

**This is a second article on the longest serving member of staff in the history of the College, Derek Cameron. Last time we considered Derek's enormous contribution over 41 years of continuous service to the development of sport at Ashgrove. "The Derek Cameron Oval" is named after him in recognition of his wonderful efforts with many thousands of boys in sports such as Cricket, Cross Country, Rugby, Swimming, and Track & Field. As a sporting coach, co-ordinator, and mentor, he thoroughly earned his "legendary" status. It was not just in the coaching area that his influence on MCA students extended, however – he was a gifted and talented classroom teacher who inspired countless students to heights they had never dreamed they could reach.**

**I was surprised to find that Brother Alexis Turton, in his 35<sup>th</sup> Annual Report in the Blue & Gold of 1974 mentioned that "Mr Derek Cameron joined the Economics Department." Derek was a graduate of the University of Queensland, having obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree with honours, but his speciality had not been in Economics, rather in History. Derek was adaptable, however, as teachers had to be in those days – class sizes were far larger than they are now, audio-visual supports to lessons were in their infancy, textbooks were the mainstay of a subject, and "chalk and talk" with copious note-taking by students was the general order of the day. Derek well remembers the advice proffered by a sage Brother before he took his first Year 8 class: "Young feller, walk into the classroom holding up the textbook so they can all see it, then write on the board 'Page 1 Exercise 1 DO'. If anyone talks or does anything else after that, hit him!" Corporal punishment by means of the cane was accepted, even encouraged, and if a boy was told "JUMP!" the only permissible question from the child was, "How high and how many times, Sir?" Assessment at Senior level was through a system of "moderation" whereby schools in a particular area would meet at a central point, and teachers of individual subjects would compare the work of children from those schools, arriving at a consensus about the standard. (If this sounds a little complicated, it was. Yet the real tragedy was the fact that teachers were just beginning to make this system work when the system was altered again.)**

**So it was against this background – which beginning teachers today would label primitive – that a young Derek began his teaching employment at the College in 1974, no doubt apprehensive about his choice of career and worried about the strangeness of it all. He needn't have been concerned – he was a "natural" in front of a class, thoroughly prepared (even in Economics!), knowledgeable, approachable, able to explain difficult concepts with clarity and precision, and always encouraging. (Like many**

**another gifted educator, however, he found himself unable to suffer fools gladly, and the odd student wishing to play up in Mr Cameron’s class soon found himself wishing he hadn’t.) In the true sense of the word, Derek viewed teaching as a vocation, and loved to see “battlers” in the classroom achieve results they had never believed they could reach. (Most memorably, Derek recalls such a struggling student coming to thank him after gaining an “A” on his final report card, and being so overcome that all he could do was weep.)**

**His talents were soon recognised by the powers-that-be, first with promotion to Year Master of Grade 11 (a position analogous to Head of House in the present-day College), and then to Subject Master in History. This eventually broadened into Subject Master in Legal Studies as well, a subject Derek virtually introduced to the College, and which gained tremendous popularity, (as much because of the way Derek taught it, I suspect, as for any intrinsic liking for the legal area on the part of students. I can recall his Legal Studies class helpless with mirth in the library as Derek described the plight of a cat put in the microwave oven by its American owner to dry off after being caught in a sudden downpour. The fatal consequences for the feline prompted its owner to sue the microwave company because no suitable written warning against the practice had been promulgated – and yes, you’ve guessed it – the owner won. As Derek solemnly assured the laughing boys, “It could only happen in America.”) And being Derek, he found that the available Legal Studies textbooks were too legalistic in language or too dull for the average student. His solution, with the expertise and co-authorship of fellow staff member Mrs Susan Currie – who had been a member of the legal profession in a former life – was to produce their own textbook, “Your Law”. It was very successful and went through several editions, though how he found the time to write it in the midst of his already over-busy life remains a mystery.**

**Just as his classroom teaching was thorough and organised, so too was Derek’s supervision and mentoring of the teachers of his subject(s). No stone was left unturned in making sure that everyone was aware of “the big picture”, as well as the minutia of the day-to-day operation of the subject(s). There was, however, one dark shadow looming over Derek: the incorporation of computing into education. In common with many of his generation, Derek harboured a deep and abiding mistrust of these fabulous machines which, we were promised, would revolutionize education (and everything else), leading to a future of “broad sunlit uplands”. After a few**

