



CHARLIE'S
LETTERS

FINAL
EDITION

CHARLIE'S LETTERS

A compilation of the writings of Charles Richard Goffet - *Charlie* - giver of French lessons, puller of legs, father, friend.

The pages comprise *Letters to the Editor* of the *Newcastle Herald* over a period of twenty years or so, and also include speeches, introductions, radio comments, interviews, published and unpublished feature articles, and some special notes to his family.

Special thanks to Julie, for lovingly keeping the family scrapbook *Les Paroles de Charlie*, from which much of this book has been sourced.

First published by the Newcastle Boys' High School Old Boys' Association in 1990, this second and *final* edition of Charlie's Letters has been compiled to hopefully ensure that nothing has been missed.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | | <i>Page</i> |
|---------------------------------------------|----------|-------------|
| Prologue | | i |
| Charlie's Introduction | | iv |
| I Remember | 11/12/71 | 1 |
| I Remember or The Bad/Good Old Days | 1972 | 2 |
| Newcastle Harbour | | 4 |
| A 'Difficult' Job | | 4 |
| Bad Eating Habits | 4/78 | 5 |
| Circular Burials | | 6 |
| PM's New Year Message | | 7 |
| Changes, What Changes? | | 7 |
| Mr Fraser's Trips | | 7 |
| The Wooing Of Elspeth | | 8 |
| The Stance For Cricket | 1/81 | 10 |
| Poetic Similarities | 1/82 | 10 |
| Wedding Dash | | 11 |
| Untitled Letter (Near Miss By Geddes) | 11/84 | 11 |
| Budget Woes | | 11 |
| What Do You Feed Your Horse On? | | 11 |
| Something a Little Fishy in The Seine | | 13 |
| Untitled Letter (Capable Candidates) | 9/9/85 | 15 |
| Untitled Letter (Dignitaries in Exile) | | 15 |
| Untitled Letter (Jail For Murphy) | | 15 |
| Parisian Weather | | 15 |
| Let Them Eat Grass . . . | | 16 |
| Untitled Letter (Slow Horses) | 12/85 | 17 |
| A Lesson From A Cunning Frenchman | | 17 |
| Untitled Letter (Mad Swimmer) | | 19 |
| Departure Fee Credits | | 19 |
| Matters For Judgement | | 19 |
| The Loss Of Luskin Star | | 19 |
| The Razor Gang | | 20 |
| The Mattara Festival | | 20 |
| Untitled Letter (Geddes For Prime Minister) | | 20 |

| | | |
|-----------------------------------|--|----|
| Untitled Item (The Stuff of Life) | | 20 |
|-----------------------------------|--|----|

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | | <i>Page</i> |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------|-------------|
| Untitled Letter (False Profits) | | 21 |
| It Certainly Pays To Advertise | | 21 |
| The Falklands Crisis | | 22 |
| Untitled Letter (Dr Furey's Charges) | | 23 |
| Radio Comments (Doctors' Strike) | | 23 |
| The Stigma Of A Tog Christening | 5/4/86 | 23 |
| Untitled Letter (Cathedral Wall) | 4/86 | 25 |
| Untitled Letter (The Chamberlain's Dingo) | 5/86 | 25 |
| Lost Illusions | 16/8/86 | 25 |
| Wayne Newman | 7/87 | 27 |
| Untitled Letter (Geddes Against Illiteracy) | | 28 |
| Untitled Letter (The Errant Lord Mayor) | | 28 |
| Radio Comments (Poor Doctors) | | 28 |
| Speech At Inaugural NBHSOBA Dinner | 8/87 | 29 |
| Taped Interview, ABC Radio 2NC | late 1987 | 34 |
| Damaged Goods | 11/88 | 39 |
| Untitled Letter (The Lord Mayor's Travels] | 1 /88 | 40 |
| Untitled Letter (Politicians) | 5/88 | 40 |
| Untitled Letter (Greinerism) | | 40 |
| Untitled Letter (Greiner and Crime) | 7/88 | 40 |
| Untitled Letter (Criticism of VIP's) | 7/88 | 40 |
| Victim of Smokers | 8/8/88 | 41 |
| Untitled Letter (Poor Pensioners) | 9/88 | 42 |
| Untitled Letter (Mayoral Logic) | 10/88 | 43 |
| Untitled Letter (Mr Keegan) | 11/88 | 43 |
| Untitled Letter (Geddes Against Smoking) | 2/89 | 43 |
| Untitled Letter (The Terminator) | 3/89 | 43 |
| Unpublished Letter (Condoms) | 3/89 | 43 |
| Untitled Letter (Blackboard Menus) | 3/89 | 43 |
| Untitled Letter (Fun Run) | | 43 |
| Untitled Letter (Cardiff Tunnel) | 6,7/89 | 44 |
| Untitled Letter (Alan Bond) | 7/89 | 44 |
| Untitled Letter (Loss of Frigates) | 7,8/89 | 44 |
| Introduction To Guest Speaker, NBHSOBA Dinner | 18/8/89 | 44 |

| | | |
|-----------------|---------|----|
| Overdevelopment | 30/9/89 | 46 |
|-----------------|---------|----|

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | | <i>Page</i> |
|-----------------------------------------------|------------|-------------|
| Untitled Letter (Forgiving Sinners) | 10/89 | 46 |
| Untitled Letter (Elliott's Philanthropy) | 10/89 | 46 |
| The Man Who Could Outdo Walter Mitty | 26/10/89 | 47 |
| Untitled Letter (Immigrants) | 11/89 | 47 |
| Untitled Letter (The Facilitator) | 12/89 | 47 |
| Untitled Letter (The Greiner Disaster) | 1/90 | 47 |
| Untitled Letter (Margaret Henry) | 2/90 | 48 |
| Untitled Letter (Snakes & Ladders) | 2/90 | 48 |
| Untitled Letter (The Earthquake Fund) | 19/4/90 | 48 |
| Untitled Letter (Lord Mayoral Annoyance) | 1/5/90 | 48 |
| Untitled Letter (Geddes Speaks) | 9/5/90 | 48 |
| Untitled Letter (Keegan's Style) | 6/6/90 | 48 |
| Private Letter (Willie Hop Off) | 6/90 | 49 |
| Untitled Letter (Rail Controversy) | 6/90 | 50 |
| Monumental Tribute To Politicians | 27/6/90 | 50 |
| Untitled Letter (The Rough Mall) | 24/7/90 | 50 |
| Unpublished Short Story (Stan) | 7/90 | 51 |
| Introduction to Guest Speaker, NBHSOBA Dinner | 17/8/90 | 53 |
| Private Card (Poem) | early 1991 | 56 |
| Untitled Letter (Tin Fish) | 4/91 | 56 |
| Untitled Letter (Newcastle Terminus) | 5/91 | 56 |
| Untitled Letter (Footpath Dangers) | 6/91 | 56 |
| Untitled Letter (Literary Losses) | 6/91 | 56 |
| Untitled Letter (Free Tickets) | 7/91 | 56 |
| Untitled Letter (Mayoral Wives) | 8/91 | 57 |

Epilogue

PROLOGUE

(From Prime Time Supplement, Newcastle Herald, 20 February 1991)

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.

CHARLIE'S 'INTRODUCTION'

Charlie Goffet was born in Cairns in 1909. His father, knowing that, in French, *Richard* means *Rolling in money*, sardonically registered his son as Charles Richard Goffet. This definitive date of birth must cast doubts on the truthfulness of Charlie's assertions in his occasional addresses to historical societies that he vividly remembers that as a child he witnessed the departure of the late Burke and Wills on their ill-fated expedition and waved happily to Bass and Flinders as they sailed past the Bogey Hole.

Charlie's premonition at the age of two that a certain Joh would one day take over Queensland led the family to set off on foot for a more civilised part of the world, so that they settled in various Newcastle suburbs. (The mention of this word *settled* may bring protests of denial from any angry surviving landlords that are still waiting for their rent.)

By shrewdly choosing the seat directly behind that of the school dux in the examination room and unwittingly perusing this lad's answers to the questions, Charlie won a scholarship to Newcastle High School in 1922. After spending five wonderful years there, he returned much later and spent thirty-six incredibly happy years as a member of the staff at N.B.H.S. at Waratah.

While recuperating in 1968 after a successful entire brain-removal operation which in no wise affected his already diminished mental capacity, Charlie was prompted to express his views in the pages of the Newcastle Herald. He has always taken extreme care to check the veracity of everything he writes.

These pages are a collection of some of his writings for inclusion in the library at Waratah High School.

The author is greatly indebted to another old boy of N.B.H.S., Mr Dick Sanders, who has graciously arranged and printed these articles.

Charlie Goffet

I Remember [NMH, 11 December 1971]

I remember the Newcastle of World War 1, when I played truant for a fortnight from Wickham school, before being sent to Mittagong reformatory. In those days, schooling took up too many precious hours.

Despite the accompanying sharks, a swim across Throsby creek to Armstrong and Royce's sawmill was certainly more enjoyable than doing sums. At the Bank Corner, you could sneak into "Jummer" Edwards' Imperial Stadium and stand in the ring where Les Darcy had fought; this reminded me that I never sold as many papers as on the afternoon I shouted frantically, "Death of Les Darcy!" from Pogonoski's "Argus".

You could pinch carrots from the forbidding Chinese market gardens occupying the old racecourse, or you could walk up to Wood's Castlemaine Brewery and spend hours watching the coopers making their casks at the spot where the Store's parking station now stands.

And in Hunter St. West a boy was sure to see Alfie "Six-Toes" West, who had walked in barefooted from Lambton, and little Herbie Lowe, dashing along Hunter St. faster than any other walker in the world.

An empty lemonade bottle entitled you to a free billy-can of soft drink at Healy Brothers' factory. Then a boy could hop on the back of a horse-drawn lorry taking coke to the steam trams at Zara St., hoping that no one would scream out, "Whip behind!" to the driver.

On such a trip I passed sailing ships and weirdly camouflaged steamers, and the paddle steamer "Gwydir" that I had once gone to Sydney on. Black Harris was standing as usual on the corner of Bolton St. and once again I wondered why he didn't shanghai my teacher.

One day I saw a crowd gathered around a dapper little man who turned out to be Albert Shanahan, who had ridden two Melbourne Cup winners in succession.

One morning I saw "the richest man in the world", John Brown, very straight and severe, with a bowler hat, and I thought of my mate's father who was building polished maple fowl houses at Minmi for John Brown's imported Rhode Island Reds that cost £300 (\$600) each, and who had pinched three of the precious eggs and was now looking for a broody hen to hatch them out and thus make his fortune.

In town, the Victoria Theatre had posters for "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and "East Lynne".

But a train must have just come in that day, for along the main street now came a stream of what looked like nigger minstrels, still stooping under their pit caps and lamps, and with their crib tins and water tins strapped on their backs.

So it was half-past three. I knew then that the matinee of "Tarzan and the Apes", featuring Elmo Lincoln, at the Lyric, would have to keep to some other day.

"I Remember" (from 1972 Novocastrian), also published as "The Bad/Good Old Days"

Now that more than fifty years have elapsed since I first came to N.B.H.S. (as a pupil, of course), I am sometimes asked what our school was like in the olden days.

The two most obvious differences are that, in my day, the school was co-educational, and was housed in the building now occupied by the Hill (formerly Junior) High School. Hence the opening lines of the original School Song, written by one of our teachers, Mr. R. G. Henderson:

"There's a school up there on the hill so high,

Bravely facing the wind and the sky . . ."

There were trains and steam trams to Scott Street, but no 'buses. So we walked up the hill.

The hours were from 8.45 to 3.45, but a whole hour for lunch allowed the more venturesome ones to go for a swim in the Bogey Hole or a walk along the wharves.

Ours was the only high school in the whole of the Newcastle and Lakeside area, and entrance was by a pretty stiff competitive examination. No wonder we considered ourselves the elite.

The girls wore tunics, but there was no regulation school uniform for the boys. You wore your Sunday-best clothes every day, and there was an unwritten law that you could go into "long-uns" in Fifth Year. Some of the boys continued right through the school in short pants.

Mr. Goffet was a student at the school from 1922-1926. He returned as a teacher in 1942 and has been here ever since.

He was athletics master when athletics was booming and has seen the school win the C.H.S. Cup three times.

Away from the school Mr. Goffet has an academic interest in horse racing and thoroughly dislikes anything mechanical including cars, photo finishes and modern weapons of war.

The two main bogies were the dreaded public examinations that certainly decided your future career, the Intermediate and the Leaving.

There were no protests from teachers, pupils or parents. On such occasions as Empire Day and Speech Night, distinguished guest speakers from the Education Department proudly informed us that we had the best school system in the world. The Establishment was nowhere threatened, and everywhere there was unchallenged authoritarianism.

Study was a full-time job. Sex had not yet been discovered, there were no cars for teenagers, no talking pictures, no television, not even radio broadcasts. We did have, however, the Complete Works of William Shakespeare, Hall and Stevens: "Geometry", Baker and Bourne: "Algebra", and stacks of Deadwood Dicks, Buffalo Bills and Billy Bunters.

And yet we were happy. The War to end all wars had come to an end, the Great Depression was far off into the future, and skirts above the knee and the wearing of the latest craze, shiny, flattering black silk stockings, brought many an attractive girl to be called by a discerning teacher to come out to the front of the class and work out some difficult problem on the blackboard. We were, indeed,

living in the Gay Twenties.

The school itself was a very closely-knit unit. There were no apparent disciplinary problems, no corporal punishment, no cadets, and no voicing in chorus of a school pledge.

There was no Tuck Shop. But each lunch-time, Mr. Tuttle drove his creamy horse and cart into the middle of the playground, and sold solid vanilla ices in summer and hot pies in winter. He has become immortal in the elegiac doggerel written by Mr. Archie Coombes for one of our School Magazines:

"No tinny trumpet tootles Tuttle's title to publicity, etc".

We studied Latin in the first three years at least, so that the School War Cry began: "Nova, Nova, New! Castra, Castra, Castle!" and it was not surprising that our olive-skinned School Beauty Queen had been known from First Year as "Nigra Pulcherrima". It is worthy of note that when she enrolled at Sydney University, she became known as "The Vision Splendid".

Unfortunately, sport played only a very small part in our school life. Because of the longer school day that was worked in high schools, Friday afternoon was granted as a holiday. For outstanding players, there were the School Cricket Eleven and the School Rugby Fifteen. The other boys were free to go swimming in summer and to engage in athletics in winter. The girls were offered tennis, hockey and basketball. This lack of training in organised sport made some of us feel out of things in later life, something that fortunately cannot happen these days.

And what of our old teachers? Unless the mists of time have enhanced their memory, I think that they were different from the assembly-line products of the present system. They were more academic, more bookish, more revered, more interesting, more individualistic, and therefore, I suppose, less competent.

