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REMEMBERING TEACHERS

I feel uneasy writing an essay on ‘my favourite teacher’. I may be crazy; or perhaps lucky. But I loved virtually all of my teachers. Singling out one to be my “favourite” would seem disloyal to the others. Somewhere, mostly upstairs, they are looking down on me. An example of bad manners would not be appreciated. It might be reported to the highest Principal of them all!

My entire school education was in public schools. I started at the North Strathfield Infants’ School, just as the Second World War was approaching its end. I can still remember the bright and sunny classroom upstairs in the infants’ school, bordering Concord Road, Correys Avenue and the golf course in suburban Sydney. My teachers there were successively Miss Pontifex and Mrs. See. Miss Pontifex was, like her name, somewhat imperious. She took no nonsense. Her principal role was to impart the alphabet to us. I remember the wonderful feeling of the glossy paper of the text book. And the smell of it. So rare in those days of wartime austerity. We were all very well behaved in 1945. We sat in serried rows, mixed classes of boys and girls. From the very beginning, I was studious. This was something that was encouraged at home, although never oppressively.

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Miss Pontifex occasionally doled out enjoyment in the form of sports and music. In the spirit of wartime service, we marched to and from our classes. Up the stairs from the assembly where my mother had deposited me in the morning. The marching tune was "*The Teddy Bears' Picnic*". On very special days, Miss Pontifex would take us to a nearby park, for example, to plant a tree on Arbour Day. I have returned to that park in recent years to see if my tree was flourishing. Sadly, an Australian summer had burnt it up. Only trees planted there by the Queen are watered and preserved.

Mrs. See introduced me to mathematics. And then it was time to progress to the "big school" in North Strathfield Public School. It is still to be found in grounds adjoining the Infants' School. The heart of the big school is an old 1890s building, erected in the golden era of the *Public Education Act*. This was the law by which the public education system was introduced in New South Wales towards the end of the 19th century. It would be free, secular and compulsory.

In third class, my teacher was Mrs. Godwin, a kindly, motherly woman. I was always eager and usually sat in the front of the class. She taught us the story of human civilisation. I can still recall her lesson on ancient Egypt and the scribes thereof. My imagination on this theme was re-kindled by weekend visits to *The Odeon* cinema at Concord West or *The Ritz* at Central Concord. Very occasionally, I was allowed to attend the somewhat posher theatre at Strathfield, *The Melba*. The Saturday matinee had many a movie which interspersed Cowboys and Indians with scenes from ancient Rome. Edmund Purdom, wrapped in a sheet, addressed the Roman Senate. It was all integrated with Mrs Godwin's classes.

In fourth class, I graduated to Mr. Casimir, an early disciple of anti-smoking. By this stage, we were divided into boys and girls. At the appropriate hour, Mr. Casimir would turn on the wireless for special programmes. H.D. Black taught "The World We Live In". Terrence Hunt taught us singing. Both had beautiful baritone voices. Later, during the fourth year, departmental officials turned up to administer IQ tests to our class. I did well in these with the result that my mother was asked to present me to the Education Department building in Bridge Street, Sydney. When I passed the further tests with flying colours, my parents were invited to send me to Summer Hill Opportunity School. They agreed to do this. And so I farewelled North Strathfield PS and took the train to Summer Hill every school day.

My teachers there assumed the added challenge of instructing a class of selected boys who had been chosen from comprehensive schools in the surrounding suburbs. Talk about the challenge of a life time. But the teachers were up to it. In fifth class, my teacher was Mr. Gorringer. In sixth class, it was Mr. Warren Tennant. I remember that he was very good looking and came from Merewether Beach in Newcastle. Both teachers were gifted and stimulating. Special demands were made on them by the pushy little charges in their care.

