

# EULOGY FOR R G TANNER

## ‘HE WHO STOOD AT A SLIGHT ANGLE TO THE UNIVERSE’

The world and we have lost a very special person – a rare individual.

He was a gentleman, a scholar, a teacher, an orator, a citizen of the world, a patron of the arts, of culture and sport, theologian and philosopher. Thus the public man – the man in the brown Senate suit, the academic gown, the Colours Blazer, the Union Jacket – the right coat, the right tie for the right occasion, be it a meeting of University Council or the Anglican Synod, be it dinner at the Newcastle Club, the Athenaeum, the British Schools at Rome and Athens or at St. John’s College Cambridge.

And there is the private man, the simple man, the man of great humility, the generous man who quietly gave much to many, who enjoyed the company of his friends in their homes and in his home. The man who enjoyed the peace and quiet of his own thoughts, music in the background and the intimacy of books. He was a very sensitive man, easily hurt and yet a very forgiving man – a man for whom the teachings of Christ were a way of life. This is the man of tattered and well worn clothes, old T-shirts and cardigans, funny baseball hats and knapsacks with broken straps, crumpled old shorts and sandals. The man who served tealess tea, arrowroot biscuits, “gunpowder” coffee and sherry left over from a sixties sherry party.

I am honoured to have been nominated by Godfrey to deliver this eulogy. I will not try, however, to capture the essence, the depth and the significance of my personal friendship nor the effect of the loss. I cannot do it for you either. For we all in one way or another had a personal relationship with him and we have all lost something special from our lives.

For me the personal friendship with Godfrey Tanner began in January 1964. After my first year of glorious celebration of University life and an inglorious set of exam results with the subsequent loss of scholarship, I was convinced that my University experience was over. I returned to the campus to retrieve a pair of Rugby boots and by chance (or by fate) met Godfrey Tanner. He waxed lyrical about my Latin prose, and lamented my level of commitment to the prepared texts. After one hour’s conversation, however, he convinced me that I did have the ability. He gave me great confidence in myself as he had done throughout our 40 years of friendship. In his own way he has done that with many of us and you all have your own story in that respect.

We who were with Godfrey when the support system was removed last Wednesday were distressed at the effect this brought about. Laurie Traminer, reminded us quite strongly, however, that this was not the sum of the parts. This was an observation that Godfrey himself would have made. And so it is with this eulogy. This is not the sum of the parts. No, that is there with you – in the minds, memories and hearts of those who knew the man. That is your story, your eulogy.

While we are on this personal note, however, I know that Godfrey would want me to thank the staff of John Hunter for all their wonderful efforts during Godfrey’s last days – the hospital. Also Laurie Traminer, Anne Creevey, James Garner, Tony Brennan and Fran, Greg Gamadge and David Dockrill for the strength and tenderness they administered to Godfrey and those around him. To Dean Lawrence for his calm, his strength and his prayers. And finally to Dr Melbourne Nelson who gave him the last rites. With such love and care Godfrey was thoroughly prepared for God. The question in my mind however, was God prepared for Godfrey!

We certainly were not prepared. While Godfrey had become quite frail, his will and determination were so strong that we were all led to believe that he would be with us for much longer. He had resumed his regular visits to the University, he had returned to 2NURFM and was back on air. The scholar had returned to Patristics, to the Stoics, to St Paul; papers were in preparation, conferences overseas planned and paid for. He still entertained friends and graduates with his scholarship, his memories and his humour. And of course throughout all this he had recovered his love of a glass of red and just occasionally, a small Scotch (all on Dr. Levi's orders).

He had gone to Mike Nelson's wedding in Brisbane 6 weeks ago on his own and had a great time. He had come with me 4 weeks ago to Kempsey to support Jean Bishop at the funeral of her daughter Katie and partner Bob. It was a difficult day, emotionally and physically, but Godfrey showed no signs of discomfort. In fact as we went through Kew I asked him a rather innocent question about church ritual; he began his answer very thoughtfully, and deliberately; he gathered pace at Taree, drew breath at Raymond Terrace to comment on University Rowing and was still talking when I delivered him to 81 Wolfe Street.