But they were all "characters". There were Alexander Nairn, who had spent so many years as tutor to Chinese princes that his eyes had become oriental slits: Podge Harrison, who had saved France and the Allies in the fighting on the banks of the River Somme in the Great War: Rupert Scott, who had represented Australia in rugby, had sailed around the Horn in a windjammer, and who recited lovingly line after line of English poetry after his lunch-time batons: Archie Coombes, the English essayist with the mod gear: Miss Ethel Ross, who had the most beautiful ankles in the world and a brother recognised as one of the greatest Rugby fullbacks of all time: Mr George Saxby, known as the "Grey Ghost", who rarely associated with us ordinary mortals: Claude Brown, who was reputed to be more than a hundred years old: Mickey Piper, who taught art in a bowler hat: Danny Scouler, who could make the bravest spirit quake by the mere utterance of "Next!", if you happened to blunder in an oral Latin translation, and who did not hesitate to give a mark of minus four out of a hundred even in a final examination, if he disliked your handwriting.

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

"Where are the snows of yesteryear?" Aye, where are they?

But it is a vain exercise to make such comparisons. The school of 1922, or the school of 1972? What does it matter? Is Gunsynd better than Phar Lap, who was greater than Carbine?

If I may be permitted to use an expression taught to us many years ago at N.H.S., I shall end with the trite remark; "Qui vivra verra!"

Newcastle Harbour

To accommodate the huge tankers and colliers that seem to be getting bigger and bigger all the time, the entrance to Newcastle Harbour has of necessity been deepened considerably and there are already plans for this new depth to be increased.

But, so far as I know, there has been no mention of the consequent need for the widening of the entrance. With the frantic dashing in and out of the harbour by the giant colliers during their all-too-brief stay in Newcastle, Nobbys has several times been in danger of being toppled into the sea. And, with the possible completion of the third coal-loader some time next century, this situation will, as they say in Parliament, be exacerbated.

I suggest, therefore, that while there is still time Nobbys should be moved out of harm's way but, preferably, kept close to the sea.

The most suitable spot seems to me to be Fletcher Park, which has remained untouched by the hands of developers, progressive aldermen and hospital staff motorists. What do your readers think?

A 'Difficult' Job

Because I am unemployed, my heart beat fast when I read in the *Herald's* positions vacant column recently: "Wanted - Person for gardening and odd jobs, 1 or 2 hours per fortnight, \$3 per hour."

My mind immediately conjured up the carefree future that successful application promised me: Once (and sometimes twice) a fortnight three NZ nectarines, or a quarter of a kilo of lobster, or even three cans of soft drink in a hotel lounge! What a dream!

But then came the awakening. The advertisement continued: "References and car essential."

I have never owned a car and my only references are a QC school certificate dated 1919, a Gould League of Bird Lovers card, and an award for intermittent truthfulness from the Mittagong Reformatory of yesteryear.

Obviously I am not even eligible to apply for such a lucrative post. Why, oh why do employers make things so difficult for would-be-employees like myself?

Bad Eating Habits

The Herald is to be congratulated on its publication (Letters 17/4/78) of Helene King's timely warning on bad eating habits.

While heartily supporting her, I regret that she appears so "bossy" in her admonitions with the use of nine "should's".

I would prefer to teach by the gentle example offered to me by an elderly gentleman named Theophilus Kelly, who lived in a shack on the banks of the Cudgegong River, in the Rylestone district. When I first met him, he had already reached a hale and hearty 107 years of age. He told

me that he put it all down to the simplicity of his lifelong diet of bullock's tonsils in aspic, strips of cinnamon bark, and fermented honey. On such festive occasions as the relief of Mafeking or Carbine's Melbourne Cup success, he would have a mild splurge on black humbugs.

In the course of time he had become something of a sage.

"I am setting this example", he was wont to say, "for the sake of humanity. If we persist in bad eating habits, there will be so many deaths from malnutrition that there will be an inevitable shortage of victims to satisfy the needs of warmongers, terrorist and motorists. And in that case, life will hardly be worth living."

And so, in support of Mr Kelly who, I am told, is still going strong, and encouraged by Ms Helene King's letter, I shall continue to advocate good eating habits.

Whenever I reflect sadly on such past misdemeanours of mine as the consumption of sole meunière, caneton aux olives and a baba au rhum, washed down by goblets of Veuve Clicquot, I am quickly called back on to the straight and narrow by my fortnightly message from Ms Margaret Guilfoyle's department.

In the meantime, may I wish our new adherents a hearty "bon appétit!".

The above was in reply to the following letter (note Charlie's underlining of the word "should");

"Wouldn't it be good for everyone if they really took literally the words, "prevention is better than cure"!

Just look at the people in hospitals being treated for a lot of sicknesses that were probably brought on by bad eating habits over a long period.

Just as the Government sends out inspectors to make sure we pay our bus fares, or that cleanliness of kitchens is to their specifications, it should train some of our unemployed to re-educate men, women and children on the facts of life. More of us must be made aware that by eating correctly now we can have the hope of growing old without the many sicknesses and complaints that have always gone with age.

Inspectors should be sent to the schools to prevent the sale of pies, potato chips and lollies to young children. Fish and chip shops should bear signs telling people that over a long period these are a health hazard. Pie and cake shops should warn people of the effects of over-indulging in these foods. Bakers should be told to warn people that white bread has had a lot of the essentials removed. Cafeterias should be advised to serve people only foods that promote good health.

Doctors should be forced to first check a patient's eating habits before deciding to prescribe drugs which could bring bad side effects.

Teachers should have to set aside at least one lesson a week to teach our young parents of tomorrow the dangers of eating the wrong foods.

Just as statistics show the numbers that die on the roads so another set should be made to make people aware of those who kill themselves."

Helene King

Circular Burials

The vexed question of whether the Christian dead should be buried at Whitebridge Cemetery in ranks with feet pointing east, according to custom, or in circles, has reminded me of a somewhat similar situation that arose when I was in Paris several years ago.

To save the almost microscopic amount of space left in the overcrowded cemeteries it was decided that for all future burials the coffins would be placed perpendicularly. This caused an immediate outcry, especially from age pensioners who asserted, with Gallic justification, that since they had worked in an upright position during their long lifetime, they surely deserved the privilege of being allowed to relax in a horizontal position after their demise.

Unlike certain of our local authorities, the civic fathers of Paris acted quickly to solve this problem. They proclaimed death within the confines of Paris a grave breach of the law, with such heavy fines and long jail sentences even for first offenders that the Parisian doctors and undertakers were soon forced to pack up and offer their services elsewhere.

PM's New Year Message

Mr Fraser's New Year message urging Australians "to set aside politics and work together" is certainly the most encouraging pronouncement he has ever made.

If his unflinching sincerity inspires him to practise what he preaches he will now hurry back from his latest jaunt overseas and gladly resign from Parliament to go to give his farm workers a helping hand at Nareen.

Changes, What Changes?

In an attempt to escape the most importunate of my creditors, and in fond hopes that their ranks might be thinned by the anticipated flu epidemic, I fled to Paris last February. But from the first moment I was tormented by fears of changes that might take place during my absence.

Would the Bogey Hole have been concreted over to become the parking station needed for football match crowds? Would massage parlours and take-away food stalls have been set up to make practical use of the picturesque, but wasted, areas of King Edward Park?

Would the civic authorities have been so foolish as to buy the historic Darks Iceworks buildings that had served for ages to preserve the carcasses of wild ducks that John Brown shot in 1903? Would they demolish the whole elegant structure, and leave in its place nothing but lawns and gardens for the enjoyment of well-to-do Hill residents?

Would King Edward Park's bowlers have finally vacated their quaint ramshackle clubhouse, just because it still lacked the parking station that would make sure that every speck of ocean would be hidden from view?

Would Mr Stanley Allanson's 'knockabouts' really become eligible for membership of Tattersall's Club?

Would payment for the amount of water consumed make even my fortnightly bath out of the question on my return?

Would there have been a city council election?

And so on, and so on.

What a relief to come back and find that Newcastle is still the same good old Newcastle.

Mr Fraser's Trips

It is grossly unfair of Mr Peter Morris, MHR Shortland, to criticise the Prime Minister, Mr Fraser, just because he has made 29 overseas trips since coming into office. How would Mr Morris like it if he had to remain permanently in a country with *Guinness Book of Records* unemployment, interest rates, inflation and taxation, and, at the same time, be expected to enjoy a happy association with a ministry of incompetents who have to spend much of their time publicly denying alleged scandals?

Thank goodness a grateful Australia gives Mr Fraser these frequent opportunities to go abroad for a spot of fishing and a chance to indulge his delusions of grandeur on the world stage. It is worthy of

note (to quote Mr Fraser's favourite expression) that all of these trips cost the Australian people a lot of money. Mr Fraser does not have to spend a cent from his own pocket. He does not have to pay even the iniquitous departure tax. But so what? Even he must realise that his good times will come to an end after the next Federal elections.

In addition, may I point out to the querulous Mr Morris the personal benefit that I derive from Mr Fraser's overseas trips? Whenever Mr Fraser is away from Australia my blood pressure returns to normal.

The Wooing of Elspeth

When my mother found out that the hovel we were living in reeked of a horsy smell because it had been built out of timber from disused stables, she bravely confronted the landlord on his next visit.

'My good lady' he said soothingly, 'don't forget that Christ was born in a stable.'

'Yes,' retorted my dear mother, 'but he didn't have to pay a pound a week rent.'

Had he lived in those far-off days, Fred Nile would have felt ill at ease in the presence of my strait-laced mother. She was convinced that to rear children in a Christian manner, a mother, besides dishing out liberal doses of castor oil for all juvenile ailments and breakages of limbs, had always to keep in mind three maxims;

'Good character, like good soup, is home-made.'

'Spare the rod and spoil the child.'

'In the home, language must at all times be marked with the strictest propriety.'

Sex, of course, had not yet been invented, but in keeping with her expectation of being considered a good wife and mother, my mother had produced a long succession of daughters, with me as the only son.

She seldom showed any emotion, but I knew that deep down she was proud of the fact that, as if to compensate for our poor marks at school, we always got 'excellent' for conduct.

My father, on the other hand, wallowed in his pride of three things: his home brew, his ancestry and his pet rooster, Hercules.

He brewed his "Pop de Goff" substitute in kerosene tins in the backyard, and it was one of my jobs to scour the countryside for discarded tins, especially since the brew sometimes corroded them before it had time to ferment. I had to stay home from school on bottling days also. My father made his own wooden stoppers and we forced them in and bound them with fencing wire, exactly the same as the French do with their champagne corks. Because so many of these bottles exploded inside the house, shattering the few windows and making huge dints in the ceilings, my father finally got into the habit of drinking straight from the tin in the backyard.

Hercules, my father's pet rooster, was of almost immaculate birth, because he was the only Rhode Island red in the district.

If he hadn't had to spend so much time brewing enough "Pop de Goff" for his own needs, my father could have made a comfortable living as a cabinet-maker. To get enough money to buy the necessary malt and hops and yeast, he had worked for a few weeks making polished cedar dove-tailed roosts at the behest of the millionaire coal-baron, John Brown, who had just imported from America a pair of prize Rhode Island Reds at five hundred guineas each.

Lo and behold, on the very last day of his job, my father discovered the first egg laid - the size of an emu's. He borrowed it, of course, and the immediate problem was to get it hatched. After several abortive attempts with broody hens and ducks and even geese, this monster egg was hatched out under my tiny bantam hen, Biddy, and the ensuing rooster soon won the name Hercules and became a local prodigy.

Even I, however, became aware of a problem that was causing my parents great concern, the finding of possible suitors for their ever increasing number of spinster daughters.

It was therefore with ill-disguised delight, rather than shocked morality, that they learned that my elder sister, Elspeth, had been seen to wander off into the bush with Cuthbert, the parson's pimply faced son, during the Sunday-school picnic. When it was reported to my mother that the couple had been seen with their arms around each other, she decided that it was high time to take action. On returning home, she berated Elspeth for her lasciviousness, kept her almost as a prisoner in the house, and invited the parson and Cuthbert to come for lunch on the following Wednesday with a view to arranging the necessary marriage.

I was not allowed to join in the meal, but I had to help at table and in the heated discussion there were many words that were beyond me at the time - expressions such as pregnancy, maidenhead, paternity, illegitimate, born out of wedlock . . .

My father was too grief-stricken to join in the conversation, because, for no apparent reason, Hercules had died the previous day.

My pragmatic mother, having considered how ridiculous it would be to waste such a giant bird just because it had died so mysteriously, decided to cook it as a feast for Micky, our hollow-flanked fox-terrier.

It was a strange setting. When the parson and his son arrived, they were met with a delicious smell of cooking poultry that would have been un-equalled at the Tour d'Argent.

But when they sat down to table with thus whetted appetites, they were dismayed to find that their main course was a pathetically weak, watery concoction of what my mother was pleased to call haricot chops, garnished with luke-warm clods of coarse cabbage.

At this point in the meal, which was served in the kitchen because we had no other dining-room, my mother rose from table, spread some sheets of newspaper on the floor, whistled for Micky to come in, and set down in front of him the freshly cooked Hercules.

This unexplained disparity of treatment of honoured guests and mongrel dog was too much for the parson. He declared that there could be no thought of marriage, that his son was not only morally but also physically incapable of defiling Elspeth because of a certain deformity and that, in any case, it was the lustful Elspeth who had tried to molest Cuthbert.

'Go!' screamed my mother. 'Go!' Then, suddenly conjuring up words from a long-forgotten past, 'Piss off !' she cried. 'Piss off, you sanctimonious, psalm-singing bastard! And take that pimply-faced, impotent t*** with you . . .'

And without a word of thanks for their meal the parson and his son left, with a bloated Micky yapping at their heels.

A strange gurgling sound came from behind Elspeth's closed door. It may have been a smothered sob, but I still like to think that it was a joyful chuckle.

The Stance For Cricket (NH, January 1981)

The question of which is the correct stance for a batsman (Letters, 12/1/81) has always been a ticklish one.

I still have vivid memories of the sensational inaugural France-Italy cricket test that I attended in the Place de La Concorde in 1903. The French coach had instructed his team to move their feet to get behind the ball when swishing at it on the off side, with the result that the whole side was dismissed without scoring and the coach threatened with the guillotine.

The Italian coach, however, had prudently trained his team to move their feet to get in front of the ball and was somewhat crestfallen when his whole side was dismissed for no runs.

For the second innings, the two coaches cunningly reversed their instructions but there was no noticeable improvement, as each side was again dismissed for nil.

The two countries agreed to give up the game of cricket and to revert to politics but I feel sure that any surviving members of this one and only test series will be pleased to know that the vexed problem of the correct stance has still not been resolved.

Poetic Similarities (NH, January 1982)

In his *Ode to a Nightingale*, the youthful Keats yearns for a draught of vintage that has been 'Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth'.

In his *Recollected in tranquility* (NH, 16/1/82) the more mature Norman Talbot recalls black volcanic blocks 'long-cooled from deep-delved earth'.

