

Charlie Goffet

Address to Introduce the Guest Speaker (Chief Justice Jeffrey Miles), 4th Annual Dinner, Newcastle Boys' High School Old Boys' Association, 17 August 1990

It would be a memorable experience for any one of us to be granted the privilege of introducing such a distinguished guest as Jeffrey Miles to this gifted gathering, but it is infinitely more so for me, because, from time immemorial, some Goffet or other has been called upon to appear before a magistrate, a bailiff, a flagellator or even an executioner, and if any of my forebears are gazing down at us from up there, I can imagine one of them calling out excitedly:

"Gawd, get an eyeful of this! Old Charlie has cracked the big time at last. In the strictly temporal sense at least, he is appearing before the Chief Justice!"

The problem is, where should I begin?

After winning all sorts of prizes during his five years at Boys' High, including such things as the first NSW award of the Lord Gowrie Scholarship, Jeffrey scraped through the Leaving Certificate with First Class Honours in English, French and German, and A passes in History and Economics. He continued his successes at Sydney University, gaining the Degrees of Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Laws, and later, the very high and rare Degree of Master of Laws.

After lecturing in English in Indonesia, he worked as a solicitor in London and Sydney, and was then admitted to the Bar in New South Wales and the Northern Territory. After acting as Public Defender in NSW, he became a Judge of the National Court of Papua New Guinea, then a Judge of the Supreme Court of NSW, Judge of the Federal Court of Australia, and now, of course, he is Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the Australian Capital Territory, in Canberra.

Out of curiosity, I have read some of his judgements, and, although I have no knowledge of the law, I have marvelled at the logic and humaneness of his pronouncements, and at the quickness with which he discerns any attempt at skulduggery on the part of a litigant.

But while we congratulate Jeffrey on his many magnificent successes, I am sure that, tonight, we are looking at him as an old boy of NBHS, and that those of you who were not with him there, would like to hear what sort of a kid he was at school.

It is a sad fact that true stories are never as interesting as their apocryphal counterparts, but I have been reminded by your Committee that despite the obvious temptation tonight, I must not deviate from my normal practice of keeping to the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. So, with those restrictions, here goes.

Our school magazine, the *Novocastrian*, had ceased publication some years before Jeffrey's enrolment in 1947. But in his very first year, his literary masterpieces, as shown in his class essays and compositions, were of such a high standard that the authorities unanimously decided to bring back the Magazine, chiefly for the purpose of recording for posterity Jeffrey's contributions. I know of one elderly lady, my own daughter in fact, who can rattle off by heart a witty article by Jeffrey, in which compulsory homework is struggling to compete with the nightly radio broadcasts of the Test cricket from England, before television. She often recites also Jeffrey's remarkable translation into English of a most moving German poem.

The Senior Debating Team, with Jeffrey as leader, and the other brilliant speakers, Doug Kelley, Alan Murphy, Tom Collins and George Bradford, went within a few syllables of winning the prestigious Hume-Barbour Trophy. I am told that all George Bradford debates these days is the question of whether or not he should have a couple more drinks.

I became aware of Jeffrey's amazing capabilities during a lesson in First Year. I knew that he was engrossed in reading under the desk what was then a banned copy of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, but I had no intention of

interfering, because I was hoping he might lend me the book later.

And then an inspector came in without knocking, took over the lesson and started asking questions in French. Some poor kid gave a wrong answer, and the inspector pounced on Jeffrey, who did not seem to be listening to what was going on, and said: "What is wrong with that answer, son?" Jeffrey looked up and frowned slightly, as if he resented this interruption in his reading of *Ulysses*, and, for a moment, I was afraid that he was going to ask indignantly: "Why ask me? You're an inspector. Surely you ought to know what is wrong."

But, instead, he gave such a clear exposition of the grammatical and pronunciation defects in both the boy's and the inspector's French, that the embarrassed inspector left hurriedly, and Jeffrey was able to continue his under-the-desk reading.

From then on, I unashamedly accepted his help with my frail osteology of the French language, especially at inspection time, when I was battling to keep my job at Boys' High.

There has to be some mention of Harold Beard at these meetings.

Noticing that I was spending a large part of my teaching time dashing back and forth from the classroom to the Town Hall Hotel, to get the race results, Harold asked me if I would be good enough to equip myself with a new-fangled thing called a transistor with an ear-plug, so that I could listen in without leaving the premises.

The first time I used it in class, with the transistor hidden in my shirt pocket and my ear plugged, it was Jeffrey who noticed.

"What are you listening to?" he asked politely. "I am very keen on Musica Viva," I answered, in an attempt to cover up.

"Never heard of that horse," said Jeffrey. "Must be one of those New Zealanders. But I can tell you that the drum in the playground is that the Newcastle horse Denali is a good thing in the last."

He had exceptional common sense. One of my most importunate creditors had the nasty habit of 'phoning me last period on Pay Friday to come in and settle, in case I lost the lot on the horses on the Saturday. So, without telling Jeffrey why, and without getting him to tell a lie, I asked him to take his books and sit at the 'phone in the staffroom, and if there was a call, simply to say that I was not available. A call did come, and Jeffrey was brilliant. "I am sorry," he said, "but Mr Goffet is not available at the moment. He has had a bit of an accident, and the doctors are working on him in the playground. You see, last period every Friday, he climbs up on the school roof to catch pigeons so that his family will have something to cook and eat at the weekend. But this time he must have slipped, and he has fallen up to his neck in the soft asphalt."

"I am terribly sorry to hear the sad news," came the voice on the 'phone, "but if he does happen to survive, will you please tell him that this is Mr Gelfius, the Area Director of Education calling, and that I must speak to him at once."

Because I had very little to do with sport in the school, I don't know much about Jeffrey's activities in that sphere, but I do know that he was in a Rugby team. He turned up one day at the Oval for Athletics training, and when it seemed to me that he lacked the natural speed of a kid like Kevin Mahoney, who, by the way, was the last bare-footed runner to win a sprint at the State Championships, I suggested he have a go at the cross-country. The course was from Waratah to Islington and back, and off he went. I waited until dark for his return, but there was no sign of him. He explained to me next day that, by nightfall, he had reached the outskirts of Tighe's Hill in a state of great exhaustion, and deeming it inadvisable to continue at such breakneck speed, he had come to a halt and had caught a tram back home.

I would love to tell you how Jeffrey removed the stigma from the name of that grandfather of mine who was the last man to be hanged from Tyburn Hill, but I can see that you are as eager and impatient as I am to hear our guest speaker. So may I ask you, please, to rise and welcome Jeffrey Miles.

Thank you.