

PROLOGUE

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Charlie's no angel, but life has been full

Charlie Goffet would probably call it misguided in the extreme, but there is among the ex-students of Newcastle Boys High School a fierce loyalty and affection for their former French teacher.

Charlie is probably better known to readers of the Newcastle Herald as an irreverent and irrepressible contributor to the newspaper's Readers' Opinions columns over almost 20 years.

Some of his offerings delight in taking the mickey out of serious souls and their serious pronouncements. Others embroider incidents from his youth into entertaining tales that may or may not bear passing resemblance to reality.

This makes it difficult to piece together an accurate picture of his life, but there are several details on the public record that he doesn't bother to quibble with.

He was born in 1909, grew up at Wickham and was educated at Wickham Public School and Newcastle High School (now occupied by Newcastle East Public School).

His first teaching job was at North Sydney Boys High School in 1929 and he returned to Newcastle in 1942 as French teacher at Newcastle Boys High School (now Waratah High), where he remained until his retirement in 1978.

He has three daughters, including Labor politician Jeannette McHugh, and lists as his hobbies two-up (the real version, played with pennies on a grey blanket), horse racing and all things French.

Though he spent his entire career teaching the subject, it was a love affair pursued from afar until his first visit to France in 1974, at the age of 65. He has been back four times since then and remains captivated by the country and its people.

As for the rest, well, it depends on who's doing the telling.

His former students recall him as an inspired teacher with an idiosyncratic classroom manner who never set homework yet got shovel-loads of it in return to mark each day.

Charlie's version: 'In 49 years I never taught a thing - I gave lessons. All I ever walked into the room with was a stick of chalk and a textbook. I prepared my lessons in my head and I taught out of my head.'

While he remains doubtful whether his lessons had much effect, his personality had a lasting impact on many of his students. They remember him with such affection that when the NBHS Old Boys Association staged an 80th birthday party for him a couple of months ago, members went through the lengthy exercise of collecting every one of his missives to the *Herald* since 1971 and published them in a volume titled *Charlie's Letters*. The print run was limited to only two copies: one for the school library and the other for Charlie.

His close rapport with students rarely extended to headmasters or school inspectors, who almost universally disapproved of his fondness for beer, the horses and cigarettes.

Though a non-smoker these days he once smoked an average of 70 cigarettes a day (many of them in the classroom). So it was with tongue firmly planted in cheek that he wrote an entertaining letter to the *Herald* in August, 1988, on the subject of passive smoking, laying the blame for any health problems he might develop at the feet of his 'chain-smoking students'.

The letter provoked a flood of mock protests and anecdotes from former pupils about his smoking practices, including his habit of leaving bumpers on top of the corner cupboard in his classroom, which, if forgotten, would be promptly snatched by an enterprising boy for a quick puff in the park nearby.

Students featured strongly in some of the 'big' moments in Charlie's life. One of his favourites came about on the final day of school before the Christmas holidays one year when, traditionally, very little work was done by either staff or students.

Several teachers, including Charlie, had gone to a nearby pub for lunch and returned, with a few beers under their belts, to attend the final staff meeting of the term. En route, Charlie was waylaid by a group of senior students and taken to the science laboratory, where the entire senior student body challenged him to drink two 750 mL bottles of beer in less than three minutes.

After perfunctory protests Charlie took up the gauntlet, ordered the beer poured into glass beakers and duly completed the task in the allotted time.

To loud applause and calls of 'Speech! Speech!' he turned to face the blackboard, chalk in hand, and prepared to write something appropriate to the occasion. A hush fell on the room as the students waited in anticipation.

The headmaster of the day chose the same instant to enter the lab unnoticed, took one look at the situation and was later heard to remark incredulously to his deputy: 'The school's a shambles, yet Goffet's the only member of staff doing a tap of work. He's got the entire senior form in the science laboratory, giving a lesson, and there's not a sound out of any of them.'

'I had to tell him the truth when I found out, of course, but it was one of the finer moments of my life,' smiled Charlie.

Reflecting on the history of Newcastle Boys High School in a school magazine article in 1972 Charlie bemoaned the loss of old-style teachers who had become legendary characters in NBHS folklore.

'Unless the mists of time have enhanced their memory, I think that they were different from the assembly-line products of the present system,' he wrote.

'They were more academic, more bookish, more revered, more interesting, more individualistic, and therefore, I suppose, less competent.'

'There are no "characters" these days, no teachers whose memory will, in 20 years' time, inspire a flood of anecdotes, apocryphal or otherwise.'

Perhaps he was wrong.