

Charlie Goffet

Speech At Inaugural Dinner Of The Newcastle Boys' High School Old Boys' Association (Aug1987)

(Charlie was the guest speaker at the Association's Inaugural Dinner. He was introduced by John McKenzie. The speech was transcribed from the sound track of a video recording made by one of the Old Boys, then edited a little by Charlie).

It was certainly a masterful plea for the defence for John McKenzie to create the mythical character he has just described in his talk, for which I thank him on behalf of myself and my family. How proud I would have been to stand before you as that paragon! But, of course, that is just an impossible dream.

To come back to reality, I shall refer to two of the topics that John mentioned - Athletics and the French language.

It is true that 1949 was a wonderful year for NBHS in Sydney. For the first time ever we had no seniors and, with our seriously diminished team, we (I mean the boys) won five of the eight sprints, three relays with two records, and came second in the aggregate.

At the official luncheon the address was given by the Director of Education, and I poked Len in the ribs and said "We'll get a bit of flap this time", and we certainly did, because the Director said "The managers of the Newcastle Boys' High School Athletics Team can go back proudly to their headmaster and school and tell them that for the first time in living memory, no member of the team smoked during the sprint finals in front of the official stand. Indeed, the only NBHS runners observed smoking were those at the back of the course in the distance events and the relay runners while they were waiting for the baton changes."

As for my interest in the French language, I must confess that it was only a fluke that I knew the French for one-toed sloth that John credited me with. What really happened was that, to curry favour with my superiors, I had decided to set about learning by heart, and in alphabetical order, the whole of the French language. This was made easier for me because, in our staff-room, we had the two huge volumes of the Larousse Encyclopedia. So, instead of pinching off to go for an occasional drink, I set to work. That is how I came across ai (ai diaeresis), the French for one-toed sloth, because it was on about the first page of Larousse, and I grew to love the word because of my affinity with this epitome of laziness. It was Jack Shield who put an end to this branch of my studies. His folding chair was so low that he used the thick volumes of Larousse so effectively to shore up his expansive bottom that the two books finally disintegrated.

As if to compensate for this set-back to my project, a miracle happened. A really and truly French boy enrolled in one of my classes. He didn't know a word of English and was a dedicated student. I think his name was Kalmikoff. After two months of intense study in my French conversation class, he had completely lost his French accent, and his knowledge of his mother tongue was becoming a faint memory.

So, realising that, like a one-toed sloth in Brazil, I was up a tree, I decided to devise a course in practical French.

Success at last! It worked like a charm during the fourteen months of my five visits to Paris. When I wanted something to eat in a fashionable restaurant, I would open my mouth wide and point to it with my index finger. When I wanted wine, I would gaze longingly at the desired bottle, raise my empty glass, and point again to my mouth. Fortunately, because of my strict moral upbringing, even in Paris my sensuous needs never went beyond the bounds of hunger and thirst! No longer did I have to waste hours trying to find some Parisian, male or female, who could possibly understand one word of my bloody French. It was clear that Parisians, in particular, spoke a language quite different from the one I had been struggling with for fifty-odd years.

Nevertheless, I must once again thank John for having revived memories of those two phases of my stay at NBHS.

And now, before wandering off into my anecdotage, I should like to thank the members of your Committee for the very great honour they have paid me in inviting me to say a few words on this great occasion. This is certainly the highlight of my whole career. To find anything remotely similar to the compliment you have paid me, I would have to go back to the 1912 Sunday School picnic in Islington Park, at which in all truth and with genuine modesty, I must tell you that I was awarded every prize for general morality, propriety of language, and my public pronouncements against the evils of nicotine and alcohol.

I could go on for ages about the distinguished boys who have passed through our Old School, but the list is too long. We have had professors, judges, developers, Lord Mayors, members of parliament, and so on. Besides these, of course, we have had those who were not so bright. But even they, by dint of repeating classes year after year, did become school teachers.

Of famous names, I am going to mention only three people: Captain Jeffries, for his Victoria Cross: Reg Trew, for his attempted rescue of a shark victim at Merewether Beach: and 'Pop' Jenkins for a surf rescue in mountainous seas near the Bogey Hole. All of these were very highly publicised.

I did not witness any of these myself, but I think that the bravest action that I have ever seen at first hand was that of a frail-looking young kid from Stockton, who risked his life, to help what must have been his impoverished family. This is what happened. One day Tom O'Connor, or 'Toc' (with his laughing manner we used to call him 'The Laughing Cavalier'), was approaching my classroom with a cane, the length of which would have got into the Guinness Book of Records. He was swishing it and swishing it, and he stormed into my room without knocking, and harangued the kids for ages with murderous threats of capital punishment for anyone who tried even to bend any of the latest school rules. I don't know about the kids, but I was pretty scared myself. When Toc ran out of threats, there was a dramatic pause, and he growled "Are there any questions?" And I thought "Gawd, I hope not!" Anyhow, this pale little kid put up his hand. And Toc said "What is it?" And the kid answered politely "Sir, would you like to buy a greyhound pup?" Vic Rooney knows the name of the kid, but I've forgotten.

