

My Favourite teacher

By Don Aitkin

I may have been lucky, but I don't remember a single bad teacher in the whole of my school years. Some I didn't much like, and some taught subjects that didn't especially grab me. But they were all competent, and what they taught stuck. For Latin I had the same teacher throughout, and I dreaded the double Latin period on Friday afternoon, my mind already well advanced on what I would do in the weekend. Yet I was to become a writer, and that training in Latin is embedded in the way I write, and in my interest in words and their meanings. Errol Sweaney was the name of my Latin teacher; I wish I had paid more attention to him.

It was the early 1950s, and I was a member of the A class at Armidale High School in northern New South Wales. In second and third year we all did General Maths, and our teacher was Mrs Lindsay — Clare Lindsay. Her arrival at our classroom was always brisk: 'Good morning, everyone!' Small, curly-haired and energetic, she would drop her things on the teacher's table, and move immediately to the blackboard, talking as she went, continuing the material of the last lesson as though we had all just left the room for five minutes. Our books would be out, and we would watch her closely. We never mucked up on Mrs Lindsay.

I've thought a lot about Clare Lindsay over the years. What was her particular magic? I've boiled it down to two ingredients, and I think they are the essentials for all excellent teachers. She loved her subject, and she loved us, in a patient and disinterested way. She had no favourites that I can remember, and she called us all by our first names, and pleasantly (at that time the general practice was that teachers referred to all boys by their surnames, not always pleasantly). She had a way of reasoning that I loved.

'Now we could go down this path, couldn't we? We could argue this, and then this, but that doesn't work, does it, because of *this*. No Can Do!' She would put a big cross, and write 'NCD' triumphantly against what she had put down. 'Right! Why not go down this new path?' And she would show us that this new approach worked. It was fun, and her infectious enthusiasm for mathematics caught on. We all did well for her, the poor students as well as the proficient. I've never found maths difficult, and put that skill down to her.

In fourth and fifth years (there was no year 12 then) we divided into the science and arts streams, and Mrs Lindsay was lost to us all. But as the Leaving Certificate exams approached, one of my friends became nervous about how much mathematics he didn't know. Summoning up his courage, he went to see Mrs Lindsay, and asked would she help him prepare for his General Maths paper. 'Of course!' she said, and did just that, after school, in her own time. He passed. What a teacher. What a model.

Don Aitkin

9 January 2009

* *My Favourite Teacher*, edited by Robert Macklin, UNSW Press, 2011 (p.206)