Alas, poor Keats! Congratulations at last, professor!

Wedding Dash

Has Mr Fraser's dramatic dash to London saved the Royal wedding arrangements?

Could it have gone on if the most (self-) important person had not been able to get to the church in time?

Untitled Letter (NH, November 1984)

If the dog had not stopped to sneeze, it would have caught the rabbit. If wishes were horses, beggars would ride. With an if you could put the whole of Paris inside one bottle. And now Mr Jeff

Corbett: If Mr Geddes had won the lord mayoralty, he would have been in a prime position to win the State seat of Newcastle.

Budget Woes

What a wretched disappointment I must be to the framers of the latest 'Give, give, give!' Budget! Because I have absolutely no financial assets or investments, I cannot benefit from any income-tax reductions. And because the only increase in the amount to be paid to age pensioners like myself is the rise due to the provisions of the Consumer Price Index, the Budget brings me no fresh cheer.

The new sales taxes will, however, affect my style of living. To help me endure in silence the woes of poverty, I have grown accustomed to an occasional cigarette and beer. But even if I can manage to reduce my consumption of cigarettes and beer to five packets and 12 schooners a day, the increased cost will more than gobble up my November 1 CPI pension rise.

Worst of all, the increased air fares will have a most deleterious affect on my health. Unlike our Prime Minister, who can gallivant at will all over the world, I have had to make do with one trip to Paris a year, a stay made necessary because of the inability of my delicate constitution to withstand the searing heat of an Australian summer.

What if I have to miss out this year! Is there no justice in the world?

What Do You Feed Your Horse On?

There was wild rejoicing in 1918 when the news finally broke that the Great War to end all wars had itself come to an end. We burnt straw effigies of Kaiser Bill in the streets, we sang *God Save The King* at the top of our voices, we waved flags and did all we could to manifest our pride in the Empire on which the sun never sets.

But there was no cessation of hostilities on the school front at Wickham. Our teacher was Stern by name and stern by nature. He had a fixed scale of penalties: so many strokes of the cane for all the normal misdemeanours such as truanting, arriving late, cheating, chewing in class, failure to do homework, impudence and so on. An audible breaking of wind earned the perpetrator four cuts and any boy who showed his amusement by giggling at this slight musical interruption to the lesson always copped a sixer.

Charlie Bailey, the leader of our class gang by virtue of the fact that he had spent six months in Mittagong reformatory for having stolen one flich of bacon and one large cheese from the Coastal Farmers' Honeysuckle warehouse, declared that our Mr Stern not only caned twice as hard as any reform-school flagellator, but that he was also guilty of overcharging with the number of strokes he dished out.

But our biggest problem was a boy in our class named Cuthbert. He had arrived in our midst in mid-term, wearing corduroy knickerbockers, long socks and patent-leather boots, and we soon decided that he was as sissy as his name suggested. The chief trouble was that he was so terrified of the cane that he quickly became the teacher's pet: no mistakes in dictation, all his sums right, no talking or chewing in class. Even in the playground he never joined in the rough games of saddle-my-nag, tackles on the asphalt, or leapfrog. In short, to us he was a complete pain in the neck, a disgrace to the class.

Our parents thought that Cuthbert was a genius when he won a half-guinea prize in an open advertising competition for making a pun on the name Dunlop. Cuthbert's answer was: 'Lop off half and it's Dun.'

But we would have preferred his genius to be directed in other directions, such as defying the sharks in Throsby Creek in a swim to Carrington and back at lunchtime or forging perfect absentee notes for those of us who had been wagging it from school.

If there are any people of my age still living, they will recall that in those days, long before the whiter-than-white Hills-hoist era, our mothers boiled up the clothes in a kerosene tin over an open fire in the backyard and hung them out to dry on a rope clothes-line. This necessitated the use of a clothes-prop, a long pole sharpened at one end to stick fast in the ground and with a fork at the top to hold up the line.

On Mondays and Thursdays a man used to drive past the school with his horse-drawn cart loaded with freshly cut clothes-props for sale. Hence his long drawn-out cry, 'Clo. . . thes props . . .'.

Now, it was a tradition in our class that as the cart was passing our side of the school with the plaintive wail 'Clothes-props', it was the duty of one boy in turn to call out inquiringly, 'What do you feed your horse on?'. And along with the inevitable answer, 'Clothes-props', the questioner received four strokes of the cane from the unsympathetic Mr Stern. This had become a Monday and Thursday ritual and Charlie Bailey never failed to remind the boy whose turn it would be to call out the necessary question. Thus it was that on a certain fateful Monday, Cuthbert was advised that it would be his turn to call out the question in a loud voice. As expected, the cart came slowly down the street and Mr Stern was about to start swinging his cane. But there was no inquisitive cry from Cuthbert. Again and again came the shout, 'clothes -props', but still Cuthbert remained silent. And then it happened! Just when it seemed that the last 'Clothes-props' call would die away in the distance, 63 voices cried out in unison, 'What do you feed your horse on?', and the answer 'Clothes-props' came faintly back.

'Stand up the boys who called out!' shrieked Mr Stern. The whole class rose, with one exception - Cuthbert. Mr Stern was now confronted with the task of inflicting four strokes of the cane on 63 boys, but long practice enabled him to complete the job with undiminished zeal. He was a little exhausted, however.

'Cuthbert,' he ordered, 'go and get me a glass of water.'

From now on Cuthbert's school-life became intolerable. Day after day he was jeered at with the cry, 'Cowardly, cowardly Cuthbert, mummy's little custard!'

After several weeks of this endless torture a strange rumour reached our ears. To win his way back, Cuthbert was planning to risk certain death from flogging by performing the quixotic act of urinating in a jam tin in one of our lessons. Friday was the day nominated, and it was to take place during the poetry lesson. None of us believed the rumour but we were none the less delightfully expectant.

As if to mock poor Cuthbert, Friday was one of those balmy days when you felt it was good to be alive. Inside the classroom, however, the unnatural silence seemed to penetrate us all.

Mr Stern turned to the blackboard and began to write: 'There is sweet music here that softer falls . .

!

It was at this very moment that the first tentative trickle struggled to make itself heard. It broke the tense silence like the crash of a cloudburst on a tin roof. Mr Stern, not believing his ears, stopped writing, walked across to the window and stretched out his hand. It was bathed in sunlight. He went back to the board and resumed: . . . than petals from blown roses on the grass, Or night-dews on still waters between walls . . .'

But Mr Stern could doubt his ears no longer - the flow into the jam tin now sounded like a small torrent.

With one swish of the cane he sent the tin and its contents flying.

And now began the bleeding of Cuthbert. Never had a cane bitten so savagely into a boy's soft hand. Tears welled up in Cuthbert's eyes, but he refused to let them roll down his cheeks. 'Thank you, sir,' he said at the end of each stroke that crashed down upon him, 'Thank you, sir' . . . 'Thank you, sir,' . . .

Something a Little Fishy in The Seine

An astonishing thing happened in the heart of Paris one sunny afternoon in March, 1937. From where he stood on the most westerly point of the Ile de la Cité, an elderly Frenchman caught a small fish. Little did he realise that this simple act would lead to the wildest disturbance in Paris since the Revolution and cause not only his death but that of thirteen others.

Now it must be remembered that the Parisian amateur fisherman is nothing like the nondescript anglers to be seen along the wharves and beaches and rocks of Newcastle, with their long-deceased prawns embalmed in a bit of old newspaper.

It is altogether different in Paris. You cannot just suddenly decide to become a fisherman along the banks of the Seine, and go to it. There are clearly- defined requirements. You must be past middle-age, affluent-looking, impeccably attired in a fawn-coloured hunting jacket and exempt of any hope of ever catching a fish. If you wish to eat fish, it is only logical that you will go to the fish-market or eat in a restaurant. It is true that, to give yourself a countenance, you will dangle a line in the water, but usually with an unbaited hook. For greater comfort, you have come equipped with a folding-stool, and an immaculate creel containing your three bottles of red, a cheese of your taste and several packets of Gauloises. Feigning polite interest, passers-by will pause and watch for a moment, but they no more expect you to catch a fish than you do yourself.

No one in living memory had ever seen a fish caught from the banks of the Seine in Paris. Not, that is, until that fateful day in March, 1937, when, at twelve minutes past two in the afternoon, good old Henri-Paul caught a really and truly live and wriggling little fish. Then, almost before the amazed onlookers had recovered from their first surprise, he caught another and then another . .

It was Pierre-Claude who was telling me all this as he sat angling from the very spot in question. He was the classic Paris fisherman, and I had spent many an hour chatting with him in this delightful setting on the island. He had been stand-offish with me at first because he thought that I was English. But when he learnt that I was Australian, and that like all Australians I was still unable to forgive the English for their scandalous treatment of Joan of Arc and the way they had cheated the French in the

battles of Trafalgar and Waterloo, he accepted me as a fellow human being and lavished upon me reminiscences of his beloved Paris. I shall let him continue in his own words (my translation):

'In less than nothing, the multitudes of other fishermen catapulted themselves from both banks to join in the miracle. Poor old Henri-Paul was the first to be pushed headlong into the river, to be followed with rapidity by the next man to reach this preferred spot. Young as I was I realised that things were in a position to become serious, so I betook myself with genuine haste to the Cathedral of Notre-Dame, where, by a stroke of much happiness, my godfather served believers as resident bell-ringer, and without loss of necessary time, the giant bells rang out as is their wont only in times of national crisis. But even in that brief passage of time, the number of fishermen who had unwittingly gone off to drown in the wake of Henri-Paul had added itself up to 13 . . .'

It was at this point in his narrative that my blood froze. For the first time ever, the float on Pierre-Claude's line started to bob up and down in the water, and his slender rod twitched and writhed frantically. He had got onto something big. Would there be a repetition of the 1937 catastrophe, and would I become an innocent victim? I hoped no one else was watching, as Pierre-Claude called upon me to help drag in his catch, which was beginning to swirl to the surface.

A moment later, we were unhooking the line from the belt buckle of one of the latest Paris suicides and pushing the body back to drift away into midstream.

Pierre-Claude could not hide his displeasure. 'Do you know,' he complained, one is wasting one's time attempting to fish here since the Mitterand Socialist Government rose to power. One catches now nought save suicide victims, even in Springtime.'

Untitled Letter (NH, 9 September 1985)

In an editorial (3/9/85) deploring the continued delay in the election of a new City council, the 'Herald' expresses the opinion that

"It is not being too harsh to say that the delay is likely to continue until Labour produces a lord-mayoral candidate deemed capable of winning".

May I, as a ratepayer, suggest that it is not being too harsh to say that the delay is likely to continue until non-Labour produces a candidate deemed capable of winning.

Charlie was not happy with the Herald over their publication of the above contribution, as shown by the following, unpublished, letter.

In my letter published yesterday, the last line should have read:

"The delay in electing a new Council is likely to continue until non-Labour parties produce a candidate deemed WORTHY of winning".

Untitled Letter

What a brilliant future, in exile, for a Newcastle Walter Mitty: Deputy Lord Mayor, in exile; Federal Member for Newcastle, in exile; Federal Minister for Local Affairs, in exile; Queen's Counsellor, in exile; Prime Minister of Australia, in exile; Governor-General of Australia, in exile! Unfortunately, in exile means expulsion from one's native land by authoritative decree.

Untitled Letter

The sentence of 18-months' jail on Mr Justice Murphy should serve as a warning to other wrongdoers. If this punitive trend continues, murderers, rapists and even corporate crime forgers may be obliged to spend part of their time in prison.

Parisian Weather

A telephone conversation that I had at the weekend confirmed what I have been stating for many years, namely that when it comes to weather Paris is the most civilised city on earth.

While we have been sweltering in a heatwave so oppressive that competition events had to be cancelled at, of all places, a surf carnival, Paris is presently bedecked in a glorious mantle of cold white snow.

Conversely, at Sydney airport last August a cruelly penetrating wind pierced the Arctic garb that I had hoped in vain would protect me from the blizzard and I wondered if my brittle old bones would snap.

But lo and behold, when I arrived in Paris 24 hours later I was greeted by sparkling sunshine that thawed me out and gladdened my heart.

Parisians never mention the weather. They have justifiably perfect faith in their administrators. Their meteorologists are not concerned with recording and forecasting the weather. Their job is to be on the alert in case there is a slight hitch.

A Parisian meteorologist of my acquaintance explained it to me like this; 'It is my boss who runs the rain and the fine weather. He is solely responsible. I am only there to observe, in case I get his job when he retires.'

He told me once again of Charles de Gaulle's curt retort to a United States President who remarked during a stroll in the palace gardens: 'What a beautiful day!'

'Thank you,' replied de Gaulle.

In Australia we haven't even a Ministry for Weather, which, perhaps, is just as well when one considers the failures of the present ministries.

Some disgruntled readers will probably ask why I don't go back to Paris and stay there permanently. May I say that that is exactly what I intend to do later, but at the moment I feel that I have a lot of missionary weather work to do here among our Frasers, Sinclairs, Nixons and Anthony's.

Let Them Eat Grass . . . (SH, November 26, 1985)

SIR, As a grass-eating bon vivant age pensioner of many years' standing, I am only too pleased to offer culinary advice to Mr Nick Ryan (Letters, October 26) on ways to prepare grass for the palates of pensioners who are faced with the problem of escalating food prices.

A few words of warning are necessary, however. One must never serve grass as the whole of the

main dish, and one should be careful to choose the appropriate species of grass for each course.

To illustrate this, may I suggest these money-savers?

For mock celery soup, use mature stalks of paspalum.

To enhance an omelette aux fines herbes, nothing could be better than the sifted clippings of bowling-green bent.

Instead of sprinkling parsley on truffled pate de foie gras, why not enjoy the succulence of tender young tops of kikuyu?

For the aromatic seasoning of caneton aux olives, sun-dried twigs of buffalo grass are a must.

A generous swathe of almost any backyard grass will serve as a perfect vehicle for kiwi-fruit dessert.

In addition, I have many proven recipes for grass beverages and liqueurs, but, to share in these bacchic delights, age-pensioners will need to have their parents' consent.

In the meantime, bon appétit!

Untitled Letter (NH, December 1985)

The Newcastle Herald (6/12/85) reported: 'Victorian Racing Squad police are investigating assertions by four businessmen that they were swindled out of \$800,000 by investing in a horse that did not exist.' These four blokes were lucky. Since the age of 10 I have lost every penny I have ever earned by investing on horses that really did and do exist.

A Lesson From a Cunning Frenchman

None of us ever found out how the father of our new boy Alister had met his death. One rumour asserted that he had been eaten by cannibals in Borneo, another that his bones had been picked clean by piranhas during an expedition along the Amazon. Our Maths master, Mr Curmudgeon, who hated everything associated with Newcastle, nastily proffered the theory that he had probably been eaten alive by our Hexham greys.