Opportunity schools in New South Wales were supposed to inject an added dimension to the education of gifted children. We were taken to Parliament and to the Public Library. We were encouraged to draw on the blackboards. I remember that my drawing of what Sydney would be like in fifty years remained on the board for many months. It portrayed elevated roadways, skyscrapers and space ships in the sky. In those

days, very few photographs were taken. It would be interesting to compare my imagination with present actuality. Perhaps I was a great architect in the making whose imagination remained undiscovered.

Mr. Tennant suffered a car accident in 1950 when I was in sixth class. To fill the gap before his return, the school headmaster, Mr. Gibbons, took over our teaching. Like many of the older teachers of that era, he had fought in the First World War. I think he was an original Anzac. He did not tolerate any indiscipline whatsoever. Whereas Mr. Tennant got by with quiet talk and encouragement, Mr. Gibbons, as headmaster, had no hesitation in using the cane. It was from him that I received my one and only caning in my school days. This was for tearing out pages from the green covered exercise book after I spilled ink on it. 'Two of the best' was my punishment. It left an indelible mark and not only on my hand. Yet even Mr. Gibbons stands high in my opinion. I have no doubt that taking over class 6A would not have been welcome on top of his administrative duties. His functions extended to protecting the King's exercise books.

From Summer Hill, in 1951, I graduated to Fort Street Boys' High School. This is the oldest public school in Australia, having been established in 1849. Like Summer Hill, it was a 'selective' school. The students were chosen from a wide suburban catchment area. All of us at the Petersham campus, in those days, were boys.

In the first year class, my teachers included Mr. Theo Neuhaus (Latin), Mr. E.T. Arnold (English), Mr. Ron Claridge (French) and Mr. Treherne (called 'Trigger', because his hair looked like the mane of Hop-a-long

Cassidy's horse). He taught us music. He also doubled-up as the school librarian.

Without exception, my teachers at Fort Street were brilliant, energetic and dedicated. In my view, there was not a dud amongst them. There was only one woman teacher, the enigmatic Thelma Hunt (French). But I was never taught by her. The school had great traditions upon which we were instructed every Thursday at the school assembly. The school motto was "*Faber est quisque suae fortunae*". This was translated, in those unenlightened times, as "Every man is the maker of his own fortune". We were told about the famous Fortians in whose steps we followed. Barton. Evatt. Barwick. Hunter. Douglas Mawson. And so forth.

Four teachers stand out from my golden five years at high school. One was George Bohman. He taught me English and History. He inculcated a great love of history especially. When I won my Leaving Certificate by being named the top student in the State in Modern History, George naturally took the credit. Credit he deserved. His style of teaching was rather like the Socratic style I was soon to experience at university. Mr. Bohman did not believe in rote learning. His aim was to get his students to understand. He constantly tested our understanding by dialogue. He seemed ever so laid-back by comparison to the more intense teachers of those days. He had a great passion for rugby football. I put this down to eccentricity, being unable to share that interest with him. But next to football, it was history. He made the subject come alive. I have often thought that I should have followed that passion rather than becoming a lawyer.

Mathematics had never been my strong point at school. Like spelling, I just did not get the hang of it. But it was compulsory. So poor marks in maths always pulled me back. I had to do something about it. In 1955, the final year at Fort Street, a young teacher of mathematics, Jim Coroneos turned up. He was later to become famous as the author of texts books on teaching mathematics, used in schools throughout Australia. But in 1955, he was a tyro teacher. He made it his business to explain his subject to the class. Suddenly, the penny dropped. And in those days, it was a kangaroo penny. As if by magic, I began to understand algebra and even trigonometry. The logic of mathematics burst into my brain. Thanks to Jim Coroneos. I did brilliantly in the General Mathematics examination in the Leaving Certificate. Years later, I was to see him when he and his wife were litigants in a property dispute before the Court of Appeal. Naturally, I could not sit in his case. But I honoured him and his long service in teaching maths. He was an inspired teacher.