I must say a few words about our original School on the Hill. Conditions 65 years ago were so different, that they would now seem improbable. It wasn't that we were a lot of priggish little 'goody goodies' in an elitist school. It's just that things were so different from those in our present permissive society. To illustrate this, may I say that when our class was enrolled in 1922, I was one of eleven boys and there were eleven girls. I am certain that at the end of our five years, all of us left the school as virgins. On the other hand, the Headmistress of a local girls' school told me recently that in the 1970's, in the first term, nineteen girls fell pregnant and that they couldn't even remember the blokes that did it.

One day, when the temperature was 107 degrees (Fahrenheit of course), a fellow pupil, Bill Marshall, who later became a distinguished veterinary surgeon, had left his coat off in class. When the woman teacher noticed this, she was scandalised, and she shouted at Bill "How dare you? Would you remove your coat in front of your mother?" And poor Bill answered meekly "No, miss."

A couple of weeks later, after our Friday sports' afternoon swim at the Ocean Baths, some of us wandered across to the sandhills on Nobby's Beach. And there we saw this same teacher in the close embrace of a handsome young man, who had not only removed his coat, but looked as though he was divesting himself of much more of his clothing. Greatly perplexed, we scampered away, hoping that we had not been seen by the couple. Bill was still puzzled. "That's strange," he said, "That chap can't possibly be her son because, if he was, he wouldn't be game to take his coat off in front of her."

When were in fourth year, that is, when we were sixteen years of age, we were studying "A Midsummer Night's Dream". One of the boys had read ahead and had noticed that in Puck's description of one of the pranks he played on humans, the word 'arse' appeared. I should be able to remember the quote, but I can't. Vic Rooney, the first word, please. (Vic) "She sits down on her bum." No, Vic. That was in the later bowdlerised edition. But I can remember the lines now.

"The wisest aunt, telling the saddest tale,
Sometimes for three-foot stool mistaketh me;
Then slip I from her arse, down topples she,
And 'Tailor' cries and falls into a cough."

Unable to believe that such a word could appear in print, we went and saw our English teacher, Mr Rupert Scott. Now Rupert was no sanctimonious person. He had represented Australia in Rugby Union, he had sailed around Cape Horn in a windjammer, he had nicotine right up both arms. He was a talented drinker at all times, and he agreed with us that such a word should not appear in print. He thanked us for our valuable warning and, when the time came to treat that page in class, naturally, he skipped the offending passage.

It was not as if we had no eye for female beauty - we did. It's just that we were too bashful. That was the time when women's skirts reached right down to the ground. We knew for a fact that one of our teachers, Miss Ross, had the most beautiful ankles in the world. Any boy who was lucky enough to be sitting in the front desk when she was seated at the table, would surreptitiously drop a pencil and steal a look. Unfailingly, and graciously, Miss Ross would acknowledge his admiring glance by asking "Did you like them?"

Most of you, of course, went to NBHS at Waratah. You know more about schoolboy larks there than I do, because I was only there as an innocent teacher or, as I should say, as a giver of lessons, since so many of you are aware that I never did teach anything. But this may be a good opportunity to tell you something about the inner workings of the school - of wheels within wheels, of inspectors, headmasters, staff and pupils, and parents and so on.

The first person that comes to mind is Micky Mearns. As headmaster, he was unrivalled when it came to handling inspectors. The sad thing is that, from the moment you become a teacher, you have for life as your permanent, relentless enemies, school inspectors. I well remember the day the whole panel of inspectors burst into the boss's office and said "Do you know that hundreds of your boys are hurling water-bombs at one another in the playground?" And, quite unabashed, Mr Mearns declared "I'll soon put an end to that." So he went outside and said to the nearest kid "Go over and tell Mr Dann the Janitor to turn off all the water at the mains."

It was during this inspection also, that the school buildings were being painted, at the tremendous cost of 2000 pounds, and the inspectors launched a second attack. They rushed into the office and complained "Mr Mearns, are you aware that some of your boys are climbing through the windows to get into their classrooms?" And once again, Mr Mearns said "I'll soon put an end to that." So he called a full, special school assembly. It was most impressive. And he said "Gentlemen (he always called the boys 'gentlemen'), any boy who is caught getting through a window, WHILE THE PAINT IS STILL WET, will be severely punished."

The next one I'd like to mention was the best, I think, and the longest serving headmaster at NBHS, Harold Beard. Mrs Beard 'phoned me on Wednesday because she knew about this Dinner, and she asked me to give everyone present her kindest regards. It was well known that Harold would bend over backwards, frontwards and sideways to help a colleague or pupil, and it so happened that the truth of this attribute was one day put to a stern test. Orm Carrick, one of the history teachers, burst into the office, white-faced and trembling, and said to Mr Beard "One of the boys in my class just told me to go and get f.....ed." "And what did you do?" said Harold. And Orm Carrick said "I came straight down to see you."

