

Memories unite old friends at School in the Park

Times of India, 11.01.09

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100 YEARS OF EXCELLENCE: Irish ambassador to India, Kenneth Thompson, receives the first copy of the coffee-table book brought out to mark the centenary of Sacred Heart School at Church Park. Historian S Muthiah looks on

Chennai: "Oh my god, I can't believe you've actually come!" exclaimed a middle-aged woman as she hugged her friend. All around, there was non-stop chatter and raucous laughter. The excitement was palpable at the school auditorium as young and old merged to form a timeless mosaic. For long moments, the alumni who had gathered seemed to bring the past alive, looking every bit the giggly schoolgirls they once were.

The occasion was the celebration of 100 years of their beloved alma mater, the Sacred Heart Matriculation School, Church Park.

As a significant part of the centenary celebrations, the alumni association brought out a coffee-table book, 'The School in the Park: 100 years of Church Park.' The contributions of several past students were put together and edited by S Muthiah, Chennai chronicler.

The book traces the beginnings of the Church Park story that had its roots in County Cork, Ireland, where Nano Nagle founded the Presentation order of nuns in the year 1771. Some of the nuns came to India in 1842 to set up schools in Madras, Kodaikanal, Delhi and Rawalpindi.

Uma Narayanan, past pupil and principal writer of the book, said that they used old log books, archives from the Nehru Memorial museum and various interviews of alumni and Presentation nuns to gather information.

"This was an exhilarating journey for all of us at Church Park and we are very proud of the outcome," she said. Pointing out that he had to face many battles with "this incredible group of women," Muthiah said tongue-in-cheek, "If I lost some of those battles, it was only because those were Church Park girls. By the end, we had formed a story of courage, a story of Irish nuns who came to India at a time when it

was unthinkable.”

Kenneth Thompson, the Irish ambassador to India, received the first copy of 'The School in the Park: 100 years of Church Park.' "Many of the nuns' names are forgotten, but their sacrifices to further education in India will be cherished forever," he said.

He quoted the book and added, "It's not the names that matter, but the school and its ethos."

Copies of the book were presented to the school's old teachers. In the audience were Pramila Ganapathy, the first Indian student of the school, and Chandok, one of the boys who passed out of the school in the eleventh standard.

There were a few celebrities too —Dr Kamala Selvaraj and Lady Darshana Sridhar, special adviser to British Prime Minister Gordon Brown.

"It was here that I learnt to be confident," said Sridhar, "the fact that I can deal with different situations with impartiality is something I owe to Church Park."

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