So it came as quite a shock to learn last Monday that Godfrey had been taken to hospital, that he was in a coma and that damage had been done to those parts of the brain of which control the speech and memory functions. It is only now that I can reflect on the irony of that diagnosis.

1. Speech and Memory – these were Godfrey's trademarks. These epitomized him.

Who will ever forget that distinctive voice, be it in lectures, at public protest meetings, in the staff club, in the Godfrey Tanner Bar, at Regattas (with megaphone) or Rugby games, in buses and trains, in taxis and planes, in pubs and clubs from the Cross Keys in Tighes Hill to the Newcastle Club in Newcomen Street.

And how that voice loved language – the study of language, the history of language, the role of language in culture, be it Latin, French, Sanskrit or the language of Awabakal. Not just ancient languages but modern as well.

In 1981 I attended one of the famous Liverpool Latin Seminars with Godfrey; when it came to question time Godfrey was the only member who could question each of the presenters in their own language – not so hard when you are dealing with French, Italian, German and Dutch classical scholars but pretty amazing when you are able to do the same in Polish and Russian.

As for memory – it was equally amazing – not just for scholarship, knowledge of history and of the ancient texts, but also for names, faces, facts that for most of us are buried in the mists of time. How many times did he surprise graduates at alumni functions with recollection of events and people in their time at the University of Newcastle?

For him memory and history were entwined and these were inextricably involved with place.

*Genius Loci – The Spirit of the Place*

Take Godfrey to the hills of Wollombi, to the streets of Parramatta, to Brisbane, Melbourne, Sydney, to Athens, Crete, Rome, Florence, to London, Cambridge, Southampton. Wherever you went with him – he seemed to have been there before, to have learnt the history of the place, to have embedded that in his memory and be able to recall it as though he had made the place and written its history himself.

Speech and Memory were an enduring theme of his lifelong interest in the origins of man. In the language of the Greeks, the Romans and the Ancient Indians, as well as in the behaviour of modern man he believed he could detect the mores, habits and perspective of stone age man.

And how he deplored the loss of memory in our own times – in our knowledge of history, religion, politics and values. Not only the loss of memory but the destructive effect of unchallenged power on our political consciousness. While he inspired his students with his lectures on fifth century Athens and first century B.C. Rome, it was to imperial Rome, especially that period of Domitian to which he directed us for an understanding of the crisis facing contemporary society. In our discussions he often turned to Tacitus, especially the Agricola for the appropriate incisive comment:

memoriam quoque ipsam cum voce perdidissemus, si tam in nostra potestate esset oblivisci quam tacere. (Agricola ch.2)

We should have lost memory itself as well as voice, had forgetfulness been as easy as silence.

Speech and Memory – take these away and what do you have? You certainly do not have Godfrey Tanner. You do, however, live in hope. Maybe it was all there; maybe he would wake up. After all, how many dinners had he attended where he appeared to go to sleep and yet later would show that he had not missed a thing.

Alas, that was not to be – with his last breath there would only be our tears – the tears of relief, the tears of loss.

‘sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt’ (Virgil, Aeneid 1, 462)

There are tears for suffering and men’s hearts are touched by what man has to bear. (West)

Godfrey Tanner came to Newcastle in 1959 aged 32.

From the University of Melbourne and Cambridge he brought excellent academic credentials.

From the King’s School Parramatta he brought a love of teaching and the role of the schoolmaster at the core of which is the development of mind and body – the *mens sana in corpore sano* ideal. From this school also he brought his knowledge and experience of the great families of rural New South Wales as well as his intimate knowledge of Australian history.

And he brought a suitcase, an old fashioned suitcase complete with travel stickers, filled with books like Newman’s “Idea of a University”, Cicero’s De Officiis, first editions of ancient texts – striped blazers, old scarves, dicky hats, a pipe, a monocle, a magnifying glass and a box of snuff (called, I believe, ‘Gust of Gomorrah’) and of course he brought a bicycle!