In 1954, a young music teacher came to Fort Street, replacing Mr. Treherne. It was David Tunley. He injected a great new enthusiasm for music into the school, alongside rugby and cadets. This was unsurprising as he was later to go on to a distinguished professorship at the University of Western Australia. Music was suddenly in vogue. A huge school choir was formed. Singing became an important element of togetherness at the school. The young and energetic Mr. Tunley would spread his enthusiasm during school days. This was supplemented by the great love of music I replenished at home and at the homes of my school friends, Bill Lawson and Bill Land. No school occasion was complete without its musical interludes. The talents of particular students (not, alas, myself) were tapped to perform singing, piano and

violin solos. In the midst of striving and achieving, we were encouraged to stop and pause and feel the spiritual power of music. David Tunley, as a most gifted teacher, left a mark on the whole school, bigger than he knew.

The most dramatic of my teachers at high school was undoubtedly Ron Horan. His discipline was modern languages. He taught me German. In second year, in 1952, I had to elect between a course in Japanese or German. Had I chosen Japanese, I could have outsmarted even Mr. Rudd by speaking in that language. But German it was. Don't forget that 1952 was only seven years after the end of the Second World War and the defeat of Nazi Germany. Learning the language of the Germans was an intriguing challenge. Ron Horan rose to the occasion.

He was a young man, although he fought in the armed services at the end of the Second World War. Every class for Ron Horan was a drama. For the Leaving Certificate, only six students undertook German. Talk about intensive teaching. Every member of the class gained a 'maximum' pass in the final year. This meant we were all judged with two or three first class honours results and straight As in all the rest. All of us, I think, found a place in the first 100 students in the State of New South Wales. I came second in the School in aggregate. Ron Horan used to describe us as an "*annus mirabilis*".

He taught us from cyclostyled notes which he shared with us. Rather irreverently, he called these notes "*Horan's Koran*". He would not get away with that today. Unlike the French teachers in those days, he insisted that we actually speak in German. He listened attentively to our accents. He worked very hard on us to get them just right. I still have a

good accent in German – a *Sprachtsgefühl*. And if the drama of the classroom was not enough, Ron Horan would engage us in plays where his dramatic flair was at a premium. Many a great advocate of the future was trained in the Fort Street Play Days.

Years after I left school at the end of 1955, Ron Horan remained behind. He became a kind of “Mr. Chips” of the school. He was himself an *alumnus* of Fort Street. He loved the place. He gave it his all. He died too young but was honoured posthumously in the Order of Australia.

Ron Horan witnessed the amalgamation of the boys and girls schools in the 1960s, an event he dreaded. He became the Deputy Principal and wrote the history of the school, preparing it for its sesqui-centenary in 1999¹. He was greatly loved by his students and admired for his unique passion, energy and dedication. By the standards of the professions, teachers, like nurses, are not paid well. Their rewards come in a form different from money. They come in the words of thanks spoken by their students to them when, later, the students make good in the world and remember their debt. Alas, there were not enough words of thanks by me to my teachers. So I say my thanks now when most of them are gone from life.

The rewards of teachers include witnessing the success of their pupils and simply knowing that the work they perform is noble and precious. From Miss Pontifex to Ron Horan, I was blessed with outstanding teachers. And great public schools. From them, I learned the precious values of public education in Australia: Secularism. Democracy. Egalitarianism. Respect for one another in all of our diversities. Pursuit

¹ Ronald Horan, *Fort Street, The School*, Honeysett, Sydney, 1989.

of excellence. Respecting discipline. Honouring our community.
Engaging with the world.

Recently, the author and film-maker, John Pilger told his school, Sydney Boys' High School, that the most precious lessons he learnt from his teachers were: "to leave ... classes not just better informed, but more prepared to relinquish silence, more prepared to speak up, to act against injustice wherever [we] saw it. This, of course, was a recipe for trouble"².

If trouble is sometimes needed to make the world a better place, I learned it from my teachers. So trouble. Bring it on!

² J. Pilger, "When education favours division over diversity", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 February 2010, p.13, quoting Howard Zinn *A People's History of the United States*.