

## John Venn Gleeson – 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1926 to 19<sup>th</sup> January 2009

At a recent gathering to celebrate the life of John Gleeson (“Jack” to his pupils at Trinity) there was a table covered with photos, newspaper cuttings, certificates of various attainments and memorabilia of all kinds. In amongst this wonderful mess, I found a letter of reference written by James Wilson Hogg in support of John Gleeson when John was about to leave Trinity. The letter included the remark that John was “a born teacher.” The cliché, doubtless recognized by Mr Hogg, was never more appropriate.

Lessons enjoyed by pupils at Trinity, (Cranbrook and Canberra Grammar where John taught prior to his appointment at Trinity) were hilarious, energetic, thorough, inspiring and profoundly effective. When I phoned a class mate to tell him that John had died, he immediately recounted details of John’s exhilarating grammar lesson, given to us just before our departure to sit the Leaving Certificate. I remember it vividly too, also recalling lessons on “Wuthering Heights” during which, John would wrap himself in his academic gown, his arms in a clinch around him and squeezing himself into a corner of the room, he would become Cathy and Heathcliff in passionate embrace.

John was Senior English Master at Trinity between 1957 and 1964. He also became Master in charge of Swimming, anxiously accepting the task while warning the Head that swimming was not his forte and that he always wore a life jacket when travelling on the Manly ferry. My sporting association with John occurred on Number One oval when John was dressed in an overcoat, hat and scarf attempting to conceal his cigarette, while supervising training for athletics. Rather than train, we rehearsed the quarrel scene from “Julius Caesar,” John playing Brutus and I, Cassius.

John had a bewilderingly wide range of interests. He knew the tonnage and building yard of every liner afloat and he built models of some of them. He knew the wing loading of ‘planes and had an infectious passion for trains. He spoke French flawlessly and in retirement, topped a three year course in German completing it in two years. He played the violin so well that on some occasions when an orchestra required extra forces, he was asked to join it. His knowledge of music, literature, history and film seemed limitless and he possessed a sharp and spontaneous sense of justice and would argue eloquently to achieve it. When John left Trinity to become a Producer of Educational Radio and T.V. for the ABC (first in Adelaide and ultimately, for all Australia) his programmes earned him many awards in Europe and Japan. All those who worked with him enjoyed his special mix of madness and genius. When he retired from the ABC, his energy did not slow down and he taught at UTS and Sydney Teachers’ College with such success that students from other classes would visit John’s classes to experience the dynamo that was John. He was at his happiest when stimulating minds.

John and I remained friends throughout his life. We travelled together in Britain, Holland, France and Germany – by train, of course. We endlessly discussed Shakespeare, swapped books that we knew would stimulate each other, I accompanied him occasionally when he played the violin, we listened to Wagner, Elgar and Brahms and shared some memorable, if noisy, meals. I visited him in Manly Hospital two days before he died and clearly the tight spring that kept him running was unwinding. After he died, his niece and great nephew went to make the sad visit to his bedside. A nurse, unaware that he was dead came cheerily into the room, shouting “Come on Mr Gleeson, wake up. You have visitors.” A perfect Gleeson moment.

**Robert Alexander**