What puzzled us most, however, was how Alister had been able to gain admission to our jealously-elitist selective high school. He was handsome, intelligent and blessed with exquisite manners, but he was practically untaught, because his parents' world travels had made it almost impossible for him to have regular schooling.

Thus it was that his answers in our class tests revealed a quaintly picturesque pragmatism that delighted us.

In arithmetic, 'What is the difference between these two numbers?' brought his answer, 'The figures are not the same'.

Instead of writing half a dozen pages to discuss, 'Do you agree that if Napoleon had never fought a battle, he still would be considered one of the greatest leaders in the history of Western Europe?' he

answered succinctly, 'No'.

But it was in his French studies that his genius for mistaken identity reached its apogee, leading to mistranslations that did not amuse Monsieur Bertrand. For example, the modest French 'Tant pis, tant mieux!' was boldly expanded by Alister into, 'Having relieved herself, the aunt felt much better'.

Then, a few weeks before the final exams, there came the annual parent-teacher evening. There was only one word to describe our feelings of disbelief when Alister's mother appeared. We were spellbound! She was all our heavenly film-stars rolled into one. Monsieur Bertrand was ecstatic. 'That woman is already causing me physical pain,' he whispered to me, then went into rhapsodies of admiration in lyrical French that might have seemed beyond the bounds of delicacy in English.

His formal introduction to her was a lesson to all of us other teachers as he bowed to kiss her hand and pay her compliments in his musical French-accented English. By the end of the evening, he had assured her that from now on Alister would have no trouble with his French. He would come to her home and give Alister private lessons every day and night if she wished. And naturally enough, without charge, because, as Monsieur Bertrand was heard to tell the lady, 'Money is ignoble!', a remark that astonished his other listeners, since Monsieur Bertrand was well known for his parsimony.

These private coaching lessons began the very next day in Alister's home, and continued day after day and night after night. I do not know if Monsieur was making any progress in his efforts to win the mother's affection, but no visible improvement had yet manifested itself in Alister's latest attempts to master the difficulties of the French language.

No wonder Monsieur was feeling desperate. He was an impecunious bachelor and the lovely mother was a wealthy widow. What a dream! The temptation was too great. On the eve of the French final examination he knew that Alister would certainly fail unless a miracle happened. So why not bring about this necessary miracle? As innocently as possible, he concentrated on every important point in the fateful exam paper, and went on until after midnight, drilling and rehearsing each phrase.

When he turned up at school in the morning, Monsieur Bertrand looked pale, drawn and frightened. I tried to joke with him: 'He who leads the child by the hand leads the mother by the heart. You have been spending too little time with Alister and too much time with his mother.'

But this was no use, and at last he confessed. 'I have taught him the whole paper. What if he comes top and gets the prize for French? Everyone will know that I cheated, and after all, the mother may have been simply using me.'

Since it was my job to mark the test papers, I felt so sorry for Monsieur Bertrand that I decided to become an accessory after the fact.

But, as it happened, there was no need to dissimulate. Alister's answers were hopeless. It was with great difficulty that I was able to award a mark here and there, with the result that he ended up with a total of 7%.

My transfer to a Sydney school coincided with the departure from Newcastle of Alister and his mother. It was not till last April, some 40 years later, that I met up again with Alister in the cellars of a vineyard in the little French town of Sancerre. We easily recognised each other, and after the usual

small talk of people who have not met for so long, he told me that he made frequent trips overseas as a buyer of wines for various Australian companies.

'By the way,' he said, 'I can now tell you the story of Monsieur Bertrand and my French exam. I never could stand the fellow, and it sickened me to see the way he was chasing round after my mother. I knew that his so-called helping me was to show her what a fine chap he was. But as soon as I saw the exam paper, I realised how he had cheated, so I cheated him in return by purposely getting everything wrong. The best thing I ever did.'

Untitled Letter

There is a chap on the Hill who can be seen each morning striding out for the Bogey Hole and returning, soon afterward, his hair damp. Another resident of the Hill, amazed by the man's perseverance in the bitterest of conditions, asked him one morning this week if he had enjoyed his swim. "It was fine", the man replied. "The hardest part is passing Shortland Clinic - they keep beckoning me in."

Departure Fee Credits

There are two redeeming features of the Budget that should not pass unnoticed.

First, those who have to pay the departure fee of \$10 to leave the country must surely realise that it is money well spent.

Second, if the Prime Minister and his associates each have to pay this departure fee every time they leave for a jaunt overseas, the Commonwealth deficit will, of necessity, be substantially reduced.

Matters For Judgement

The 20th Century Book of Revelations, now available to us all in Sir John Kerr's Matters For Judgement, must surely cause us to weep and wail and bemoan our folly in failing to recognise the second coming. What a tragedy that this self-proclaimed God-like creature was granted so short a time to rule over us!

How we shall miss his saintliness, his self-righteousness, his solicitude for his chosen people, his charitable forgiveness of the sins of his political enemies, his sometimes sober judgements, his abhorrence of the vanity of the outward trappings of power, his contempt for wealth and his uncomplaining acceptance of so many humiliating hostile manifestations.

And how sad it is that there seems to be no resurrection possible for him to come and dwell among us again. Unless, of course, he reappears on stage as the first President of wicked Whitlam's Republic of Australia.

The Loss of Luskin Star

So Newcastle has lost Luskin Star after all! If there is a sour note in the sadness that I feel at this loss, the sourness is understandable.

Ever since his win in the Golden Slipper it was obvious that Luskin Star was in danger of being forced to join the Mr Tommy Smith or Mr Bart Cummings assembly line, but that does not soften the blow now that it has struck.

I sympathise with Miss Lee Cantwell, Luskin Star's strapper, on the loss of her horse, and I compliment Mr Max Lees on his dignified and modest public pronouncement. "Luskin Star is an easy horse to train," he said in an interview. "Anyone could win with him".

I think it was nice of him not to add, "Even Mr Bart Cummings".

The Razor Gang

On the score of the Federal Government's incompetence after more than five years of mismanagement (as exemplified by our present record unemployment, record interest rates, record high taxation and particularly of its prodigal pampering of the National Country Party and its wasteful extravagances on such things as the Army Academy, the Prime Minister's VIP luxury planes and so on), why doesn't the Fraser Razor Gang go the whole hog in its efficiency and economy drive by handing over the Federal powers of government to the highly successful multinational corporations that are already on hand in Australia?

To compensate Mr Fraser for the resultant loss of his Prime Ministership and at the same time help to assuage his manic desire to rule the roost, the multinationals could, in a show of gratitude for past, present and future favours, appoint Mr Fraser as Governor-General for life, especially as Prince Charles has apparently consented to give up any claim to that high post.

The Mattara Festival

While strolling through Civic Park this morning after an absence from the city I was bewildered to find that large areas of the park have been cluttered up with trees, flower-beds, garden seats and, of all things, a fountain and an ornamental pool.

Not only must all these impractical things prove most cumbersome to Mattara sideshow men who, even at the best of times, are hard put to it to find sufficient space for their expensive cultural equipment to operate, but they must also make it almost impossible for our main park to serve as a site for circuses, rodeos, dirt-track racing and so on.

If our civic authorities really have the welfare of their citizens at heart, they will surely ring out the old and ring in the new, preferably in time for this year's Mattara Festival.

I suggest, however, that the public conveniences be retained, but it may also be an appropriate time to cut slices off the Darby and King St sides of the park for road-widening.

Untitled Letter

It is bad luck for Newcastle that Mr Don Geddes will now have to wait a little longer to become Lord Mayor. With Mr Jeff Corbett's unflagging support, however, he still has time to nominate for Federal Parliament, with a view to becoming Prime Minister.

Untitled Item

The following advice from Newcastle man Mr C Goffet could take a rise out of the bakers who are trying to make a crust by striking for more dough. Mr Goffet, who thrived on high-quality Parisian bread when he visited France on three different occasions, told me what he would like to do with the strange concoction that masquerades as Newcastle bread. He said: 'Drain the moisture from the plastic wrapper covering the bread then remove all the dough from inside the loaf. Squeeze this dough into balls and use it for modeling or for filling in cracks in plaster and cement. Place the remaining shell in a moderate oven and cook for 40 minutes. Serve hot.' His suggestion for sliced loaves is to form the slices into fancy shapes and feed them to the poddy mullet in Cottage Creek. The mullet would probably turn up their noses, he said. You never know. Some fish might go yeast instead of west!

Untitled Letter

Yesterday's *Text for Today* issues a stern warning against false 'profits'. Is this just a misprint, or is St Matthew really having a crack at Bishop Holland's proposed development scheme in the cathedral grounds?

The Text for Today read:

'Be on your guard against false profits; they come to you looking like sheep outside but on the inside they are really like wild wolves. You will know them by what they do. Matt 6:33.'

It Certainly Pays to Advertise

When I was a child the ads in the old-style *Herald* were often a source of innocent merriment.

Mr Tommy Moore, a Hamilton undertaker, issued a weekly challenge 'to box anyone in the district for 25 pounds'.

Jerry offered as a special concession: 'half-fresh lobster for two shillings'.

The Strand featured Rhubarb Vaselino in *Mud and Sand* - conqueror of foaming beers conquered by a purple garter.

And, superseded unfortunately by Professor Norman Talbot with his puzzling pompous puff, a nameless genius turned out a daily dose of a dozen lines of self-explanatory verse to publicise the magic powers of 'Wood's Great Peppermint Cure'. We youngsters marvelled at his ability always to find a word to rhyme with Cure in the last line.

On a more daring note, Lowes advertised:

'Lowes' trousers are down. Come and see his goat.' And sure enough, there really was a billy grazing in their Hunter St window, to the bewilderment of any disbelievers among the *Herald* readers.

At times, however, an advertisement was anything but amusing. Day after day, we had been reading: 'The End of the World Is Coming! Be not afraid, but be prepared.' This warning struck terror in the hearts of us poor unknowing in Wickham.

We children noticed that, for the first pay-days ever, our fathers returned home early from the Albion, the Criterion and the Lass O' Gowrie. Confessionals did a roaring trade, and since it seemed that I was soon to meet my Maker, I sought redemption by owning up to the burly headmaster that it was I who had put the bundle of stinking prawn heads in his office drawer during the annual inspectorial visit. Each murderous stroke of the swishing cane took me one martyr's step closer to the Pearly Gates and my torturer one step closer to everlasting Hell fire.

But my religious fervour waned and our fathers resumed their uninterrupted carousals when the 'End of the World' advertisements proved to be nothing but advanced blurb for a film.

Then, as if in compensation for our recent tribulations, came the promise of the greatest thrill of all. A

half-page advertisement announced that on the following Saturday afternoon, big-game hunter Zane Grey would hook the 'Great White Death' in Stockton Bight.

All Newcastle turned up. There were special ferries and the free vehicular punt with me on board almost sank under the weight of other thrifty visitors.

It was certainly a gala occasion. A large part of the beach had been roped off and there was a magnificent marquee housing a millionaire's collection of harpoons and rods and wondrous reels, movie cameras and tripod weighing apparatus, and rubber rafts and lifejackets, with bustling Americans in charge.

Admission to the enclosure was one shilling, which precluded my entry but I could hear for free an Edison record blurring forth *The Star Spangled Banner*.

Then, suddenly, just when the show was about to begin, there came loud shouts from a couple of hundred yards further along the beach, and already an excited crowd was gathering round. I got there with Zane Grey beside me. And what a sight!

Handsome big local Carl, with frayed strands of knotted clothes-line rope still in his hands, stood panting in front of a real White Death - 19 feet of White Pointer shark, weighing in later at nearly three tons.

Zane Grey bravely hid his disappointment in wonderment and admiration.

'What did you use for bait?' he asked Carl.

'A dead dog,' came the answer.

'But,' queried Zane, 'how in God's sake did you manage to cast out far enough on a thick rope line with the weight of a dead dog on the hook?'

'I swam out with it,' answered Carl apologetically.

The Falklands Crisis

Times have certainly changed. In an attempt to drive the English out of France, Joan of Arc got on her high horse and led her troops into battle.

In an attempt to drive the Argentinians out of the Falkland Islands, Margaret Thatcher has got on her high horse and is sending her troops into battle.

Untitled Letter

Dr Furey's charges work out cheaper in the long run. Because of this doctor's self-acknowledged expertise and expensive equipment, age pensioners have to make only one visit for such things as heart transplants, brain surgery and child birth deliveries, whereas in the suburbs they have to go back again and again to their local doctor to have a little bit done at a time.

Telephone Comments on Radio (circa 1986)

A Newcastle undertaker has told me that he will be out of business, if the doctors' strike continues much longer. He claims that most people die from their medical treatment, and not from their illnesses.

The Stigma of a Tog Christening [NH, April 5 1986]

My family's disbelief the day I received a postal note for half-a-crown from my Uncle Skinflint for my ninth birthday led to all sorts of conjectures. My father spoke of mental aberration and my eldest sister suggested that Uncle Skinflint must have finally heard of Scrooge, but my charitable mother was so seriously concerned that she wondered whether my father should go and see if his well-to-do brother, who had already suffered one massive stroke, was trying to make his alley good for entry into the next world.

But none of these discussions detracted from the excitement I felt at the sudden acquisition of such wealth. It was true that I had sometimes thought that my uncle had been less than generous on the few occasions that I had spent a weekend at his place. He had no children of his own, and there was plenty for me to do. I ran his messages, I cleaned out his fowl houses, I burnished all the brass door knobs, I cleaned and polished his boots, and so on. But to his credit, I had to admit that he had once bought me a small icecream at the local shop, and that the afternoon he had driven me into town in his sulky, we had gone into Way's in Hunter St and he had treated me to a threepenny meat-pie.

The family talk now turned to the question of how to make the best use of my money. In our present currency, half-a-crown would be the equivalent of a paltry 25¢. But things were quite different in 1918. For half-a-crown, I could have gone 10 times to the pictures at the Strand or Lyric, or bought 30 cones of ice-cream. Or it would have enabled my mother to proudly put threepence in the plate at church on 10 successive Sundays. It was certainly a lot of money for in nine-year-old boy.

At last the fateful decision was made: I would spend half of it to buy a pair of cotton swimming-tights at Mullaly's.

Old-timers like myself will remember that long before Major Corlette's storm- water channels were built during the Depression, there was a crystal-clear freshwater creek that flowed through what is now called District Park and widened to form a delightful swimming-pool at the spot where Chatham Rd meets the bridge near Newcastle Gas Company's land at Georgetown.

There were no houses in the vicinity, and the thick ti tree scrub with lots of birds' nests made it an ideally secluded place for schoolboys to spend the day. Further along, the creek emptied over a weir into the filthy, evil-smelling Styx Creek, which in turn emptied into the tidal Throsby Creek at Islington.

So I could think of no better spot than 'Freshy' to christen my new togs. Boys from the Georgetown

'mob' were already swimming naked, and it was with much pride that I dived in from my side of the creek.

