

JACK WATERFORD



Michael Naughtin was my senior Latin master and, with most of us by now steeped in five years of it, only casually bothered with close checking of homework. We had been set a longish passage of Ovid – and he picked up the text and began translating it quickly. Suddenly he giggled and blushed, then, recovering himself, went on. Asked why he had paused, he explained that the passage contained a particularly execrable, and indecent, Latin-Greek pun he had never noticed before. I think he disapproved more of the pun than the indecency; as, also one of our English masters, he tended to think puns were a lower form of wit.

He had a talent for quick organisation of data that might, in other lives, have enabled him to reorganise ACTION bus timetables with 30 per cent greater efficiency in 20 minutes or so.

Greek and Latin were close and familiar friends, which he read for pleasure as well as duty. Though he never boasted of it (or anything), he could fairly readily turn Greek and Latin verse into first-rate English verse of matching metre. He taught them on and off, mostly on, for 63 years and if, over that period, the classics had ceased to be a fairly ordinary part of the curriculum for bright students and fallen almost entirely out of fashion, it was no fault of his. At least he has lived to see them in some slight revival.

But classics were only a part of his wide interest in, and love of, learning and literature. He did top-level maths and physics, took a doctorate in classics from King's College, Cambridge, and a postdoctoral award, also in classics, from the Sorbonne. He was a very stylish bat in a cricket team and, had he planned his life differently, might well have won a Rhodes scholarship. He earned almost the equivalent of one, in time found after about 70 hours of teaching and management each week.

And he had a talent for quick mental gathering, collation and organisation of data which might, in other lives, have enabled him to reorganise ACTION bus timetables with 30 per cent greater efficiency in only 20 minutes or so.

The talent was manifested at my old school with the school timetables. In the lower grades we were streamed, all in one quartile doing more or less the same subjects, but with different teachers for different subjects. In the senior classes there were a good many elective subjects and, with about 150 boys in each year group, probably no two students were doing exactly the same subjects at exactly the same levels. There were seven teaching periods to the day and, generally, our teachers taught seven (as well as coaching sport afterwards); the "free period", whether for teachers or students, was rather disapproved of. There were but 38 teachers for 900 boys. All but two were unpaid religious brothers of the Marist order.

At the beginning of each year each student would fill in a form, listing the subjects he was studying. They would go to Brother Michael, *inter alia* Deputy Headmaster and Prefect of Studies, who would read them through once or twice. At day's end he would publish the annual timetable of classes and teachers and, if there were conflicts for more than one or two in a class, it would occasion great surprise. Generally, by the time he had written the timetable, he knew of each problem he had created and had an idea for resolving it. His timetable was the least worst solution.

Even in this day and age, computers find this sort of matrix-making very difficult. Michael, who died on Saturday and is being buried today, had an intuitive knack for it – he did the timetables at Joeys for 38 consecutive years – but could never explain just how he could hold so much information simultaneously in his head.

I was exceptionally lucky in the quality of my schoolteachers – I have often written of the brilliance of my maths teacher, Kevin Friel – but Brother Michael was a standout who inspired a particular reverence even from the best.

When he first arrived at my school in 1962 he was 43, with 24 years of teaching, including a long

headmastership of Marist Brothers, Darlinghurst (later reborn as Marist Brothers Pearce) behind him. He formally retired in 2002, at a mere 83, after 64 years with the chalk, but was helping students, and doing odd school chores, until his death. They included being the Catholic Schools representative on the NSW Board of Senior School Studies for 16 years, as well as all of the Mr Chippish things such as coaching First XIs and debating teams, editing the college magazine, maintaining links with old boys, school records, writing a history and seeming to remember all the thousands of students who had passed through his hands.

A decade or so ago he sent me corrections for a draft of a stylebook for this newspaper, agreeing, sometimes regretfully, with remarks I had made about such things as the new singularity of *media*, *agenda* and *data*. Like me, he thought that fake Latin plurals – such as *referenda* and *fora* – proved their employer to be an illiterate swine and, probably, a mountebank. He was ever a gentle and humble soul, who scarcely raised his voice; seldom had to.

He was in a remarkable 1936 class in a Victorian Marist school. Eight classmates became priests, he a teaching brother. On profession he abandoned his Christian name, Vincent, for the name Michael.

The motto of my school – *In meliore contende* (Strive for better things) – inspired him to write a memorable school prayer in 1962, to be known by heart by perhaps 8000 students since. The words, not trite as so many such things are, might serve as his epitaph:

Teach me, oh Lord, to aim high
And not to be content with mediocrity.
To set my sights on noble goals
To have a brave heart, a clear vision,
To prize the things that are worthwhile,
To always have courage to choose
What is right.
To despise what is petty,
To shun all selfishness,
To have a heart that is strong and brave,
Pure and happy, docile yet courageous,
So that under your guidance and with your grace
I may at all times and in all things
have as my motto
In meliore contende.