Thus, like a missionary in another land he set out

- to bring the languages and culture of the classical world to a land that had no physical reminders of a Greek and Roman past
- to introduce the students of the fledgling University to the traditions of student life
- to demonstrate that the University had a part to play in the life of the Newcastle and Hunter community.

The people of Newcastle had pressed for a traditional University. James Auchmuty had responded and Godfrey Tanner was one of his key instruments in realizing that dream.

By the time Godfrey retired in 1993 the tradition had become a “legend”, a living treasure. His curriculum vitae will show the positions held on Council, on Faculty, in the Union, in Sport in the Community. It is a story of public service - of virtus. His name was everywhere – from the Godfrey Tanner Bar to the Aquatic Centre at Raymond Terrace.

In 1994 the University awarded him an Honorary Degree, a Doctor of the University – a distinction and honour of which he was very proud.

Nevertheless he continued to work, using the good offices of Engineering, still researching, teaching Sanskrit, supporting the Alumni and most important of all preparing his thoughts for ‘Godfrey’s Gripe’ on 2NURFM.

His alumni work completed the cycle of his worth with the University. 2NUR took him to the world.

In 1998 Godfrey, encouraged by the initiative and drive of Mr Geoff McCloy (who was at that time Chair of the Foundation Board) and by the generosity of Dr Peter Hendry (at that time a member of University Council and a great supporter of the University), gave his assent to the establishment of the Godfrey Tanner Scholarship Fund. He contributed greatly to this and was delighted to see the response from friends, graduates and the community. It was a scholarship to assist students who had been disadvantaged in one way or another. The scholars who have received this award are, however, the first “official” Tanner scholars. Godfrey had supported many others through the years but this was not public knowledge.

In the discussion of honours, achievements, contributions etc., it is interesting to note those Godfrey himself held dear. Yesterday I sat in his room and noted the following on his wall:

- Testamur from University of Newcastle – Honorary Doctorate 1994
- Testamur from Cambridge – M.A. 1957
- Testamur from Melbourne – M.A. 1950
- Distinguished Member Award – Convocation 1997
- Life membership Boat Club 1973
- Life membership Engineering Frat. 1974
- Fellow, Royal Geographic Society 1978
- Statement of Election to Athenaeum 1978
- Certificate commemorating the Award of the Queens Medal 1977
- Photograph of the Queen

In times to come much will be written about Godfrey Tanner’s contributions, his legacy. No doubt the discussion will revolve around issues such as

- The ideal and tradition of a University and the role he played in shaping the University of Newcastle
- His contributions to scholarship in general to the Classics in particular. For most people the challenge is learn and understand the Classics; he not only learnt and understood them – he took the classical world by storm and shaped it himself.
- A Chair of Classics and a thriving Classics Department that has stood the test of time in an environment where one would least expect it to survive.
- His students and those who came to know him through the variety of his interests, especially in the Union and the Sports Union.

And yet perhaps his greatest legacy is to be found in those memories and images that were indelibly inscribed in the minds and memories of those who knew him.

- (a) the academic – his gown – the blackboard
- (b) the striped Colours Blazer
- (c) the Blazer for the Patron of the Union
- (d) The Latin grace at University functions – the only grace in the world to get a standing ovation.
- (e) The Tanner Bar on Autonomy Day
- (f) Flour bombs at Throsby Creek Regattas
- (g) Dining in style at Oliver’s restaurant.
- (h) Entertaining at the Newcastle Club
- (i) Sherry parties in the McLarty Room
- (j) The gentleman taking the woman’s hands to his lips
- (k) Anti Vietnam protest meetings
- (l) Michael Sutton’s memory “ I suppose like many of you having heard that Prof was gone, I began to think about the time I’d spent at Uni and in particular how he had touched and directed my life. Strangely what came instantly to mind wasn’t the many lectures I had attended, the walks around campus discussing honours topics or even the private talks in his office, but a speech he delivered extempore for a Classics Society function. Times were dark – as they always seemed – there was talk of closing down the department; engineers were questioning the need for Mickey Mouse degrees and the Classics Society had gathered to celebrate the Foundation day of Rome. Prof delivered the key note toast and an uplifting speech where he likened the students of the classics to the monks in the dark ages – keeping the flame of enlightened alive in a world swamped by barbarians. I don’t think I ever walked away from any talk more inspired – in fact I’ve still got the chalk he drew on the board with. Even today surrounded by hunnish economic rationalists I still draw strength from the ideals that the Professor championed.
- (m) Professor David Finlay – “My strongest image of Godfrey is in waiting at the bus stop in New Lambton to see this figure approaching on a bicycle complete with goggles and florid, floral shorts and moving at snail’s pace. A “good morning Godfrey” always elicited a “Good morning Dear Chap” as he moved past.
- (n) The Marcus Aurelius story
- (o) The Augustus incident
- (p) Bus and train trips