But no sooner had I surfaced than there was a loud cry of 'Police!' and everyone rushed from the water. I noted with despair that I was the only one who had left his clothes on the side of the creek where the policeman was standing.

So that was it! My coat and pants were not only my Sunday best, they were the only ones I owned. And in those days, the police did not hand out the gentle, almost apologetic reprimands that they seem to offer now, with the result that I was led all the way home to make sure that I had given the correct name and address, and my dear mother was informed that the official summons would be delivered in person at the house. As it duly was.

Without naming the culprit, the *Newcastle Morning Herald* published a whimsical report of Constable Knox's 'Raid on street Arabs', but the whole of Wickham school already knew that I was the one to have to face the court. So much so, that our headmaster, Mr Stern, deemed it necessary to call a general assembly to publicly condemn my disgraceful behaviour that had besmirched the fair name of his school, and to let me know that, in part indemnity, I was to go to his office after the assembly to receive six of his best strokes of the cane.

Noticing a few adults leaning over the school fence to see what it was all about, Mr Stern then burst forth on how lucky we youngsters were to be living in this part of the glorious British Empire, and warning us that when it came to crime, fortunately for the public good, hanging was still strong in the colonies, a peroration that drew spontaneous applause from the bystanders, and I was alarmed to hear angry mutterings of 'uncontrollable child', 'I'd kill him if he was my son', 'Fancy meeting that kid in the dark', and so on.

So that my father would not lose a day's work, it was resolved that my mother would accompany me to the court. We had been informed that I would be required to be neatly dressed and that, most particularly, I was not to be barefooted. This added greatly to our worries for the simple reason that I did not have any boots and socks, but as good luck would have it, one of the neighbours came to light with a pair of size 10 boots that were no longer needed by her recently deceased husband. All that was necessary to lessen the Charlie Chaplin effect was to stuff them with fistfuls of cotton wool and crumpled newspaper.

So off we went. The case was to be heard in the Children's Court, presided over by a chamber magistrate. My first glance confirmed my fear that he might be even sterner than our Mr Stern. He showed little interest in Constable Knox's exaggerated account of his raid, and I was hoping that he would pay greater attention to my truthful version and take heed of the fact that not only had I been wearing tights but that I had undressed in the middle of a clump of trees. But he did not even ask me to speak, and the next thing I heard as he glared at me was: 'After listening to all the evidence, I find you guilty of behaving in a public place to the annoyance and embarrassment of his Majesty's loyal subjects, and I sentence you to a fine of five shillings, in default, two hours in the shade.'

'Oh thank-you, sir,' I cried out gratefully, thinking that the magistrate was taking pity on me after all, and that all I had to do to expiate my crime was to go and sit quietly in the shade of some tree in the grounds of the court. 'Thank-you, sir, thank-you! I shall take the two hours.'

How wrong I was! 'If you don't take that impudent brat out of here,' he screamed at my mother, 'I

shall charge him with contempt of court. You must pay the fine at the office before that child leaves the precincts of the court.'

As a *Newcastle Herald* editorial pointed out recently, Victor Hugo's character Jean Valjean was right when he said, 'My sentence is over: now my punishment begins.'

The stigma of my conviction meant that with my background, I had no chance of finding a good job and earning social respect. So I finally settled for becoming a school teacher, and for 49 long years in that position, my greatest worry was not the possible ignominy of misusing a French imperfect subjunctive, but the ever-haunting fear that some day a parent might stumble across my police dossier, and make public the secret of my 1918 conviction.

Untitled Letter [SH, April 1986]

Not only must I congratulate you on your article calling for a report on the wanton destruction of mature trees on Anglican Church land in Newcastle but I must thank you also for drawing my attention to the church spokesman's warning of the risk of serious injury that I obviously incurred from the imminent collapse of the boundary wall.

I have walked up and down Wolfe St almost every day since January 27, 1922, and always on the Cathedral side of the street.

I would often pause, not just to get my breath, but to admire the wonderful setting that the trees and shrubs gave to the brick Cathedral.

Untitled Letter [NH, May 1986]

It should be easy for Lindy and Michael to play their parts in the proposed Chamberlain film, but if the original dingo cannot be induced to come out of retirement it will be hard even for Harry M. Miller to find and train a replacement dingo to portray the same degree of cunning, stealth, dexterity and invisibility as that shown by its predecessor.

Lost Illusions [NH, 16 August 1986]

There is always something worth looking at if you take a stroll along the Boulevard Saint-Germain, especially on the terrace in front of the fashionable restaurant of Les Deux Magots, and it was there that a month or so ago I was lucky to witness a remarkable one-man show.

I have a peculiar prejudice against muppets, ventriloquists and their dolls, and impersonators, and yet there I was, enthralled by the prodigious performance of a Charlie Chaplin impersonator.

I had seen many others over the years in Australia, but I had always felt sorry for them and even resentful at their effrontery in trying to emulate my favourite star. This one was different. It was as if the French had not only brought their beloved 'Charlot' back to life but had endowed him with fresh little mimes during his absence from this world.

Although I clapped loudest of all at the end of this supernatural performance, it was with mixed feelings of admiration, envy and regret that I put my 20 francs in the collection hat.

'There, but for the lack of a zip-fastener that had not yet been invented, go I,' I kept telling myself,

and my memories flew back to the early '20's, to those golden days of silent films and in particular to that night 60-odd years ago that put an uncompromising end to my own acting career.

We had no radio or television then, no talking films or technicolour, but we did have plenty of really and truly living heroes and heroines to fall in love with at the 'pictures'.

Under the spell of the gush that I gorged on in the endless flow of newspaper and magazine articles about Hollywood, I became hopelessly addicted. I knew what the film stars ate and drank, their birthdays, their favourite colours, their likes and dislikes . . . I marvelled at the beauty of the women and the bravery of the men.

We were living in Cardiff at this time and that is how I became so involved, because it was there that Mr Albert Edwards, the proprietor of the local picture-show, gave me my first job in the film-advertising sphere. It consisted of pulling a billy-cart all the way up the steep road from the pub to the Lookout and shouting at the top of my voice: 'Tonight, tonight, in Smith's Hall, a grand picture-show will be held! Roll up and tumble up!'

I have no idea now why I needed the billy-cart, but it may have been to carry the hurricane-lamp, because there were no street lights. From this lowly start I progressed to the printing in Indian ink of the advertising slides, probably because I was doing technical drawing at school. Which reminds me of the savage caning that I got from our headmaster, Mr Stern, for the only time I ever wagged school. I can still quote the explanatory absentee-note my mother wrote for me: 'I sent Charlie to school yesterday, and he went to the Strand pictures instead.'

Then, as if to enable me to go on living in this fantasy film world there came a breathtaking announcement.

To advertise the 'Coming soon to this Theatre' of Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights*, Mr Edwards was to organise a competition for boys up to the age of 15. On the Saturday night after next, the competitors would have to give an impersonation of Charlie Chaplin. The management would provide the necessary garb and there would be a prize of 10 shillings (\$1) and three months' free admission for the winner and his parents.

Oh boy, was I excited! This was my chance. I knew from their biographies that some of my most famous film gods and goddesses had had even more humble beginnings than mine.

I must rehearse, rehearse and go on rehearsing until I became Charlie Chaplin himself. I purloined the longest cane from Mr Stern's office and got my father to steam one end into a curved handle, and my Uncle Skinflint grudgingly lent me the bowler hat that he had been using as a nest for one of his bantam hens. Baggy old clothes and boots were no problem, because every family possessed some.

So I spent hours and hours perfecting the walk, the twirling of the cane, the pathetic smile, the extremely difficult little acrobatic antics, the comical twitch of the nostrils and, above all, the pleading look that could melt the hardest heart.

There were 17 of us on the night of the competition. Mr Edwards gave us our instructions. We would be introduced by a number instead of by name. I was Number 5. Our moustaches would be charcoaled on before the start, but there was only one set of Chaplin clothes. Each boy was to strut

across the stage and back again and hand over the cane and clothes for the next one to change into. And we had to be quick. The winner would be decided by a show of hands from the audience at the end of the competition.

From where we were standing in the wings, we heard mild applause and some laughter for the first four Chaplins. But from my first knee-bending arrival on stage, there came shrieks of uncontrollable laughter and boisterous applause. The whole building quivered, and tiny flakes of old kalsomine fell like clouds of dandruff from the startled ceiling. The reception was so overwhelming that I kept on giving encore after encore, until Mr Edwards finally came and yanked me off stage.

Knowing that my virtuoso performance could not possibly be superseded, I hardly gave the valuable prize a thought. In this seventh heaven of success, all I could think of was the future that now lay ahead of me. To begin with, however, it would be heart-warming to hear the renewed applause when my card No. 5 was held up, and to bow modestly in response to a standing ovation.

But just a moment! Could this be some sort of nightmare? When my card went up, I got three votes, those of my father and mother and brother Norman.

'What happened?' I asked my brother, as I choked back sobs after the show. 'Why didn't I win?'

'Because your fly was undone and every time you bent your knees, all those tin buttons kept flashing, and the more you went on, the funnier it looked.'

Wayne Newman (NH, July 1987)

As a former teacher of the late Wayne Newman at Newcastle Boys' High, and as a friend of his family for many years, I should like to challenge recent media predictions that he is likely to pass into folklore as the epitome of the underworld gangster strongman.

Despite his enormous strength and sporting successes, Wayne Newman was always a quietly spoken, retiring person. He even chose to play the gentleman's amateur game of rugby union rather than professional league and he often won the award for the best and fairest player during a match.

On the various occasions that I saw him as a bouncer in the local gambling clubs of the 1950's and 60's, I often commented that he never manhandled any disgruntled player who had to be ejected. Wayne's size and quiet demeanour were enough to induce the offender to go quietly.

It was these qualities that led to Wayne's downfall. He was often called upon by weaker associates to fight their battles for them, which he always did if he thought they were in the right.

He paid dearly and uncomplainingly for taking justice into his own hands.

Because his funeral was private and unadvertised I offer the Newman family on behalf of myself and a host of those who really knew and understood Wayne our deepest sympathy.

Untitled Letter

I have no interest in politics but, like *The Herald's* Denis Butler, I agonise over the increasing violation of the English language. I entreat lord mayoral candidate Mr Don Geddes, in deference to one of his former teachers at Newcastle Boys' High, to persevere with his study of the language and

learn to eradicate the shameful illiteracy of his letter-to-voters appeal, just in case he has to represent us in public.

Untitled Letter

One day in July, 1921, my parents sent me off to school, but I chose to go to the Strand pictures instead. In July, 1987, the Newcastle ratepayers sent the Lord Mayor off to Newcastle-upon-Tyne for a special function, but he chose to go to London instead and sit in the Royal Box. I was obliged to resign from my position as school captain. Will our Lord Mayor be obliged to resign from his position as council captain?

Telephone Comments on Radio

Because I am a genuine age-pensioner, I can sympathise with other people in need. So I am concerned that, despite the fact that dedicated doctors are working up to 100 hours a week, on call, their incomes have been reduced so much by Medicare that some of them will soon be on the breadline.

Now, if I send some food parcels to some of the most deserving cases, shall I be able to claim their cost as a tax concession?

Speech At Inaugural Dinner Of The Newcastle Boys' High School Old Boys' Association (August 1987)

(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 we 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' (Kelter, 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 fichtre" (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 enfler" 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.

Taped Interview, Newcastle ABC Radio 2NC (late1987)

[The following is the transcription of an interview with Charlie, made by local ABC radio late in 1987. The interviewer is John Clarke, himself a former student of Charlie's. The beginning of the interview was apparently not taped, the recorded part beginning with Charlie's reply, to an apparent reference during the introduction, to his "teaching" of students.]

Charlie: Yes. I'm certain that I haven't taught one. I gave lessons to many thousands but I don't think I was ever congratulated on teaching anyone anything.

John: When did you start your long career?

Charlie: In 1929 at North Sydney Boys' High School.

John: That would be before the bridge . . .

Charlie: Before the bridge was built. In fact I could claim that I instigated the building of the bridge, but in fact it had an effect on me because, in those early days, you couldn't possibly arrive late at school. That would have been the end of the world. At that time I was living at Maroubra and teaching at North Sydney and, to get over there, I had to go by ferry. There were two magnificent ferries, the Koompartoo and the Kuttabul. It was the Kuttabul that was later attacked by the miniature submarines in Sydney Harbour. I had to get a tram from Maroubra. Now if I were running a little late and the Kuttabul or the Koompartoo was drawing away from the wharf, I would make a leap of, say, anything up to 35 feet and land on the deck. I think that the building of the bridge was one of the reasons that Australia's performances in the long jump deteriorated after the 30's.

John: Your athletic feats were an inspiration to many, do you think?

Charlie: Well I was untrained and fully dressed at that time - you had to wear a three piece suit. There was no desire to get into that sporting corporation or whatever you call it in Canberra. You just did it because you didn't want to arrive late.

John: When did you start teaching at Newcastle Boys' High School?

Charlie: In 1942.

John: And was that where you remained for the rest of your career?

Charlie: Yes, I stayed there for 36 years.

John: Why the same school for so long?

Charlie: Because the travelling was easy. I inherited a bicycle (at first I thought it was going to be a tricycle, but it was really a bicycle). I was so happy with it. I spent some years learning to ride it, yet I could never dismount properly. To dismount I had to run into a wall. And I had many happy days at Boys' High because of that. You see, boys were forbidden to ride in the playground. But I had to ride through the double gate and into the playground, because to pull up I had to run into the wall - near the notice board. And each morning it was like the arrival of the bike riders in the Tour de France. There'd be a large group of boys waiting to cheer me on and telling me that I mustn't ride in the playground. It was good fun. Now even though I couldn't ride "no hands" I could ride with one hand, and with my free hand I used to make certain gestures to the boys that were cheering me on. One day I found that there wasn't one squeak from them when I arrived, and I thought that I had quelled them at last. But as I ran into the wall and dismounted I found that the headmaster was some 30 yards behind me and that was the reason for my silent arrival.

John: Did you have any ambition to rise through the Department and become Principal?

Charlie: I'm afraid not. There were occasions when I was more or less recommended to become a Deputy Headmaster, but I couldn't have done it. You see, I fell in love with

(my job at) Boys' High, it was so easy.

John: Do you think there's still a role in the education system for selective high schools?

Charlie: Oh, yes. I'm highly in favour of that. I blame the parents, the teachers and, of all things, the Teachers' Federation. I think that in a place like Newcastle there certainly should be a selective senior high school. You see, Newcastle Boys' High was a selective high school and so many people were jealous of Boys' High (they called it "Beardie's Circus" later on of course). The trouble was they were jealous of the fact that we did have many of the best pupils in the district and I think there was a lot of jealousy about that. Later on, in the big high schools, languages were taught by correspondence. At Maitland High School, for example, and once at Newcastle Boys' High, French had to be taught by correspondence because there weren't enough pupils in the senior class! If you had a senior high school in the area, and if there were people who wanted to study Greek, Italian or Japanese, say, there would be a chance for them to carry on those studies. But, at the present time, of course, there's no chance at all - except by correspondence, or something like that.