Sometimes you find that it is a parent who is the fly in the ointment. One day, when I was supposed to be in charge of languages, the Boss sent for Mr McRae and myself to come to the office. And there we were confronted by an angry parent who had come to complain that his dear son had come home in tears to report that Mr McRae was teaching the class swear words. This puzzled us, because I don't think Len even knows how to swear. Let me cite an example. One Saturday morning, when Len was helping me to mould counterfeit 20 cent coins for distribution among needy pensioners, our crucible accidentally overturned, and a torrent of molten lead spurted all over Len's bare feet (he had given his last pair of shoes to an

impecunious vagrant). And all Len said, sheepishly, was an apologetic "Well, goodness me!" But the irate parent persisted, and said that Len had definitely taught the class bone arse (bonas). Realising what had happened, Len now spoke up in defence of his beloved Latin. Warming to his topic he explained Latin declensions and pointed out that, as the lessons became more advanced, the kids would be learning to say men's arse (mensas), cow's arse (causas), and even on her hairy arse (honorarias). "Pig's arse they will," yelled the father. "I'll take my son away from your bloody school."

I think that one of the saddest things about teaching is that a distinguished person like Roland Henri Motte, who was 18 stone 12 pounds of French arrogance and scholarship, is completely forgotten, except perhaps, for the one brief moment when, during his lesson, a huge rat ran across the room and went under the little platform in front of the class. The boys ran after it and one rosy-cheeked little kid called out excitedly "I can see his hole, sir!" And Roland, with real Gallic pragmatism, said "well, keep after him, boy. The rest of him can't be far away."

There were all sorts of minor dissensions in our staff-room. For example, on the first day back at school, when Albie was being congratulated on the birth of the latest of a long brood of children, Roland's trite compliment was "Comme d'habitude, vous avez l'air bien foutu." (As usual, you look well and truly rooted.) And, unfortunately, that was what we all thought, but dared not say.

To bestow a cruel nickname on a fellow teacher was a nasty form of attack. Because Roland's ears used to twitch as he was sneaking off to have a glass at the corner pub, he became known as the 'furtive zeppelin'. In return, Roland always addressed Kelter Hartley as 'Kelter, en deux mots' (Kel ver, in two words), because this was the pronunciation of the French 'Quel ver', meaning 'What a worm'.

Our Subject master's name was Mert Duncan, and Roland's star turn was to give these two names a French pronunciation as he called out to him loudly across the room. So what we heard was "Merde?" No answer from Mert. "Merde?" a little more plaintively. Still no answer. Then "Merde? Merde? Merde D' un con?" Instead of answering this appeal, the furious Mert would rush around to the boss's office to report Roland once again, and possibly with some justification.

'Merde', one of the jewels of the French language, is not nearly so indelicate as its Anglo-Saxon equivalent 'sh..t', but when it is linked with 'con', which is the French name of a certain part of the female body, so that Mert Duncan translates into 'sh..t of a c..nt', we understood why our Subject master disapproved.

I never, never, never tolerated any smut in my classroom. If some little smartie asked me what was the French word for a 'root', I would ask innocently "Do you mean a root under a tree?" And when the giggling kid said "Yes", I would say I had no knowledge of French words like that, but that he must go down and ask Toc, who had a list of them. Then I would run down the stairs after the kid and catch him before he had to face up to Toc. And that would be the end of the matter. But I shouldn't have kidded myself on being so clever, because it was my own fault that I myself finally fell in the soup. One day in town, one of my best students who had left school some years before, asked me seriously how you would say 'Go and get f.....ed' in French. Flattered that an old boy of mine was so much in love with the language, and not knowing that he still had younger brothers and cousins in classes at NBHS, I gave him a variety of expressions to choose from. "Va te faire aimer" (Go and cause yourself to be made love to) was a fairly mild way of saying it. The slightly stronger "Va te faire fichre" (Go and get stuffed) could possibly be used unwittingly by Fred Nile as he mused over the latest pornographic film. "Va te faire foutre" is probably the exact equivalent of our "Go and get f.....ed". "Va te faire enfiler" also means go and get f.....ed, but it implies a more refined and penetrating enlacement of the participants. "Va te faire enculer" is extremely vulgar, since it means "Go and cause yourself to be sodomised". "Va te faire enculer par les Grecs!" is the most vulgar of all these expressions, as it insists that this particular act be performed by Greeks, because they are reputed to be the best equipped physically for this gay activity.

A few weeks later, during his annual visit, my inspector was pleased to tell me how delighted he was to hear so many kids in the playground calling out rapturously to one another "Par les Grecs!" "But," he asked me,

"why didn't you teach them to say 'Parlez français' instead of 'Parlez grec!'"

Not wishing to hurt the inspector's feelings by saying to him "You poor bastard, don't you know any French at all?" I answered untruthfully that I really didn't know, but that it could be that we were becoming a multicultural society, and that we already had a lot of Greek pupils.

When I learned some months later of the inspector's untimely death, caused by the sudden bursting of every blood vessel in his body, the frightening thought occurred to me that it was probably my fault that the poor bloke had croaked because he had finally found out why the boys at NBHS were calling out "Par les Grecs!"

And now, I really don't know how to thank you all for being so patient and so kind to me. I must not get so emotional that I shall burst into tears, but thank you, thank you very much.