is what we are here for.⁷

The idea that each individual had a destiny to fulfil was a challenging one at a time when many schoolgirls regularly sat through speeches about their coming role as wives and mothers. West reminded students and staff that they owed a duty to the community – the greater their privilege and gifts, including artistic talents, the greater the duty to others. Her audience did not always welcome these sentiments. West said on 1 September 1923:

It is worse than useless for us to be accomplished, clever, well read and well informed if our accomplishments are going to stop at ourselves, or if we regard them as matters for private satisfaction. Our talents must be used, there must be no hugging to ourselves, no miserly hoarding of the good things we enjoy. Whether they come from books, music, pictures or the things that money can buy, or whether they use natural gifts. Our enjoyment of the country, the hills and the wide horizons, the slanting sunlight

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.5.

and shadows in the Holt [the large bush reserve nearby], reflections in the creek, human friendship, all our emotions and experiences should make us more fit to help others to a fuller and more abundant life.

No man is the lord of anything
If in or of him there is much consisting
Till he communicate his parts to others.

Instead of passive, selfish acceptance there must be passionate and unselfish giving. And especially do we owe this duty to any community to which we belong.⁸

West had a strongly spiritual nature, which some have described as mystic, ‘characterized by enormous passion and a deep sense of oneness with the whole of creation.’⁹ Her Christianity was never narrowly denominational. Her favourite passages of scripture included St Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, with its description of community as ‘all part of the one body’. The school’s motto, ‘in love serve one another’, came from chapter 12 of that letter.

She also recommended the concluding chapters of the Book of Job, where a contrite Job wonders at the power of nature, the might of God, and his own insignificance.¹⁰ It is entirely possible that she returned to these chapters in an attempt to gain control over her own impatient nature. Another spiritual theme was the need for leaders to have some meditative time alone. But private reflection was to be a time of refreshment for the spirit rather than a retreat from the world. The aim was for wisdom and strength, to help people to live abundantly:

You were meant to be happy and joyful, and you ought to be able to impart some of your happiness to

⁸ *ibid.*, p.6.

⁹ Frensham website, ‘background information’.

¹⁰ April 3, 1969. *Addresses of Winifred West*, p.95.

others. Face life, go out and meet it with courage; there are great things before you. The world, life, death, things present and things to come, all are yours.¹¹

Did West follow her own advice to inspire rather than to dominate? Yes and no. She inspired, certainly, but she had a dominant personality and the people around her usually did things her way.

In the school's early days West's inspiring 'crash through or crash' style of leadership worked well. Enrolments grew from three on the first day in mid 1913 to more than a hundred by 1918. West's reputation as an educational pioneer attracted talented staff. A handful stayed for the rest of their working lives.

West was not complacent about the school's achievements. She saw schools as living organizations rather than machines and insisted that they must be allowed to grow. She wrote to a friend in 1920 about her students:

They think for themselves and are extraordinarily tolerant in their attitude towards each other but how far they will be able to keep their 'open-mindedness' when they get back to conventional society I don't know. We fall horribly short of what we are aiming at but we are feeling our way and I hope that we may improve as time goes on.

After its first decade, Frensham established a company with a school council and became less of a one-woman show. By the 1930s, despite the hardships the Depression brought elsewhere, Frensham had an enrolment of more than 300.

¹¹ Suzy Baldwin, *Unsung Heroes and Heroines of Australia*. Greenhouse 1988, p.39.

By the late 1930s the innovative aspects of the school had become less remarkable. West, an innovator by temperament, was growing restless although her school was a success. In the press, Frensham was often portrayed as a place where formal study came a long way behind art, drama, music and sport. West herself was not impressed by socially prominent parents who were keen to publicise themselves and their daughters. One of West's last decisions as headmistress was the establishment in 1937 of the Frensham Press, whose first publication was Rosemary Dobson's poems, a small volume with a linocut cover.

When an organization is led by an inspiring leader, the question of succession becomes acutely sensitive. It is rare for one person with unmistakable charisma to be followed by someone of equal stature. In 1938, Winifred West, then 57, announced that she would retire and that Phyllis Bryant, a sports teacher who was some twenty years younger, would succeed her.

For a highly intelligent woman, West had some blind spots. She was slow to concede that it is all but impossible for the founder of an organization, someone who is synonymous with it, to step aside from the executive role while remaining an undefined assistant. It was far from an easy handover. The title 'Headmistress' passed to Bryant, but charisma, contacts and reputation – much of the actual power – remained with West. To make matters worse, West stayed in her old study for the first year or so, leaving Bryant to manage the school from a back room. Phyllis Bryant said nothing on the record about any anguish the very awkward transition caused her.¹²

With hindsight, it might have been wiser for West to leave Mittagong, a small pond for someone with an international outlook. The web of financial bonds tying the founders to

¹² For an analysis of this handover, see Susan Emilsen, *Frensham, a historical perspective*, Winifred West Schools, 1988

the school made that almost impossible. They were major shareholders in the school properties and had no other assets. The group of schools had always been a stand-alone enterprise: first a privately owned school, then a private company. While this freed Winifred West Schools from interference by a religious denomination or other organization, it left them with comparatively modest assets. West used the seven hundred pounds cheque that she received on her retirement to found Sturt, an experimental craft workshop, on land adjoining the school.

