

Walter Empson(1856–1934).

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Headmaster of Wanganui Collegiate School, New Zealand

Walter Empson was born in 1856 at Eydon, Northamptonshire, the eldest of the eight children of Arthur John Empson, an Anglican clergyman, and his wife, Anna Delicia Hook. At an early age Empson decided to go into the army but, while attending Charterhouse he found that deterioration of his eyesight prevented the achievement of this ambition. Instead of Woolwich he therefore proceeded to Trinity College, Oxford, where he went in for rowing and took his B.A. degree with honours in law.

In 1877 he came to New Zealand. After working for a time with a survey party in the Patea district he joined his brother, Arthur, who had purchased land on Rangitata Island, Canterbury, but soon went to Fiji where he invested (and lost) his small capital in a banana farm. Two years later he returned to New Zealand (with a malaria germ which stayed with him for the rest of his life) and secured the position of secretary of the Canterbury Jockey Club. He became a well known figure in Christchurch. His biographer, R. M. Burden, records that at this time "he usually wore riding breeches and a rather loud check coat. An eyeglass was a permanent fixture in one eye and a bulldog followed close at his heels wherever he went". In fact a long succession of bulldogs followed him all his life. In 1883 a written application for appointment to the staff of Wanganui Collegiate School was accepted, and he commenced duties at once. Two years later he married Agnes Dyke, daughter of J. B. Acland, of Peel Forest, Canterbury. In 1890, upon the death of the Rev. Dr B. W. Harvey, he was appointed headmaster, a position he held for 20 years.

In appearance Empson was a wiry man of medium height with bright straw-coloured hair and with a generally weatherbeaten look. He possessed a distinct individuality and was considered by acquaintances to be eccentric. He was in fact a wise and enlightened teacher. While steadily increasing the standing of his school in face of problems of overcrowding and lack of finance, he introduced at the same time ideas which in the main were soon adopted by leading secondary schools throughout the country. He was, for instance, the first to introduce to New Zealand the present characteristic style of uniform for schoolboys — grey flannel open-necked shirt and navy-blue shorts — a fashion previously created by Dr Almond at his school at Loretto, Scotland. To encourage responsibility and self-reliance, Empson developed the prefectorial system and appointed senior boys as cadet officers instead of masters. He founded a debating society, fostered organised games like cricket and rugby football, and arranged interschool matches with Wellington, Nelson, and Christ's Colleges. The production of the school magazine he handed over to a committee of pupils who elected the editor.

Despite these innovations he kept the general direction of affairs well under his own control and retained corporal punishment, which he normally administered with a fives bat (on the principle that the louder the noise of its impact on flesh, the greater the moral effect). He believed in work for work's sake and was a brilliant teacher with a natural gift for interesting his pupils. His discipline was firm but natural and kindly; and his sympathetic understanding of adolescent problems, his uncanny knowledge of all that went into the school, his sense of fair play, and his unbounded enthusiasm and energy in promoting the welfare of the school and its members inspired the keen devotion of all his boys. Like Frank Milner he was known as "The Man", and although as a schoolmaster he replaced his eyeglass with a pair of spectacles, he was loved for his humour and his unconventional ways — his fondness for wearing old clothes; his bust of Caesar (which he regularly sent to represent his presence at parties organised by his prefects); his willingness to work with his boys as a labourer in erecting cycle sheds, cricket pavilion, laboratory or classroom; his profound disdain for prizes and testimonials; his readiness to assist boys in trouble (as when he trundled a sick boy home in a wheelbarrow past a group of pupils of the Wanganui Girls' School and their headmistress — without loss of caste).

In 1910, on the eve of the opening of new buildings, after over 20 years of gradually but firmly moulding his school on the principles in which he believed, he decided to retire, though still only 54 years of age. He went overseas to visit his son in India and his brother in Mexico, and then came back to New Zealand for a time. Finally he returned to England, and after a few terms of teaching at Uppingham, he settled in the Cotswolds. As a satisfying service as well as a hobby, in his later years he took up Braille typing and the transcribing of books for the blind. He died at Parkstone, Dorset on 14 June 1934, after a long illness.

His wife devotedly supported Walter Empson in all his work for the school; and after his retirement, during the Great War, busied herself with work for the New Zealand War Contingent Association, for which she was awarded the O.B.E. There were two children, a son and a daughter.