John: Did you ever come up against antagonism, from other faculties at Boys' High? Was there a push for the boys to do, perhaps, the hard subjects like maths?

Charlie: That happened after Sputnik, which had a great effect on teaching in the high schools, because from then on most people thought that the only subjects worth studying were technical studies, mathematics or science. And from then on the study of languages fell away.

John: Do you think every child should learn another language?

Charlie: Oh, yes. More than ever these days, because nearly everyone in Australia, in his twenties now, will certainly travel overseas sometime or other. It's certain that he will. Many will get jobs overseas, even if its just for 12 months or so. If they have not studied some foreign language, even for a few months, they'll find it almost impossible to learn enough during their stay to get along in the other country. You see, sometimes the phone goes and the person says "I've just been appointed to Paris for 12 months, or to Marseilles for 12 months, or something like that, can you teach me a little bit of French?" And I always say "Did ever you do any foreign language at all? Have you done French at all, even for a couple of months? And they say "No, no, no, no, no, no, no". And I say "Well look. I think it's pretty impossible. Perhaps I could just teach you a few phrases." And, you see, English is so different. Yet they don't necessarily have to study French. In fact, I suggest that they study Italian because Italian is so much easier. Somebody confronted with studying French, or Italian, or German, or something like that, is not in the race if he doesn't realise that, for example, in English you have one word "good". In the other language you have half a dozen words for "good". You've one word for "went" ("I went", "you went" for instance). In the other language you have six. So it's too hard for the people just starting off.

John: You were always considered a bit of an eccentric. Was this conscious, or entirely natural on your part?

Charlie: My eccentricity?

John: Yes.

Charlie: I didn't know that I was eccentric.

John: Well anybody who dismounts from a bicycle by riding into a brick wall is a little bit eccentric!

Charlie: Oh, I see what you mean. Well I love French because to my mind many distinguished French people are eccentric - film directors and so on, and novelists and even poets. I was never arrogant. Many French people are arrogant and they are accused of

arrogance by Australian tourists in particular. But I'll mention later that I had 14 months in Paris and not once did I find one arrogant or uncivil person. In fact, very often in Paris, at breakfast and other times, they would find out that I was Australian and I used to say "I apologise for what the English have done to you - at Trafalgar, at Waterloo - and what they did to Joan of Arc. And I'd also say that I was sorry about my ancestors, telling them "By the way, I'm descended from a long line of head shrinkers and cannibals, and I have come to Paris chiefly to apologise to the authorities publicly for the fact that my ancestors ate so many French missionaries and loved them".

John: Where were you born?

Charlie: I was born in Queensland and I felt so ashamed because of Bjelke Petersen that I made enquiries to see if I could have the place of birth changed by deed poll. But that would have taken too long, and my horses were running poorly at the time, so I didn't go on with it. But I was really born in Cairns.

John: When did you come to Newcastle?

Charlie: Well I came to Newcastle, fortunately, two years later because my father (who was a carpenter and cabinet maker) had gone to North Queensland - Stannary Hills, Mareeba and so on - to build sugar mills. When he came back to Newcastle, because of the death of his mother, we happened to follow on later, to meet up with him again.

John: And when was this? Shortly before the First World War?

Charlie: Oh, Lord yes. It was 1911.

John: So you remember Newcastle well.

Charlie: Oh I remember Newcastle well in World War 1. Oh yes. No trouble at all. In fact, for example, if you went in to buy a billy can or something like that, they'd say "Oh no, you can't have it because they've all gone for the troops." And I used to knit, or rather I used to try to knit, socks for the soldiers overseas, but I could never turn the heels, and so most of my socks went for yard after yard. I think they made them into scarves. I'm not sure.

John: What was it like, growing up in Newcastle at that time?

Charlie: Well, it was wonderful. See, nobody had any money. Most of us were barefooted. In fact, I was once threatened with gaol because I was caught swimming, to the annoyance of the public, at a place out of Georgetown, in the thick of ti-tree scrub. It was a freshwater creek then. I was wearing tights and we were raided by the police. I was the only one caught and of course my clothes were on the opposite bank. I was charged, dealt with at Newcastle Police Court, and fined five shillings or two hours in the shade. To appear in court I had to borrow a pair of boots, because I didn't have any. We weren't poor - we were the best fed kids in Newcastle - but you just didn't have boots, or things like that.

John: There has been so much change, of course, to the city. Is it still the city . . . ?

Charlie: Oh, the change is terrific. Newcastle was blue metal right up to Zara Street. It was just blue metal, chunks of blue metal. We had the old steam trams, of course, but as kids, if we wanted to go to the beach or something like that, we would hop onto the back of a horse-drawn coke lorry, which was taking the coke up to Zara Street. Then, on the way back, we'd get on the back of a lorry taking tallow from the wharves to the soap works at Mayfield.

There was a lot of fun. You knew every fruit tree in the area and, as usual, you'd pinch a bit of fruit. But we weren't vandals. I don't think we ever vandalised anything. If you found a rowing boat in Throsby Creek - they didn't have the wharves there then and of course there were many sailing boats there, beautiful things like the Ethel M Stirling and six-masted schooners - you'd pinch the rowing boat and a bit of butter box and row

around the harbour until the water police caught you. But we didn't vandalise anything.

John: I'm sure they probably tolerated that too. Where did you go to secondary school?

Charlie: Newcastle Boys' High.

John: That was on the Hill in those days.

Charlie: Yes, on the Hill, not far from here.

John: And it's still going as a school building, as a matter of fact.

Charlie: Yes, they've restored it marvellously.

John: When did the love affair with things French start, Charlie?

Charlie: Well, it became my hobby (I'm not saying that I'm any good at it), but it did become my hobby almost from the beginning. I thought, of all the subjects we were doing at the high school, that French was the best because you could learn the little bit of French you got in the classroom - you didn't have homework.

John: Even though you were, and are, considered an expert on French, you never actually went to France until comparatively late in life.

Charlie: That's right, I was 65 before I went there. The nearest I got to going to France was to go on board the French ships that came into the harbour, from the Messageries Maritimes. I used to call them boats, of course, the same as the French do. The French call them boats, not ships. Well five of them made three visits a year for four months - they did the round trip. They were magnificent little boats of about 8000 tons, and they carried wool, mineral sand, lead and zinc - and were as clean as a whistle. The officers on board were just magnificent. They would be on two trips and then they would have their four months off. In the course of years I got to know a lot of these officers. I would get a phone call at three o'clock in the morning from Adelaide saying that one would be arriving on Thursday, or something like that. Magnificent!

That was the first time I think I did attempt to speak some French, and learnt a little bit of saucy French, I suppose. French isn't a dirty language. I've often boasted that I don't know of one word in the French language that couldn't be used in polite society. Not like the present, permissive society when apparently you can say anything at all, even in front of women. Women these days seem to swear just as much as the men, which amazes me. But I don't think there's one word in the French language that can't be used in polite society.

John: When you finally arrived in France, was it everything that you expected.

Charlie: Oh, yes, I couldn't believe it. I just couldn't believe it. To begin with, there is only one high rise building in the whole of Paris itself. I'm not talking about the outskirts, where they have the high-rise units, out of the city itself. Nearly everyone lives inside Paris. The buildings are roughly five stories high. They haven't been altered for a couple of hundred years. The people live in Paris because the banks, the shops and so on, are on the ground floor. And every few yards there is a big double door, with a lock, and the people live upstairs. So that in Paris itself, which is only a small place, you have something like 8 million people living there. They are all living in Paris.

John: Do you think Paris is a 20th century city?

Charlie: Mmmmm. It's what a 20th century city should be, I'll say that. See Sydney, as you know, is being ruined at the moment. It's a terrible pity. Because even though I have had 14 months in Paris altogether, it is true that when you come back on a Sunday morning, and you see Sydney and the harbour, and so on, you just think "Why did I ever leave?" But it is being ruined. Sydney is being ruined.

John: What other interests do you have, apart from French? I suppose I'm not divulging anything if I say that the horses have played . . .

Charlie: Well it is true. I've had two or three loves in my life. I've had French, as a hobby, race

horses, and the old-fashioned two-up. I suppose they were my three great interests.

John: Recently you were guest speaker at the Boys' High Old Boys' dinner. I bet that was a fun occasion and brought back a lot of memories for you.

Charlie: Yes. I was so nervous that I can't remember really what happened. I was terrified.

John: I bet you met a lot of old friends.

Charlie: Yes, I did. Even some of my creditors who were present were very nice to me on that special occasion.

John: There'd be few teachers in Newcastle as fondly remembered as you. Why do you think that is?

Charlie: Please, I can't . . . I think that some of them fondly hope that one of these days I might get them through an exam. See, I taught in the high schools for forty nine years and I'd still be there for, unfortunately, I put my superannuation and long service money on a horse that ran rather poorly. So, because I ended up with no superannuation, I had to keep on at the school as long as possible. As I said, I had forty nine years altogether, and I was told at the end of my 49th year, by the Director of Education "You've had a pretty good trot, haven't you? How long have you been in the schools?" I said "Forty nine years." And he said "Did you ever get anyone through the Leaving Certificate, or the Higher School Certificate?" I replied "Break it down! No. My kids all were sat right in the front of the exam room. I never had one lucky enough to sit behind a really good kid from another class." And they said "Well you've had a fair trot."

[The above interview was replayed by Newcastle ABC station 2NC on Monday 11 November 1991, following Charlie's sudden death the previous Saturday evening.]

Damaged Goods (NH, November 1987)

Wanda Metcalf (*Readers' Opinions*, 21/11/87) is bewildered at St Vincent de Paul's rejection of her most generous offer of a fridge in perfect condition, except that the door does not close, and excellent woollen blankets except for a few holes. The society has even refused my offer of two perfect hot water bottles that leak a little, a large umbrella with only a few ribs missing, and a dozen gripping detective novels with only the last few pages torn out.

The above was in reply to the following letter:

A few weeks ago, I rang the St Vincent de Paul Society to offer it a big old fridge I was not using. I also told the Society to take a couple of old blankets which I would leave on the fridge. The St Vincent de Paul people came out, had a look and left everything. Their reason being that they don't take damaged things.

The fridge is in perfect working order but the door doesn't stay closed, something which surely wouldn't cost much to fix. The blankets had a few holes in them, but were pure wool and would have kept somebody warm. The St Vincent de Paul people wouldn't take these things because they assert that people won't take damaged goods. If that is so, just how needy are the needy?

What do they want us to do, give them our new things and keep the old, slightly damaged ones? I can't believe there is no-one out there who needs a few more blankets or a big fridge in working order. What should I do with them, take them to the dump?

Untitled Letter (NH, January 1988)

After our generous treatment of his officers and crew, it would not have hurt the master of *Eagle* to sail AId. John McNaughton back from Brisbane and spare him the anguish of almost having to dip into his own pocket. Critics forget that his meagre Lord Mayoral allowance would soon be exhausted if it had to go towards speeding his return home from such places as London and Brisbane, not to mention Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

Untitled Letter (NH, May 1988)

Nick Greiner is happy with the monorail and the harbour tunnel, Terry Metherell is gleefully playing trains with the HSC and AId John McNaughton soon will be able to gaze out in rapture from the 31st storey of a high-rise heaven. Isn't life wonderful?

Untitled Letter

Congratulations and thanks to those voters who have made the Greiner mini-Budget possible. They have argued successfully that since poverty is now a crime in NSW, it is only fair that the guilty ones should serve a four-year, non-parole period of unrelieved Greinerism.

Untitled Letter (NH, July 1988)

Yesterday's *Herald's Opinion* headed 'The Arantz backdown' should be a warning to Mr Greiner in his praiseworthy \$1 billion attack on crime in NSW. If a State Premier's wilfully broken promise becomes an indictable offence, Mr Greiner may have to spend time in one of his planned new prisons.

Untitled Letter (NH, July 1988]

It amazes me that there are still Novocastrians who not only deplore the planned construction of a 34-storey monument to greed, but also criticise the actions of Mr Greiner, Dr Metherell and the Lord Mayor, AId McNaughton. No public figure seems to meet the approval of these unhappy critics, not even such present-day greats as General Botha, the Ayatollah Khomeini and Ronald Reagan.

Victim of Smokers [NH, 8 August 1988]

Not once since the earliest days of the Colony has any member of my family deviated from its anti-smoking tradition. Many a winter thrashing I got as a child for suspected smoking, when all that was issuing from my mouth and nostrils was condensed breath.

I well remember the laudatory comment of the proprietor of the crematorium at my great-grandfather's funeral: 'There's no doubt about it, those Goffets don't even smoke when they are being cremated'.

When we grew up, we were not allowed to swim at Bondi in case we came under the influence of that heartily-in-favour-of-smoking Dr Whitby.

So I was pleased to read of that \$60,000 out-of-court damages award to the Melbourne bus driver who had been affected by the smoking of his passengers. But now I am concerned about my own case.

For 49 years I was a high-school teacher and, because of my gentle nature, I had no control over the boys' smoking habits in class. Through the haze I could distinguish Capstans, Winfields, Alpines and Marlboros, and in the French classes, Gitanes and Caporales.

Even the inspectors dreaded the thought of entering my smoke-filled room, so that all they saw of my teaching methods was what they could observe by peering through the windows from the corridor outside.

One newly appointed headmaster hastily phoned the fire brigade on his first day at the school.

And now at last the warning signs have begun to appear. Last Tuesday morning I gave an incipient cough. Shortly afterwards, one of my undertaker friends not only gave me an unusually welcoming smile but stopped long enough to run his professional eye up and down my frame.

How do I go about seeking damages for 49 years of suffering from passive smoking? Do I sue the Education Department or the parents of the boys who smoked during my lessons?

The above provoked the following replies;

Passive Smoker Found Out

I was fascinated to read Mr Charlie Goffet's views (Readers' Opinions, 8/8/88) concerning the victims of passive smoking.

Being a student at Newcastle Boys' High School in the 1950's, I believe I qualified for entrance because of a reasonable level of intelligence and observation (which is often questioned by members of my family).

From these levels of observation I believe that Mr Goffet has been 'found out'.

I have many fond memories of my school days at NBHS and on one occasion I remember Mr Goffet entering the classroom for one of our French periods and putting one of his half-smoked 'roll-your-own' cigarettes on the top edge of the cupboard in the room.

Obviously he believed the cigarette was extinguished but it wasn't, and to everybody's dismay (or was it delight?) the 'bumper' fell into the waste paper bin.

After a few minutes the contents of the bin caught fire. Mr Goffet acted quickly and to the entertainment of the class threw the contents, alight, out the window.

Another one of Mr Goffet's practices was to put a half-smoked cigarette (extinguished) behind his ear for future pleasure.

I still hold memories of Mr Goffet with great affection. I hope he writes more letters to the Newcastle Herald.

