1877 AND ALL THAT:

[A summary of the address given by Mr. K. V. Mathews, B.A., M.Ed., to the October meeting of the Society].

Following the passage of the 1866 Public Schools Act the previously divided National School system and Denominational School system were brought under the common administrative control of the Council of Education. However, both Public Schools and Denominational Schools continued to exist a hundred years ago. In 1878, there were 30 Public Schools in Illawarra, 8 Denominational Schools and 3 Provisional Schools, the latter being publicly supported private schools (usually quite small) subject to inspection by Council inspectors.

One of the consequences of the Public School Act was that expensive and inefficient duplication of school facilities in an area was frequently removed. The usual outcome was the disappearance of a Denominational School and the retention of the more robust Public School. In 1877, for example, the Roman Catholic Denominational School at Wollongong had its certificate withdrawn because of inadequate enrolments. Such an outcome was due, in part, to the growing acceptance of Public Schools and, in part, to the more favourable conditions connected with the establishment and operation of Public Schools as compared with their Denominational counterparts.

Provisional Schools, such as the one operating at Bulli Mountain in 1877 (after 1895 known as Sherbrooke), had first been introduced by the 1866 Act as one means of extending public education to less densely settled areas. Though they were usually small, the one at Bulli Mountain in 1877 had an enrolment of 45, of whom 41 were present for Mr. Inspector Mcintyre's visit in October of that year. That was a high percentage—average attendance in the state for the year was 67%.

Associated with the schools of that time were bodies designated Public School Boards, or, in the case of Denominational Schools, Local Boards—in fact the latter term was sometimes used for all. When a community sought to establish a school, it first set up a School Committee. That body organised support for the projected school, found a site (which was not always easy), planned the school and raised money toward the cost. Until 1875, local communities had to find one-third of the cost of Public Schools and all of the cost of Denominational Schools. Once the school was established, the School Board or Local Board was constituted. It then had many important responsibilities—in particular it had the duty of maintaining the building and its equipment, supervising many aspects of the running of the school, including reporting any inadequacies in the teacher's performance and protecting him from "frivolous and vexatious complaints," and evaluating applications for exemption from the payment of school fees. The Chairmanship of such Boards was usually the lot of some prominent local citizen—the managers of the Mt. Keira and Bulli mines were cases in point. Appointments to a Board were taken quite seriously by the Council of Education and public announcements of those made appeared in the local press.

The correspondence in the files of the Council of Education give numerous examples of the important work carried out by the Boards
in the areas of responsibility named. The history of the planning and building of the Mount Keira school building—one hundred years old this year—is an instance. Letters from the School Board making representations for action to replace the previous school which was described as being "in a very dilapidated condition" were followed by letters relating to the tenders called and received, the tenders re-advertised and again received, the appointment of a Clerk of Works and progress on the building, the extension of the time given in the contract for completion of the building, and ultimately to the completion of the school.

The opening days of such schools were opportunities for community relaxation and celebration. The "Illawarra Mercury" recorded the happenings on November 9, 1877, when Mount Keira School opened: a picnic was held and speeches were made. Dapto opened its new school on Easter Monday of the same year with a tea meeting and sports.

Of course, not all work was as spectacular as the building of a new school. In 1877, secretaries of School Boards advertised in the "Mercury" for such things as fencing and gates at Marshall Mount, a kitchen at the Church of England School at West Dapto, lining and ceiling the Albion Park Public School and for closets for the Cordeaux River Provisional School (which may well have had to survive without such luxuries up to that point—a situation not rare in the small schools in remoter parts).

While some schools rejoiced in new buildings that year, other communities were seeking to establish schools. A public meeting was called at Mount Pleasant in February, another at Macquarie River in June—both to set in train moves to establish new schools. The Macquarie River meeting sought to replace the Denominational School there with a better located and more adequately housed Public School. It also expressed the hope that the teacher of the superseded Denominational School might become the teacher of the new Public School—just one instance of the way in which teachers were able to move between the two basic classes of schools.

The interchangeability of teachers was nowhere more evident than in the case of pupil teachers. There were several letters written in the area that year relating to the transfer of pupil teachers from Denominational Schools to Public Schools. The pupil teachers who were the subjects of such letters exemplified the usual means of recruiting new teachers to the service. After passing qualifying examinations in their own school work, young people aged from thirteen to sixteen years became, overnight, teachers of other children. They then spent the next four years (more if they did not pass the yearly examinations) teaching during the normal school hours and taking lessons themselves from the head teacher afterwards. Sometimes they were pupil teachers in their own old schools. Sometimes they went to live in areas away from home; letters to the Council from pupil teachers and their parents seeking appointments back in their home towns bear witness to the stresses endured by many.

Brief mention was made in the closing stages of the address to the scarcity of funds for equipment and books (Wollongong Public
School, for example, with an enrolment of 206, spent £5.11.6 on “books and apparatus” in 1877) and to the more relaxing and now somewhat less significant school concerts and picnics—events in 1877 of very memorable character.

—K. V. MATHEWS.