For me – his greatest strengths were:

- He loved teaching and he knew his subject,
- He saw no distinction between teaching and research and believed that they were linked and that the prospect of a research institute as separate from the University was a complete contradiction,
- He was dedicated to the all-round University experience – the *Kalos Kal Agathos* Ideal
- He believed that as a citizen and members of the community that he had an obligation to belong and to share in the responsibilities which came with the rights of the community. He was a political animal in the Greek sense of the word and had drawn deeply at the well of the Periclean oration:

“Here each individual is interested not only in how own affairs but in the affairs of state as well; even those who are mostly occupied with their own business are extremely well informed in general politics – that is the peculiarity of ours. We do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business – we say that he has no business here at all”. (Thucydides)

- His learning and his scholarship underpinned his daily life, his values, his perspective, his relationships and his goals in life. He did not accept that definition of the word ‘academic’ which implied either ‘practical’ or ‘irrelevant’.
- Above all he believed in people; he valued friendship, fellowship and community. These were vitally linked with learning. His greatest strength was that although he knew so much, and had a distinguished record in scholarship, he could make each of us believe we were on his level. He had the ability to inspire faith in ourselves and our ability to learn.
- He was the traditionalist, the conservative, the establishment man who seemed to be forever challenging convention, cant and hypocrisy.

## THE FUTURE

During our time together in the Classics department Godfrey and I, along with Charles Penglase applied for a research grant for the study of Greek and Roman ideas of the afterlife. We were particularly interested in the influence of Homer, Plato (The Myth of Er) and the Etruscans on Virgil’s account of the underworld as described in the sixth book of the Aeneid.

It is not inappropriate therefore to imagine Godfrey’s journey to this world. I have no doubt that he would be the absolute gentleman with Charon, the ferryman who rowed the souls of the dead across the river Styx. I am sure he would be wearing his Colours Blazer and that his first words to Charon would be:

“HEM, My dear boy, do you take snuff?”

which would be immediately followed by the suggestion:

“My dear boy, why don’t you have a rest. I had my own Aquatic Centre in the upper world and I know how to row.”

After pacifying Cerberus who would recognize a fellow “Beast”, one can also imagine Godfrey’s delight in meeting up with the souls of former students like James King and Anne Lowrey, as well as with great-hearted heroes like Jeanette Cook, Kevin Lee, John Bishop and Nick Hammond. Talking (and stammering) furiously and clutching his ‘golden bough’ (a branch of the fragipani tree from his garden at “The Bestiary” – 81 Wolfe Street) he would move quickly on to:

“the land of joy, the lovely glades of the fortunate woods and the homes of the blest. Here a broader sky clothes the plains in glowing light and the spirits leave their own sun and their own stars. Some take exercise on grassy wrestling grounds and hold athletic contests and wrestling bouts on the golden sand .....” (Aeneid 640ff).

Godfrey would look with admiration at the young men exercising and would want to stop to discuss his long held theory of a direct connection between hoplite warfare and the Rugby scrum. He would, however, be impatient, and want to find his mother. There are last he would regain that love that he had searched for in the upper world.

For us, as we face the future, Godfrey Tanner gave us direction through another image from the Aeneid. At the end of Book VIII, the hero is presented with a shield on which Vulcan, the God with a knowledge of things to come (a role which Godfrey enjoyed – and which his portraitist in the Godfrey Tanner Bar tried to capture) had depicted the future of Rome.