Memories of Classroom Antics

Mr David Taylor's views (Readers' Opinions, 3/9/88), regarding Mr Charlie Goffet and his smoking habit reminded me of my days at Newcastle Boys' High School.

As a student there in the mid-60's I was witness to Charlie's penchant for hiding 'bumpers' on the top of the corner cupboard that was part of every room.

Some of the more astute students would snatch the 'bumper' and head for the park if Charlie forgot to retrieve it.

Another teacher at the school, Mr 'Keg' McRae, had an unusual idiosyncrasy that was directly related to Charlie's. Whenever 'Keg' entered a room, the first thing he did was to run his fingers along the top of the cupboard, occasionally encountering a forgotten 'bumper'. This would promptly disappear into his pocket and where it went from there was anybody's guess.

My only regret was that I didn't continue with my French and so missed out on many more encounters with a fine teacher.

Untitled Letter (NH, September 1988)

My heart bleeds in sympathy for those pensioners with substantial financial investments who find themselves threatened by Mr Howe's proposed income test. I am broke at the moment, but if I win Lotto and a couple of million dollar lotteries between now and December 1, will I have my present pension reduced and lose my fringe benefits? What a dismal future to look forward to.

Untitled Letter [NH, October 1988]

The delightful logic of the Lord Mayor's explanations (*Readers' Opinions*, 26/10/88) should now put an end to all protests against the proposed Civic development. He has proved that viewed from Hunter St, a low building will, of necessity, look much taller than the proposed tower. Conversely, viewed from an outer suburb, a crowd of 1100 protesters will, of necessity, be reduced to 850. Quod erat demonstrandum.

Untitled Letter [NH, November 1988]

Led to believe that a change of government would benefit my fellow citizens, I contributed an unconscionable proportion of my pension money to Mr Keegan's (MLA Newcastle) \$100,000 election campaign. I have grown accustomed to waiting patiently for my horses to finish in their races, but according to my political form guides, Mr Keegan has not yet left the barrier stalls.

Untitled Letter [NH, February 1989]

The Geddes anti-smoking revolt has deservedly been inspired by the burning wet hay stench of Australian cigarettes. In Paris restaurants, the chefs and waiters serve their gastronomic masterpieces with a French cigarette balanced on their appreciative lips, as they gleefully envelop the happy diners in welcome clouds of aromatic fumes. A similar set-up in Newcastle would satisfy everyone, including Don Geddes.

Untitled Letter [NH, March 1989]

On Newcastle-Sydney rail trips, an official announces that the train, not the journey, will terminate at

a certain station. This wilful waste of still usable railway stock must cost millions. But there is worse to come. A grim notice outside Newcastle station warns that next Saturday and Sunday the passengers will terminate at Gosford. What a bonanza for the central coast undertakers.

Unpublished Letter [SMH, March 1989]

I can certainly understand the Reverend Fred Nile's detestation of the sale and use of condoms. He and I know that if our parents had lived in a more enlightened age and had had the benefit of foresight, it is hardly likely that he or I would have been born into this ungodly world.

Untitled Letter (NH, 31 March 1989)

My heart bleeds for Kathy Gray (NH, 30/3/89). Those club blackboard menus cater for wealthy customers only. Last week my grandfather and I hitchhiked from Islington to Oodnadatta and back, and suffered the same churlish treatment. In every club his modest requests for caviar, truffled paté de foie gras, bullocks' tonsils in aspic and a magnum of Bollinger were sneeringly rejected because these humble items were not on the blackboard menu.

Untitled Letter

I arrived by train on Sunday to compete in the Fun Run. But after lugging my suitcase from the far end of platform 3 to the exit opposite Bolton Street, then along to the Watt Street lights and finally back to Bolton Street, I was so exhausted that I had to scratch from the event.

Untitled Letter [NH, June/July 1989]

Why not make the unlit middle of Cardiff tunnel our rail terminus? Although a little further away than Broadmeadow from our beaches, hotels and harbour, it would become such a popular world wonder for tourists that the tunnel could go on being extended until it finally encompassed the present Newcastle station.

Untitled Letter [NH, July 1989]

I want to call on anyone who is gloating over Mr Alan Bond's present discomfiture to reflect that: "There, for the lack of a billion or two, go I."

Untitled Letter [NH, July/August 1989]

Why all the fuss? Blind Freddie knew that Newcastle would lose the battle for the frigates. Happily, to ease our sorrow, we now have the gleefully-shed crocodile tears of certain members of parliament. And Shakespearian comic relief comes from the angry threats of people who have never voted Labor in their lives swearing never to vote Labor again.

Address to Introduce the Guest Speaker (Kevan Gosper), 3rd Annual Dinner, Newcastle Boys' High School Old Boys' Association, 18 August 1989

Mr Chairman and Gentlemen

I must thank your Committee for being so foolhardy as to grant me the great honour and pleasure of introducing tonight's distinguished guest speaker. You will be surprised that I shall make no mention whatsoever of the fact that Kevan Gosper, after winning the quarter-mile at the Vancouver Commonwealth Games in 1954, gained a silver medal at the 1956 Melbourne Olympics. If I went

on and told you that Kevan was Tour Captain at the Rome Olympics, is President of the Australian Olympic Federation and is odds on to become President of the International Olympic Committee, it would be like a speaker at a Convocation of turf enthusiasts pointing out excitedly that Phar Lap not only won the 1930 Melbourne Cup, but went to Mexico and won the Agua Caliente Handicap.

And everyone knows that in the more serious world of business, Kevan is Chairman of Directors and Chief Executive Officer of Shell.

So, instead of reciting long lists of Kevan's achievements in sport and business, I should like to recall some of the lesser known facts of his career. Let me, therefore, take you back to August, 1946, the date of the Sydney C.H.S. Carnival. The star of our team was Gordon Jones, a past-the-post certainty in the Under-13 hundred yards. So much so, that we prevailed upon Harold Beard to invest the School's SWASC funds on the result. I think it was Len McRae who negotiated this deal, because I have always been somewhat chary of becoming involved in gambling. It was a disaster! Jonesy was beaten into second place by a handsome, smiling long streak from Canterbury High with the stride of half a dozen kangaroos rolled into one. The colour drained from Harold's cheeks when he heard the dismal news, but he recovered quickly enough to call a special school assembly and announce that SWASC contributions would have to be increased if the School was to provide the saucier photographs, pictures and other equipment needed for his sex education sessions.

On the following Monday, a new kid came to enrol at Boys' High. Lo and behold, it was the Kevan Gosper who had beaten Gordon Jones in the hundred. Despite his plea that his family had moved to Newcastle some months before, but that the Canterbury coach had boarded him privately so that he could represent Canterbury High, Harold Beard, who normally would not hurt a fly, began by giving him six of the best for having bankrupted SWASC. There were even stories that Harold sometimes grabbed hold of Gosper half-way through an important race to haul him back to school for another six, but this could be an exaggeration. What is true, however, is that Len and I also fell out of favour with the boss, because rumours began to emanate from P & C mothers' meetings that, politically, Len had leanings toward the left and that I was addicted to alcohol.

Another not-so-well-known performance was that, at an International athletics Carnival in Newcastle, the 15 years old Gosper outjumped the men with a leap of 21 feet 9.5 inches, which English and American sportswriters claimed to be a world record. I don't quite know what this has to do with my talk, but just as Margaret Whitlam had won a High Schools' Diving Championship, so did Kevan Gosper.

And then, luckily for his future, he broke his collar-bone at Australian Rules when it looked as if he might be heading for a career in Melbourne. Again, just as Phar Lap's successes caused the weight-for-age rules to be altered and the unbeatable Walter Lindrum the rules of billiards, Kevan's winning of 5 Senior State titles against very strong opposition caused the rules to be altered to a maximum of 3 events.

If I had to nominate Kevan's greatest performance in athletics I would choose his win as a rank outsider in the 400 metres in 1954 in Los Angeles when he beat the world record holder in a race listed as the "race of the century".

His best performance at N.B.H.S. was to win the prestigious Ross Mearns prize for manliness, leadership and service to the school. It is noteworthy that he won a similar award, the Dean's prize, at the end of his stay at the Michigan State University.

His enthusiasm for the French language proved rather a handicap, however. Instead of learning the necessary examination vocabulary, Kevan knew the French for such exotic things as dog-faced baboon, whortleberry and so on, but which never appear in exam papers.

Without hurting his feelings, I should like to quote a couple of his mistranslations that have passed into folklore. The first, "Tant pis, tant mieux!" means roughly: "So much the worse, so much the better!" Recognising bits here and there, Kevan's translation was: "Having relieved herself, the aunt felt much better!" He did likewise with: "Rosa, émue, répondit . . ." ("Rosa, deeply agitated, answered . . ."), which Kevan transformed into: "The pink emu laid another egg . . ."

Because of his many trips to France and also the fact that in June of this year his son Brett in Paris married a French girl who knows no English, Kevan now speaks excellent French.

To sum up, if I had to choose one word only to describe Kevan Gosper, it would be "loyalty".

I now have the great pleasure of introducing our guest speaker to the four hundred other distinguished old boys waiting to welcome him.

Thank you.

Overdevelopment [NH, 30 September 1989]

With confirmation through freedom of information that I was conceived 80- odd years ago at an idyllic spot near Lady Macquarie's Chair in the Botanic Gardens, I have spent much of my time and most of my personal fortune travelling backwards and forwards from Newcastle to Sydney to keep a watchful eye on this tiny part of my heritage.

In the olden days it was not much of a problem. If you were confronted by some adult male struggling to choke back his sobs of frustration at not being able to develop this jewel of the landscape, you comforted him as best you could and pointed out there still remained, tucked away in the inner city, a few delightful friendly little theatres, hotels and restaurants that were almost screaming out to be transformed into inhospitable commercial mausoleums.

Also, over on the North Shore, there were whole acres of charming sites inviting similar treatment. Thus reassured, your enemy would thank you politely and hurry away.

But that was before the inauguration of NSW Inc. These days any developer worth his plausibility can buy a public hospital or seaside school, a showground, a public park, a large or small railway station or a lottery office.

With this Government's term still having more than two years to run, anything can happen. Will my parents' trysting place become a shelter for a privatised Farm Cove bus service? When my ashes are being scattered from the top of my favourite cliff, will they foul the decks of pleasure craft moored in the marina of an extended Bogey Hole built for the benefit of the owners of the luxury dwellings on the prestigious King Edward Park Estate?

Untitled Letter [NH, October 1989]

Not only God but certain members of many organised religions work in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform. To wit, 'Forgive us our sins and we shall be quite happy to forgive those that

have sinned against us provided, of course, that they come across with \$5.38 million.'

Untitled Letter [NH, October 1989]

Self-confession is certainly good for the soul. Liberal President, Mr Elliott, has pronounced publicly (19/10/89), that his party 'will take it away from the bludgers and hand it back to the workers'. This could mean that in his present generous and repentant mood, Mr Elliott might decide to divest himself of his wealth and distribute it among those who need it least.

The Man Who Could Outdo Walter Mitty [NH, 26 October 1989]

Mr Richard Glover's moving article, 'Dreams that ended in despair' (NH, 24/10/89), dealing with the life and death of the late Kelter Hartley, will surely bring to mind many a story, true or apocryphal, from people who were associated, in one way or another, with Dr Hartley in the happier days when he was a teacher and then a Professor of French in Newcastle.

I often had the feeling that Dr Hartley could 'out-Mitty' Walter Mitty.

During one of his lectures to a French Distinction class consisting of two students, he suddenly halted his reading of the text at the point where it began the description of the burning of a heretic at the stake, and gazed inquiringly around the room:

'Has any member of the class ever witnessed a burning at the stake?'

The male student thought hard, scratched his head furiously and answered shamefacedly as if he realised that he was letting the class down: 'I am sorry, Professor, but I don't think I have.'

The female student tried even harder to recall such an incident during her life in the Newcastle area, but at last even she had to confess that not even once had she been present at such a ceremony.

Professor Hartley, obviously disappointed at the unworldliness of this particular group, declared proudly, but not unsympathetically: 'Well, I can assure every member of the class that it is a most horrendous sight!'

Untitled Letter [NH, November 1989]

It amazes me that there are still people who find fault with our immigration laws. I wonder if these critics ever stop to think what NSW would be like without the benefits we are now happily enjoying as a result of the untiring efforts of our present Premier and Minister of Education.

Untitled Letter [NH, December 1989]

In times of need, the Fairy Queen uses a magic wand, Aladdin has a wonderful lamp, jockey Dittman has an enforcer, and our Lord Mayor and Town Clerk, at a trifling cost to ratepayers, have a facilitator. But now we are in danger of losing this prodigy. Perhaps Ireland, Lebanon and the Queensland Nationals are already planning to entice him away from us.

Untitled Letter [NH, January 1990]

May I quote the sad reflection of my 99-year-old philosopher friend Theophilus Kelly: "I have lived through the First World War, the 1919 bubonic plague, the Great Depression of the 1930's, the

Second World War and the Newcastle earthquake, but I still have to survive two more years of the disastrous Greiner Government."

Untitled Letter [NH, February 1990]

Our Deputy Lord Mayor will need a gifted facilitator if he expects to repair the damage he appears to have so wilfully done to the image of his high office by his mean, contemptible, ignorant, sexist and stupid comment on Margaret Henry. The critics who complain that Mr Greiner should have declared Newcastle a disaster area must have forgotten that our civic administration has been a disaster ever since the last council elections.

Untitled Letter [NH, February 1990]

Is it true that besides attending an international earthquake conference in Russia at the ratepayers' expense, our Lord Mayor and Town Clerk will also be off to a convention in Madagascar, where civic leaders will consider relaxing the rules of Snakes and Ladders, with a view to making this intricate game more attractive to elderly players?

Untitled Letter (NH, 19 April 1990)

May I suggest that any money left over after payment for the administration of the Lord Mayor's Earthquake Fund be distributed among those needy victims for whom it was intended in the first place.

Untitled Letter (NH, 1 May 1990)

No wonder Alderman McNaughton is annoyed! I think Alderman Tate is very naughty indeed to publicly criticise our Lord Mayor, who, busy as he is, never fails to point out how pleased he is with the support he gets from all but a few of the ratepayers.

Untitled Letter (NH, 9 May 1990)

Goody, goody! The seemingly all-powerful Alderman Geddes has at last spoken (NH 1/5/90): "As far as I am concerned as an alderman, I will be making certain that people who are trying to hinder the progress of the city at this stage are put in their place." Alleluia!

Untitled Letter (NH, 6 June 1990)

May I ask your readers to forget politics for a moment and to linger rapturously in admiration of Mr George Keegan's superb mastery of the English language in his gentle admonition of Mr Keith Parsons. At my own expense, I have cyclostyled one thousand copies of his literary masterpiece for distribution to our schools.

The above was in reply to an interchange of letters between George Keegan (then the Independent Member for Newcastle) and a constituent, Keith Parsons, extracts from which are as follows:

From Keith Parsons.

