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HONOURING THE LATE
EMERITUS PROFESSOR
CHARLES BIRCH

Contribution to Memorial Ceremony
The University of Sydney
Wesley College
14 November 2010

The Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG

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WESLEY COLLEGE**

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I will be in Belfast at the time of the service to honour the life of the late Emeritus Professor Charles Birch.

Suitably enough, my mission will be a conference on human rights. Somehow, I believe that Charles would approve.

His loving friend, David Paul, has asked me to offer a reflection for the occasion. Though physically far away, doing so gives me the chance to be present at the acknowledgement of, and contemplation upon, his life. Charles too is now physically far away. But his spirit is certainly there in the beautiful places and corners of the University of Sydney. That is where I first met him. It is where I think of him at the very height of his powers.

He came to the University of Sydney, just after the Second World War, as senior lecturer in Biology. He passed through the ranks and was appointed Reader in Zoology in 1954, and Professor of Biology in 1960. He was to hold that chair until 1984. From time to time, this led him to act in the senior administrative ranks of the University, supporting Sir

* Justice of the High Court of Australia (1996-2009); Fellow of the Senate, 1964-9; President of the Sydney University Union 1965; President of the Sydney University Students' Representative Council 1964-5.

Stephen Roberts, the historian Vice-Chancellor, in dealing with pesky students and their incessant demands.

In 1962, I was elected to the first of two terms as President of the Students' Representative Council of the University. That high office led to constant meetings with Sir Stephen. Larger than life (though smaller than Lady Roberts), the Vice-Chancellor was overweight, short of breath, a chain smoker, florid in complexion, exuding an air of exasperation in response to every request that I humbly placed before him

It was in meetings of that kind that Charles Birch sprang to the rescue. I suspect that Roberts had asked him to be present lest a supplication should take the better of him and result in a fit of temper or, worse still, a fainting attack or uncontrollable fury.

As I endeavoured to save this student from 'sending down', or that student from the Proctorial Board, Charles Birch would intervene to cool things. He would open with a diffident, almost stuttering venture at peace-making. Roberts would look around with despair as yet another deposit of ash would fall from the ever-present cigarette onto his waistcoat. A merry twinkle in Charles Birch's eye would lighten the occasion. He was a problem-solver. He could always find the median path. Neither Roberts nor I (both stubborn men) were particularly grateful for Charles' interventions. Neither of us was truly satisfied with his solutions. But they were generally adopted for default of anything better. With a merry look of triumph, Charles Birch would escort me from Sir Stephen's presence. He would assure me, in a stage whisper,

that I had won that encounter. Sometimes, I even believed that this was true.

Whereas I never really thought that Roberts understood the students of that age, with flowers in their hair, (still less the inscrutable sphinx-like Margaret Telfer, Registrar of that time), Charles Birch did. Though he seemed at the time a great age (he was but 44 years old), he somehow seemed more engaged with the student body and certainly with their pushy SRC President.

His empathy for students was not only demonstrated in those encounters with Vice-Chancellor Roberts or in the countless lectures that he delivered as Challis Professor. He also took it upon himself to be involved in the teaching of science in Australian high schools. He published books on senior science and biology for high school students. Truly, he was young at heart.

Long before others did so, Charles Birch understood the importance of protecting the planet and treasuring its environment. His service as a member of the International Club of Rome followed in 1974 and in that, he joined another great Australian, Sir Zelman Cowen. In explaining to his fellow creatures the imperative necessity to safeguard the environment; to reduce the waste; and to defend the means of life, he perceived the integrated nature of ecology. He wrote of *Living with the Animals*. He was forever *Confronting the Future*. Like that other great zoologist, Alfred Kinsey, he was definitely engaged with humanity and none of it was a stranger to him.

When he won the prestigious *Templeton Prize* in 1990, one might have expected that he would have been recognised for his global contributions by the highest national civil honours and a shower of honorary degrees. They did not come. In this respect, Australia can sometimes be an ungenerous and unforgiving place. But I do not think that this lack of worldly trappings greatly troubled him. He seemed happiest in the company of a few friends and in the worlds of organ music and surfing. Virtually to the very end, he would plunge into the beloved ocean of the east side of Sydney. By this, he would remind himself of the utter powerlessness and insignificance of our individual lives. Not to him was given the blessing of children and grandchildren to take his precious genes into future generations. But that did not mean that his life was without meaning or worth. Far from it.

For some, the ultimate meaning of their lives is to be found solely or mainly in their progeny. In others, it is to be found in service and teaching: thinking and sharing great thoughts, doing fine things for others.

Charles Birch thought endlessly of *Nature and God*. He taught science and its truths to students on every continent. His books will be read long hence. The loving friends I saw at the end, gathered around his bed at St. Vincent's Hospital, testified to the closeness of his closest friendships. Even then, gasping for breath and hanging on to life, I could see a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. Stephen Roberts and Margaret Telfer were long gone. But it was as if he was trying to still the anxiety and pain of those present and to spread peace and harmony amongst us as we looked at the stark reminder of our own mortality.

Despite his great mind and ceaseless thought, Charles Birch did not solve the riddle of life and the mystery of existence. But he made a distinctive contribution. He was honoured by those who count. He was mischievous. He was kind. He will be missed. He was certainly special. And that is how we remember him.