The hero, although he does not understand the significance of scene depicted, nevertheless shoulders the shield and with that the Fame And Fate of his descendants – *famamque et fata nepotum*. (Aen.VIII 731)

When the University of Newcastle gained autonomy and began its search for a new crest it was these three words which Godfrey proposed as the motto. For him it was not enough to look ahead. That of course we must do and for one whose life and livelihood depended on the past, it is amazing how much time he spent in the future, sometimes in doom, sometimes in despair and sometimes in hope. So we must not only look ahead, we must also take on the responsibilities that come with foresight. That is, the role of the University in the modern world. It is this shield of foresight and responsibility which Godfrey Tanner has passed on to us.

Let me draw your attention to a passage from E.M. Forster who in his book “Pharos and Pharillon” gives a description of the modern Greek poet Cavafy, – who was Godfrey’s favourite modern poet. You will note an uncanny similarity between Cavafy and Godfrey Tanner.

“A French gentleman in a straw hat, standing absolutely motionless at a slight angle to the universe. His arms extended, positively. “Oh, Cavafy!” Yes it is Mr Cavafy, and he is going from his flat to the office or from his office to the flat. If the former, he vanishes when seen, with a slight gesture of despair. If the latter, he may be prevailed upon to begin a sentence – an immense complicated yet shapely sentence, full of parentheses that never get mixed and of reservations that really do reserve, a sentence that moves with logic to its foreseen end, yet to an end that is always the more vivid and thrilling than one foresaw. Sometimes the sentence is finished in the street, sometimes the traffic murders it, sometimes it lasts into the flat. It deals with the tricky behaviour of the Emperor Alexius Commennus in 1096 or with olives, their possibilities and price, or with the fortunes of friends, or with George Eliot or the dialects of the interior of Asia Minor. It is delivered with equal ease in Greek, English or French and despite its intellectual richness and human outlook, despite the natural clarity of its judgements, one feels that it too stands at a slight angle to the Universe.”

I came across this passage in a book Godfrey had lent me only two weeks ago. Ironically I was reading this passage when Godfrey had begun his departure from the world. As I read these words ‘**at a slight angle to the universe**’, I thought, at last I have found the most appropriate description of Ronald Godfrey Tanner.

Years ago, when I finished my doctorate, I acknowledged Godfrey’s role as supervisor with the tribute – guide, philosopher and friend. I could not have predicted then how prophetic that description would become. I shall miss his friendship and those great moments in time when we could quietly discuss the world, people and our favourite pieces of Greek and Roman literature. On our last occasion we examined one of Martial’s poems and in view of the last line it too seemed rather prophetic:

“Vitam quae faciunt beatiorem,  
iucundissime Martialis, haec sunt:  
res non parta labore sed relictā;  
non ingratus ager, focus perennis;  
lis numquam, toga rara, mens quieta;  
vires ingenuae, salubre corpus;  
prudens simplicitas, pares amici,  
convictus facilis, sine arte mensa;  
nox non ebria sed soluta curis,  
non tristis torus et tamen pudicus;  
somnus qui faciat breves tenebras;  
quod sis esse velis nihilque malis;  
summum nec metuas diem nec optes.”

The things that make life happier, most genial  
Martial, are these: means not acquired by labour,  
but bequeathed; fields not unkindly, an ever blazing  
hearth; no lawsuit, the toga seldom worn, a quiet  
mind; a free man's strength, a healthy body;  
frankness with tact, congenial friends, good-natured  
guests, a board plainly spread; nights not spent  
in wine, but freed from cares, a wife not prudish  
and yet pure; sleep such as makes the darkness  
brief: be content with what you are, and wish  
no change; nor dread your last day, nor long  
for it.

# Emeritus Professor Godfrey Tanner

## Curriculum Vitae Summary

Born, Ronald Godfrey Tanner, on 24<sup>th</sup> September 1927 in Brisbane.