If West had emotional and financial ties to Mittagong, it must also be said that few other doors were open to her. She was little known outside educational circles. Her biographer writes, ‘She never recovered from the loss of her main vocation, teaching.’¹³ In a period when the abilities of women were greatly under-recognised, she was not offered directorships on commercial boards (though she served on the board of the nearby boys’ prep. School, Tudor House). Tragically, perhaps, she found no wider platform for her talents apart from Sturt. West had once gone to some lengths to ensure Frensham’s independence from church, state and business. Now no one from the established organizations felt impelled to offer her a role.

West put some of her energies into the Berrima District Education Group, a forum for educators from the Southern Highlands. Frensham, with an ageing and sometimes underqualified staff, continued along much the same lines as earlier decades, under less zestful leadership. It was no longer in the vanguard. West was a key player in the establishment of a Children’s Library in Mittagong. With the help of Ernest Llewellyn, she brought national music camps to Mittagong each year. Meanwhile Sturt, the craft workshop founded with modest aims in 1941, was growing. With the appointment of master weaver Ericke Gretshel in

¹³ Kennedy, *op. cit.*, p.123.

1951 Sturt began to gain a reputation for excellence. In 1954 Ivan McMeekin established a pottery at Sturt which became one of Australia's finest, later attracting ceramic artists such as Les Blakeborough and the Japanese potter Shiga to its staff.

In the last decades of her life Winifred West planted hundreds of trees and bulbs for others to enjoy, and spun thousands of yards of thread for others to weave. These activities were an admirable outlet for her energy but did not make the fullest use of her intellect. She continued giving her frank and often unwelcome opinions at Frensham council meetings. Although West was a spellbinding speaker she wrote down only enough of her speeches to fill one slender book. She died in 1971.

Sturt currently offers classes in ceramics, jewellery, weaving and woodwork. There are four resident potters and a full-time woodworking course. A shop, a café, weekend courses and on-site accommodation provide some income for a venture that has always been challenged by its location and modest size.

In her book *Archetypes of Leadership*, Amanda Sinclair distinguishes several types of leader, one of whom is the 'meaning manager'. This type of leader articulates values for her community and gives direction to the work of others and sets a framework to guide those who follow. Sinclair writes that this leadership archetype

lends itself to small organizations which are not highly differentiated and which possess a charismatic leader or at least a past which can be mythologised. It is unsuited to large organizations which deliver intangible goods with diffuse and controversial technologies or to organizations which are host to a range of competing domains.

This analysis is pertinent to West's career: her leadership skills were ideally suited to the school she founded, but severely tested by the internal politics of a more complex group of organizations once the Frensham group had grown to include Sturt, Gib Gate and Holt Farm. Decades later West was mythologised as a mystic.

The seeds of the myth, though, were present long ago. When Harold Cazneaux photographed West in 1934 he had her pose in a garden setting. The picture is titled 'The Bird Bath' (significantly, not 'the Headmistress').¹⁴ It shows West squatting in a ring of miniature daisies at the foot of a bird bath in a walled garden. Sunlight streams on to her hair and back, in a halo effect. She is gazing upwards at the birdbath, where a trinity of white doves, suffused with light, are dipping their heads to the font. No wonder she refused in later life to sit for a portrait. A gifted photographer had captured her in her prime, bathed in supernatural light: a twentieth century annunciation image.

As Cazneaux suggested in his image of West at the birdbath, she was the source of light and energy for the educational community she founded. Dreamer, entrepreneur and 'meaning manager', she was a leader of stature whose achievements outnumbered her shortcomings. Her ardour for the creative community inspired numerous poets, painters, craftspeople and musicians. Rosemary Dobson recently told an interviewer,

The role of the poet today, in this pragmatic world, is to keep alive the things of the mind and things of the spirit. Poets, artists, writers, musicians, should.... use imagination, seek out the mysterious, the unexpected, stir emotions and expose others to the sudden thrill of

¹⁴ *The Frensham Book, 100 Pictures by Cazneaux of an Australian School*, Ure Smith, second edition 1959, plate 23.

recognition that you are looking at something in a new way.¹⁵

Those words would give a thrill of recognition to Winifred West if she were able to read them: her ardour for the creative community lives on.

¹⁵ Janet Hawley, 'Rosemary and Time', *Good Weekend*, 2 December 2000, p.44.