**unfortunate early incidents in his association with the new technology, my brother termed computers “misbegotten offspring of malfunctioning typewriters.” The unfortunate incidents continued, probably as some kind of self-fulfilling prophecy – disrespected technology tends not to perform. On one afternoon shortly before an end of year history exam, I read out to Derek the marks each student had gained in each exam during the year, while he entered them into the computer; after marking the final test, we would then enter those results, and so establish a total for the year. The computer expert guiding us told Derek to give a name to the History file so the marks could be recovered by the machine. Come the great day for the entry of the latest exam results, and Derek typed in the required name to recall the files: the computer responded with “No results”. Repeated attempts produced the same response, until Derek’s temper ignited; the staffroom echoed with abuse of “stupid \*\*\*\*\* technology that NEVER \*\*\*\*\* works!!!” My enquiry about the name produced the outraged response, “10 HIS, of course!” “Why don’t you add T to it?” I suggested, and at the prompt of 10 HIST the computer happily produced the required file. Derek’s only concession regarding his error was that the computer “should have known” what he was after.**

**Derek’s quarrel with the infernal machines was not just practical, however – it also extended to the philosophical area. He returned absolutely outraged from a (compulsory) in-service conference on computing in education, growling that the world had been overtaken by barbarians and Philistines. Apparently one lecturer had informed his audience that knowledge did not exist until it was put on computer, thereby (in Derek’s opinion) ignoring the great literature and achievements of Greece, Rome, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment, and thus relegating the many centuries of Western European development to the scrapheap. (“Where do these fools think the facts they type in come from?” etc, etc.) So firm did Derek’s opposition to the technology become that he and fellow staff member Michael Callanan formed Ashgrove’s own LUDDITE Society (League for the Unearthing Detection and Destruction of Inappropriate Technological Encumbrances.) Sad to record, despite several letters to the editor of the Courier Mail, the modern day duo were as unable to prevent the march of the computer as the original Luddites had been to stop the Industrial Revolution.**

**Derek’s habit of plain speaking did not always endear him to the powers-that-be, and he many times found himself in conflict with “what was wanted” because he felt unable to pursue such a path. A notable example was a Year 9 History conference where the keynote speaker urged the**

**teaching of the Reformation era from a view so anti-Protestant that it was ludicrous: Derek took as much as he could, and then asked the question, “Is that what you want us to teach the kids, or *what actually happened?*” This did not, understandably, make him flavour-of-the-month, but that was a typical example of Derek’s moral courage – he would never accept or adopt a course of action he felt was wrong or misguided. And if the consequences of his stance were liable to result in some form of censure for himself, that altered things not one iota – like the kangaroo and the emu on Australia’s coat-of-arms, he is not capable of taking a backward step. (We will speak more of this when we consider Derek’s relationships as a colleague, mentor, advisor, and Union representative: the steel that lies beneath a courteous and gentlemanly demeanour has surprised many an opponent. It is not wise to cross swords with Derek with the light of righteous wrath in his eyes.)**

**So, in 41 years of continuous service to the College, Derek has been one of its most constant and gifted teachers. He has inspired thousands of students, bringing out talents and determination they didn’t realise they possessed; he has mentored and advised young teachers and colleagues with patience, humour, and sympathy; he has argued (usually fruitlessly) against excessive curriculum alteration, and then done the “hard yards” as a Subject Master to ensure the impact of those alterations on his students and on the College as a whole is as minimal as possible; he is a font of wisdom and experience so invaluable as to be priceless. And he has done all this with (usually, unless computers are involved) calm courtesy, sweet reason, and dignity.**

**It is probably best to finish with an article which featured Derek in “The Catholic Leader” as an acknowledged master of his craft. When asked the secrets of successful teaching, he responded that knowledge of one’s subject was vital, as was proper preparation of lessons; getting to know individual students and to gain their respect was very important, as was a capacity for hard work; essential, however, was the need for classroom discipline, because “if they’re not listening, you’re not teaching.”**

**Nuggets of wisdom indeed, and on that note we will leave our further consideration of Derek Cameron until next year: he is a complex character, and other facets of that character are still to be revealed.**

**Until next time,**

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