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FORT STREET HIGH SCHOOL
THE FORTIAN MAGAZINE 1984

ON THE RETIREMENT OF RONALD HORAN

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The Hon Justice Michael Kirby CMG *

He swept into the classroom beside the Staff Common Room. He called us his 'scribes'. 'Pick up your pens, scribes!' he would command. He taught us useful achronyms, such as Dogwuf (durch ohne, gegen, wider, um für). They still go on chanting in the hidden recesses of the mind. He was dramatic. He had flair. He was a perfectionist. He held his class in awe. It was 1952. King George VI had just died. I was commencing my second year at Fort Street. German was the course. Ronald Horan was the teacher.

We used ancient textbooks which, believe it or not, still referred to the Kaiser. Hitler's war was still vivid in memory. After all, it was only seven years since the Fuhrer had shot himself in his Berlin bunker. Germany itself was in economic ruins. The German language and German culture were not the most fashionable in the world at that time.

But Ronald Horan breathed life into the language. He talked to us in German. This may be commonplace with modern language teachers nowadays. But back in those days modern languages, like ancient Latin, were chiefly learned to be read, not spoken. To this day I am sound in written French. But in international conferences, whilst I stumble over my French, my conversational German is good. Thanks to Ron Horan.

It was he who introduced me to school plays. My hidden dramatic talents had not been recognised in First Year. But in the German class in Second Year a special play was put on. It was 'Ali the Cobbler'. With great discernment, Ronald Horan chose me to be the villain. Thenceforth, in each successive year of my time at Fort Street, I played a villain — a murderer here, a misanthrope there. The warm glow of the lights and the smell of greasepaint got me in. It sparked an interest in the dramatic that has not left me. They say that Neville Wran also learned his drama lessons on the stage at Fort Street.

After Third Year, the large German class dwindled to a group of six. I was one of them. Everyone in that class gained a maximum pass in the Leaving Certificate examination in 1955, all with two or three first class honours results. Ronald Horan cajoled, coaxed and inspired us. How fortunate we were to have such a brilliant teacher to ourselves -- six eager young minds -- one of whom, Tom Handler, came, I think, first in the State in German and second in the whole of New South Wales in aggregate. He is now a leading solicitor in London. He visits Sydney from time to time and, as at school reunions generally, we reflect upon our fine teachers and talk of the Extraordinary Ronald.

Ronald Horan was, even in the 1950s, writing his 'Khoran'. I suppose we would not be allowed to call a mere German grammar text after that Holy Book nowadays. It took a long time coming but is now published and available to a wider audience of German language students. We were its earliest disciples.

Over the years I have kept in touch with this doyen of Fort Street teachers. He never seems to age, nor lose that fresh enthusiasm he brought into the classroom in 1952. Yet here it is, in the words of the Harrow School song, thirty years on. We are all growing older and older. The influence of great teachers persists throughout the life of their pupils. It has its ripple effect. Their work continueth. How fortunate Fort Street and its pupils have been to have the inspiration, dedication and imagination of this fine teacher. He is a link with the past -- and it is a past worth celebrating.

- * President of the Court of Appeal, Supreme Court, Sydney. Formerly, Chairman of the Australian Law Reform Commission and Judge of the Federal Court of Australia. Fort Street Boys' High School 1951--1955.