TODAY IN HISTORY

1780 Debut of *British Gazette* and *Sunday Monitor*, the first Sunday newspaper in Britain.

1793 Holy Roman Empire declares war on France.

1804 United States Congress orders the removal of native Americans east of the Mississippi to Louisiana.

1827 Death of German composer Ludwig van Beethoven.

1828 Austrian composer Franz Schubert gives his only public concert, in Vienna.

1872 US inventor Thomas J. Martin is awarded a patent for the fire extinguisher.

1898 World's first game reserve, the Sabi Game reserve, is designated in South Africa.

1937 A 2m statue of the cartoon character Popeye is unveiled during the Second Annual Spinach Festival in Crystal City, Texas.

1942 Nazi Germany begins sending Jews to the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland.

1960 Homes blown away when cyclone hits Carnarvon, Western Australia, with winds of up to 124km/h.

1964 The musical *Funny Girl*, starring Barbra Streisand (pictured), opens on Broadway.

1973 Women are allowed on to the floor of the London Stock Exchange for the first time.

1984 Australia introduces the \$100 banknote.

1992 Britain's Prince Andrew and his wife, Sarah Ferguson, separate; Former world heavyweight boxing champion Mike Tyson is sentenced to six years in prison for rape.

1995 Australian Labor Party wins NSW state election with 50 of 99 seats in Lower House and Bob Carr becomes premier.

2000 Pope John Paul II crowns his Holy Land sojourn with a gesture to the Jews when he places a plea for forgiveness in a nook in the Western Wall, expressing sorrow over the past errors of his church.

2008 Australia's food bowl to come under Commonwealth control for the first time, after Victoria ends its resistance to a \$10 billion (later increased to \$12.9 billion) Murray Darling rescue plan.



FRIDGE DOOR

RECYCLING: Recycling bins will be emptied in Barton, Deakin, Duntroon, Forrest, Garran, Griffith, Harman, Hughes, Isaacs, Kingston, Narrabundah, Oaks Estate, O'Malley, Phillip, Pialligo, Red Hill, Swinger Hill and Yarralumla tomorrow. Put your bins out before 7am. Ph: 6260 1472.

CANBERRA DANCE THEATRE: Contemporary dance classes (Basic). Cost: \$20 full \$16 concession. Today, 6-7.20pm. Kingsley Street, Acton. Ph: 0435 025 365.

MAJURA TENNIS CLUB: Garage sale. Saturday, 8am-3pm. Rosevear Place, Dickson. Ph: 6248 0627.

RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH: Russian Bazaar. Easter cakes, piroshki, bortsch, pilmleni, white elephant stall, books. Saturday, 10am-2pm. 4 Matina Street, Narrabundah. Ph: 6295 2874.

DRUGS IN THE FAMILY: Fortnightly meeting. Today, 7.30-10pm. Seminar Room, Lewisham Building, Calvary Hospital. Ph: 6257 3043.

MONARO FOLK SOCIETY: Shearer's Ball. Lively bush dancing, relive the past and dress in daytime colonial wear or smart casual. Cost: \$16. Yarralumla Woolshed, Cotter Road. Ph: 6161 2426.

SOUTHSIDE DAY TO DAY LIVING PROGRAM: Providing educational and recreational programs and activities for people living with a mental illness. Kambah Village Centre, corner Drakeford Drive and Marconi Crescent, Kambah. Ph: 6231 0846.

ST JOHN'S CARE: Patch-a-puzzle are a group of talented volunteers who repair and restore wooden puzzles and toys at very reasonable prices. They are looking for work at the moment. Ph: 6248 7771.

WODEN SENIORS CLUB INC: Singers wanted. No audition. Cost: \$10 per annum club membership; \$4 per session. Mondays, 10.30am. Woden Seniors Club, Corinna Street, Woden. Ph: 6292 6222.

THE COMPASSIONATE FRIENDS ACT & QUEANBEYAN: Support group for those who have lost children at any age from any cause. Meetings held in Holder. Please phone for details. Ph: 6286 6134 or 6258 9960.

SCOUTS ACT: Scouts ACT is looking for people 18 and over to make a positive impact on the youth of Canberra. Training and ongoing support are given to volunteers. Ph: 6282 5211

MIGRANT RESOURCE CENTRE: The MRC is desperately seeking volunteer home tutors in the Tuggeranong and Belconnen area to teach English to refugees. Ph: 6248 8577.

Fridge Door is for community notices of non-profit organisations. Information must be submitted on the appropriate form, which is at canberratimes.com.au in the Community section or via fax: Att: Fridge Door on 6280 2282, or post: Fridge Door, PO Box 7155, Canberra BC, ACT, 2610.