1945	Matriculated from Melbourne Grammar School
1946 – 48	University of Melbourne Undergraduate
April 1949	Graduated BA. Honours Class I in Classics.
1949	Tutor in Department of Classics – Part-time
1950	Full-time
April 1950	Graduated MA Honours Class I: Thesis subject “Ancient ideas of the economic function of the city”.
1950 - 2	Wyselaskie, Aitchison & Myer Scholar of University of Melbourne
1950 – 2	Jebb Scholar of University of Cambridge
July 1952	Graduated from Clare College with 1st Class Honours in Classical Tripos Part II.
Nov 1952 - Dec 1955	Lecturer in Classics, University of Melbourne. Taught Sanskrit as an Honours option, 1954
1956	Sanskrit research with Professors N.B. Jopson and Sir Harold Bailey.
Jan 1957 – Dec 1959	Senior Classics Master at The King’s School, Parramatta.
Feb 1960 – Dec 1962	Senior Lecturer in Charge of Classics, Newcastle.
Jan 1963 – Aug 1964	Associate Professor of Classics, Newcastle.
Sep 1964 – Feb 1993	Foundation Professor of Latin and Head of Classics Department Newcastle University College and University of Newcastle.
Jan 1967 – Jan 1968	Commonwealth Fellow of St. John’s College Cambridge.
Jan – July 1973	) Dean
Jan 1979 – Jan 1981	) Faculty of Arts
Jan 1984 – Jan 1986	)
1987	Visiting Professor, University of Southampton, Lent Term
1984 – 2002	FIEC Delegate
1992 – 1995	President, ASCS
Feb 1993	Emeritus Professor of Classics
April 1994	Honorary Doctor of the University

Research and Publications: Plato, Aristotle, Stoic Philosophy, Greek Tragedy, early Latin Verse, Roman Comedy, Seneca, Martial, Tacitus, and the Church Fathers. After retirement he continued with work on the Byzantine and Sanskrit areas concentrating on the Vedas, the Upanishads and Kalidasa.

## *University and Community Involvement*

When Godfrey Tanner came to Newcastle, he joined James Auchmuty and Brin Newton-John in the endeavour to create a traditional University here in the Hunter.

He was committed to the sporting life of the University. He founded the University Boat Club at Raymond Terrace largely with a legacy from a deceased great aunt. He was Patron of the Rugby League, Surfing and Rowing Clubs, Vice-President of the University Rugby Club, a Member of the Venerable Gentlemen Cricket Team, was President of the Sports Union (1970 – 1974) and Vice-President of AUSA. For his service to sport he was awarded Life Membership of the Sports Union.

His commitment to student life was equally remarkable. He set up debating and Union Nights and helped organize the 1965 Universities Drama Festival. He was a member of the Union Board of Management (1975-88), Trustee (1981-89) and Patron 1990 onwards. The new bar in the Shortland Union Building was affectionately named the Godfrey Tanner Bar in 1992 and he was awarded Life Membership of the Union.

He was Patron of the Engineering Fraternity and enjoyed close relationships with the Faculty of Engineering who later provided him with an office after official retirement.

His commitment to community life is reflected in his involvement in the Hill Residents' Action Group, his membership of the Newcastle Club and his role with the Church as well as a variety of other activities. An active Anglican Churchman, he was for a number of years, between 1963 and 1988, a member of the Newcastle Diocesan Council and served on the General Synod Doctrine Commission for three years in the 1970's.

He was an elected Member of University Council under the old Act, 1984-88 and was re-elected in 1999 under the 1989 Act as Convocation Member of University Council for a term which was due to expire later this year. He was honoured with the title of Professor Emeritus (1993) and Hon. Doctor of the University (1994). In 1996 he was awarded Distinguished Membership of Convocation and some months later was elected Deputy Warden of Convocation; a term he held for two consecutive years. From 1997 he was an ambassador of alumni development for the University, regularly attending events. In 1999, the Brisbane Alumni Committee established an Alumni Medal in his name. He hosted the inaugural Alumni Gathering at the Athenaeum Club in London in 2000.

Godfrey's commitment to students and his discipline is reflected in the fact that he continued to teach Sanskrit and help students right up until his death on Wednesday July 10, 2002.