"George Keegan appears his usual silent self about the proposed closure of the Civic to Newcastle rail link. Is he waiting to endorse whatever Wal Murray will announce . . . Who remembers the last time that Mr Keegan opposed or even

criticised a major Greiner initiative?"

From George Keegan.

"I believe Keith Parsons is being one of the few loud-mouthed knockers who the people of Newcastle are growing tired of. I am in favour of stopping the rail line at Civic, I am not pushing my views down other people's throats, as others are . . . Judging by the number of people who did not attend last Saturday's public meeting, I appear to be representing the views of the majority of people in Newcastle."

Private Letter to His Children (June 1990)

When the postman handed them to me, he told me how lucky I was to know such charming children and asked me if I knew any others like you, and, of course, I had to answer truthfully that I certainly did not.

The nearest one that I can remember was the happy little boy that I met in China many, many years ago.

His name was Willie Hop Off. Everyone loved him because he was so helpful and unselfish and obedient. No matter what he was asked to do, he would obey without hesitating.

To give him a reward for being so good, his father told him one day that he could come with him to gather chocolates from the only chocolate tree growing in the whole of China.

To get to this tree was very dangerous. It was situated in the wildest part of the country, and you had to cross a rickety, narrow, swaying, bamboo bridge spanning a raging torrent that thundered many miles below, and that was infested with sharks, polar bears, huge mosquitoes, lions and tigers and very naughty puppy-dogs. Only the bravest possible person would dare to cross this bridge, and when that did happen, a large crowd would come and watch.

When Willie Hop Off and his father found the tree, they could hardly believe their eyes. It was loaded with the best chocolates they had ever seen, and in no time they had filled their baskets to the brim.

On reaching the bridge on the way back, the father lifted little Willie Hop Off up onto his shoulders and carried a basket in each hand. The wind was so strong and the baskets were so heavy that the bridge was rocking worse than ever. And then, a terrible thing happened! One of the little boys in the crowd of people watching on the other side called out excitedly: "Hey, Willie Hop Off!" And little Willie, who always did what he was told, hopped off. Down, down he plunged, with the crowd now screaming in terror and all the savage animals below baring their fangs and getting ready to gobble up poor little Willie.

Then, when all seemed lost, the father called out in desperation: "Willie, STOP!" and little Willie, who always did what he was told, stopped in mid-air, just out of the reach of all the fierce animals. And he remained there obediently until his family and neighbours brought long bamboo ladders and rescued him.

It was one of the most exciting rescues that I ever saw, and I often wonder if the chocolate tree is still there.

Untitled Letter (NH, June 1990)

To end the rail controversy, my great-grandson has suggested that the tracks be left as they are, but that there be different sets of trains, one lot running from Sydney to Civic, and the other from Sydney to Newcastle.

Monumental Tribute To Politicians (NH, 27 June 1990)

Some years ago, when certain creditors forced me to seek refuge in Europe, what impressed me most was that there were more public statues in Rome and Paris than there are parking meters in the streets of Newcastle.

As far as I know, there are only two well-known statues here, the magnificent one of James Fletcher in the park of his name, and the equally wonderful sculpture of the AIF soldier in front of our Post Office. As an ardent admirer of Our Town, I am concerned that in years to come, when Newcastle has become a renowned tourist attraction because of its proliferation of new and old rail terminuses, its clusters of parking stations, its glassy un-tenanted office blocks gleaming proudly and uselessly where government schools once stood, with freeways replacing our too-few interesting suburban streets, with an odd shrub or flower struggling bravely where whole parks and gardens could have stood, visitors will wonder who the perpetrators of these innovations were and will crave to know what they really looked like.

That is why I suggest that we hasten to preserve in marble a selection of our Civic and State parliamentary representatives, in various poses, after the fashion of the Burghers of Calais.

As usual, there will be 'loud-mouthed knockers' who will object to this idea because of the cost, but the whole project could be paid for from the interest from the Lord Mayor's Earthquake Fund.

I am sure the needy victims, whose only hope of financial help will apparently depend on their own longevity, will be delighted that at long last part of this money is being spent for the public benefit.

Untitled Letter (NH, 24 July 1990)

Last week, my maternal grandmother fulfilled a childhood ambition by crossing Sturt's Great Stony Desert on foot. Unfortunately, because of her addiction to the backing of unmotivated horses, she has only one pair of shoes, but these served her without mishap during her long walk.

Yesterday, however, after her first few steps to go shopping in the Newcastle Hunter Street Mall, the heels of both shoes snapped off.

She is now looking for a farrier.

Stan (Unpublished Short Story, July 1990)

The first dicky I ever saw was worn by Roy Rene on stage at the Tivoli in the old days of 'Stiffy and Mo'. It consisted of a large handkerchief stretched across the chest to simulate a shirt-front, and fastened to the braces with safety-pins. The frock-coated Mo would stand shivering in front of the pawn-shop while the knowing audience waited for the three brass balls to fall to the footpath so that

Mo could splutter out his "Strike me lucky, I didn't think it was that cold!"

The only time I saw a dicky worn as a serious part of male attire was one day in the twenties when Stan joined our high-school staff.

Conditions were somewhat austere in that pre-Metherell era. There was a regulation stipulating that, if a teacher died in harness in the morning, his family would lose a whole day's pay, but that, if he waited until after lunch-time to breathe his last on school premises, the penalty was the forfeit of only a half day's pay. Because you would lose all your holiday pay if you were absent on the day immediately before or after any of the long vacations, it was not unusual for a horse-drawn ambulance to be driven into the school playground, and for the teacher patient to be carried in on a stretcher to sign on or off duty as the case might be.

I can well remember one of my colleagues writhing in agony from an attack of shingles as he struggled to write on the blackboard. I also recollect observing headmasters handing out departmental crutches and slings to members of staff with broken legs or arms in plaster, to enable them to get to their classes without delay.

Unpunctuality on the part of a teacher had not yet reared its ugly head. Because I was living at La Pérouse and teaching on the North Shore, I had to travel by tram to the Quay and then catch the ferry to Milson's Point, as there was no Harbour Bridge. If the Kuttabul or the Koompartoo had already got under weigh when I dashed through the wharf turnstile, a leap of anything up to thirty feet was required for me to land safely on the deck. And these leaps were made by my unathletic self, completely untrained, and motivated, not by the hope of winning a scholarship to an Institute of Sport, but by the terrifying prospect of arriving late. The subsequent building of the Harbour Bridge has certainly led to a lowering of the standard of our long-jump performances.

But to come back to Stan. There had been all sorts of rumours about him: He was a defrocked monk, he was an expelled Oxford don, he was a remittance man of royal birth, he smoked opium when drugs were practically unknown in Australia, he drank absinth morning, noon and night, on one occasion, after missing the last ferry, he had swum fully-clothed across Sydney Harbour . . . Strange to say, none of us who claimed as certain the truth of at least our own particular rumour, had ever set eyes on him until the day he landed most unexpectedly on our doorstep, having been unceremoniously transferred from a school in the western suburbs, in ludicrously puritanical circumstances. His headmaster had waited for him to emerge from a lavatory and had upbraided him with the criticism that he was spending too much of his teaching time in the toilet.

"Yes," Stan had gleefully concurred, with a friendly pat on the headmaster's shoulder, "as Casanova was wont to remark, a good evacuation of the bowels is even more enjoyable than making love!"

The immediate result of this brief exchange of views was Stan's transfer to our school. The punishment was obvious. Our repulsive headmaster had deservedly earned the title of Departmental Chief Inquisitor. But even he was no more startled than the rest of us at the sight of the newcomer's apparel. Stan was wearing a floppy oversized tweed coat, baggy corduroy trousers, a dicky straining to support an unattached celluloid collar yellowed with age, and old sandshoes that had been blackened over with Zebra stove polish in a vain attempt at transmogrification.

Day in, day out, rain, hail or shine, Stan wore these same clothes during the whole of his stay at our school. There were times when I thought I could detect a thicker layer of pipeclay than usual on his

celluloid collar, or a more translucent black on his counterfeit shoes, but we soon grew accustomed to the incongruity of this garb, which contrasted so strangely with his aristocratic face, his freshly-bathed look, his handsome eyes, and his carefully modulated cultured voice.

His knowledge of English, French, German, Roman and Greek literature went far beyond that of any academic I had ever heard boast of. You had the impression that if you were to stick a pin in him, there would spurt forth a flood of English verse, Rabelaisian taunts, German songs, Latin epigrams or Homeric similes, interspersed with Pindaric odes.

Because Stan seemed to know everything, we gradually fell under the spell of his erudition, and also because of his almost quixotic good manners as he politely apologised for being able to answer our questions on ballistics, sporting records, operas, the ability of penguins to propagate and rear their young in Antarctica, and so on and so on, he never once behaved like some abominable know-all.

We knew nothing of his life outside school. He was always the first to arrive and the last to leave, and he never accepted an invitation to visit anyone's home.

But this happy state of affairs was too good to last. By 10 o'clock one morning, there was still no arrival of the quaint figure with the dicky and the celluloid collar, and as the minutes went by, the headmaster's bellowings grew louder and louder, and you could hear his screams of "Fancy that upstart having the effrontery to flout me!"

Finally, Stan turned up, a little before twelve. By half-past, it was common knowledge that Stan was on his way to the salt-mines, or to be more explicit, the boss, as usual, had won the game, and Stan was leaving to take charge of a one-teacher school in some hamlet the other side of Bourke.

There was no staff farewell ceremony, and Stan had nothing to pack, not even a book, because he carried all his knowledge in his head.

When I saw him come out of the office and head towards the railway-station, I ran and caught up with him.

"I shall miss the pleasure of your company," I said fatuously, almost in tears at this parting with my hero.

He sensed my discomfiture. "You are very kind," he said.

A few minutes later, I was called to the office to keep an eye on things while the boss went on one of his snooping rounds.

And there, on the table in front of me, lay the official report that Stan had had to write to explain his lateness.

"This morning, the train was more crowded than usual, and when more and more people entered my carriage, I found myself tightly squeezed in the midst of a group of young women. The pressure of their bodies against mine, the exotic perfume that they wore, the constant jolting of the train, in short, the very voluptuousness of the situation caused something inevitable to happen . . ."

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.

Private Card to Daughter (early 1991)

"Dear Yvonne Mullane tells us what really happened:

One day my mother said to me,
"Old Charlie's coming for afternoon tea,
And all the time he's in the house,
I want you to be just like a mouse."
No wonder I felt a trifle worried,
But keen to obey, away I hurried.
I gnawed at the cake and ate the glazed cherry,
Then made a warm nest in Charlie's French béret.
But out in the yard I gave a squeal.
Oh my, how frightened I did feel!
For THERE was the cat, and I was a mouse!
So I scurried back into the house,
And told my mother that I'd be nice,
But that I was tired of playing mice.

Untitled Letter (NH, April 1991)

While scouring the banks of Cockle Creek in search of native herbs to flavour my evening meal, I came upon some youngsters with an amazing haul of fish. When I asked them to share their secret, the answer was 'Mr, these fish are so impregnated with heavy metals, that instead of baited hooks, we tie magnets to the end of our lines.'

Untitled Letter (NH, May 1991)

Thanks for your timely warning, my Lord Mayor (*Newcastle Herald* 28/5/91). Because of the cruel decision of Mr Bryce Gaudry and his ALP mates, like Mr Bob Carr, I shall have to sit comfortably in the train all the way to Newcastle terminus, instead of alighting somewhere along the line to

complete my journey by some other means of transport.

Untitled Letter (NH, June 1991)

My globe-trotting grandmother, who is a skateboard fanatic, is cutting short her present visit to Newcastle because of the dangerous condition of the city footpaths. In yesterday's interview with the president of the World Federation of Skateboard Riders, she warned that our footpaths are worse than those in uninhabited parts of Upper Mongolia.

Untitled Letter (NH, June 1991)

The alleged shredding of Mr George Keegan's parliamentary masterpieces has left a tragic gap in our national archives. The authorities must now guard against the destruction of any tapes or videos of the Rev Fred Nile's self-reported apparent discussions with God on pornography, abortion, gambling casinos and political horse trading.

Untitled Letter (NH, July 1991)

On reading page one of *The Newcastle Herald* yesterday, I was full of praise for the Newcastle Town Clerk's generosity in providing tickets for our local aldermen, members of parliament and freemen to attend the Civic Theatre fund-raising concert. But now a philistine friend of mine claims that it is not Mr Lewis personally, but we ratepayers, who will have to foot the bill. Can this be true?

Untitled Letter (NH, August 1991)

This week's public comments by Ald Doyne Lanham and Ald Don Geddes should have a chastening effect on future appeals from Lord Mayoral candidates. For example, could a candidate's spiel go something like this: 'I am notoriously incompetent, dim-witted and uncultured, but I beg you to vote for me because my wife/husband is terribly good-looking, highly intelligent, patient, and most importantly, keenly interested in my advancement'?

This was apropos of the following two consecutive items:

By Sally Croxton, Civic Reporter

Retiring Citizens Group Alderman Doyne Lanham is not putting his money on group leader Ald Geddes becoming Lord Mayor at the September 14 Newcastle council election.

In Ald Lanham's estimation the present Lord Mayor, Labor's Ald McNaughton, will get back if only because of his popular wife, Margaret.

"I think what will get him in is her, Margaret's the vote-winner," he said.

By Don Geddes

In response to Sally Croxton's article on Ald Doyne Lanham (Newcastle Herald 1/8/91), both John McNaughton and I are fortunate to each have a patient and very special lady as our wife.

EPILOGUE

(From Readers' Opinions, Newcastle Herald, 16 November 1991)

Adieu, Charlie Goffet

Charles Goffet (or 'Charlie', as his many students knew him) was a regular correspondent to these pages, so this seems a fitting place to put down a few words in his memory.

Charlie was in his element last Saturday night. It was the 30-year reunion for the fifth year students of 1961 at Newcastle Boys' High, and he was our guest speaker.

We were having the kind of night you would expect from a group who had gathered together from all over Australia after a long separation, reminiscing about the school we loved, the teachers we knew, the friends we had. And the teacher we remembered best was with us, still full of life.

Not only was Charles Goffet an excellent French master and athletics coach, he was more importantly a friend to all of us, teaching us from his wide experience of a life lived to the full.

In the greyness of our school world, he was one of the brightest and most colourful stars.

Towards the end of the dinner, Charlie entertained us with stories (mostly unrepeatable) about our old school and teachers, delivered in his own inimitable style. It was as if the years had been rolled back, and we were once again in the classroom.

And then we watched in disbelief as suddenly, without warning, he fell to the floor as his heart stopped.

Charlie, you died in the full flower of life, in the company of good friends, and one could not have wished for a better way to go.

I think you would have been proud of the Marseillaise we sang later in memory of you. The words had been lovingly and carefully taught to us all those many years before.

Au revoir old friend.

Ian Graham