

Geoffrey Maxwell Taylor

5 August 1928 – 5 July 2003

Geoff Taylor was a remarkable man, and he came from a remarkable family. He was blessed with talents that revealed themselves early, and he had the wit to develop them. Human life is too short for any of us to properly nurture all that is within us, but Geoff did more than most, and he was a quick and unafraid student of what he needed to know, whether it was astronomy, sailing or French. So, at full flowering, it could be and was said of him that he was a most creative electrical engineer with some important original work to his credit, a senior civil servant who had significant interactions with other countries, a wonderful craftsman in wood, a fine baritone, a man who understood and enjoyed excellent food and wine, a good writer who became the family's principal historian and crafted an enjoyable autobiography, and an Australian who knew the world well and learned thereby how to value his own country. He could make a telescope, build a boat and fix almost anything, and all his work had 'finish'. My father said of him that 'Geoff has a good head on his shoulders as well as a good pair of hands'. It is a fine summary.

Of course, putting it this way is 'man talk'. Geoff was, no less than all that, a sensitive man who loved and valued and admired his wife Lorna, whom he first met when he was 15, married in 1950 when he was 21 and lived with thereafter. They produced three daughters, and Geoff invested his fathering and husbanding with the same care and thought and zest for living that characterised him in work. Sue, Deborah and Fiona will tell you about his gifts in these domains in a moment. He had a wide range of friends, in many parts of the world and of this country, and he was good at friendship. He was a good son and a good brother. To his care, by common agreement, came the task of delivering the eulogy or a poem at the funerals of his brothers and sisters. That was only just, for he was dear to them all, and he had a way with words.

Geoff was born in the Sydney suburb of Auburn on 5 August 1928. He was the last child of Herbert and Elizabeth Taylor and he came a long time after the other five children, one of whom was my mother, 22 years his senior. His father was a blacksmith in the nearby railway workshops. Geoff was the only child born into the only house the Taylors ever owned, at 150 Park Road, which all of us, the 19 grandchildren who made up the Taylor 'cousinage', got to know well as the place where Nanna and Pop lived. It was a musical household, because Herbert was a competent violinist and his elder children all sang and could play the piano. Geoff too learned to play the piano and to sing, and music became a central accompaniment to his life, as is the case with so many of our family.

At school he was, again like more than one in our family, quick, lazy and easily distracted by passions of the moment, in his case radio, motor vehicles and girls. In 1944 my mother and father suggested that he spend the final year of school with them so that my father could coach him in mathematics and physics and my mother in french. So Geoff came to be part of our family for a year. Nine years older than me, he was mostly an object of awe and imitation for me and my

brothers, but that year, together with a few weeks under canvas during the summer holidays in 1949, gave him a special status in our family. Geoff and Lorna and their family have been our closest family connections for a very long time.

I'm sure my father and mother wanted to prepare him for university, which both of them had entered, with teachers' college scholarships, in the 1920s. But Geoff couldn't bear the thought of more study, and opted for a traineeship with AWA, with attendant study at Sydney Technical College. He survived both, rather to his amazement, and in 1951, through some good fortune, was offered a post with the then Department of Supply in the Long Range Weapons Establishment at Woomera, with the prospect of advanced training in his speciality in England.

When he and Lorna finally left for London on the *Orcades* in May 1952 they were the first of their extended family to travel overseas, and as well as the first to work overseas. Geoff went to the Royal Aircraft Establishment at Farnborough, where he learned more about the radio control of pilotless aircraft, his responsibility at Woomera. He spent nearly three years there, and they were wonderful years for a young married couple with a relatively decent income and no kids. On their return to Australia Geoff was promoted, made 'permanent' in the public service, and given greater responsibility. Geoff and Lorna embarked on what sociologists coyly call 'family formation', with Susan arriving in 1956 and Deborah rather more than a year later.

During this period Geoff began to be marked out for what I would call 'liaison' or quasi-diplomatic work, firstly negotiating with the British and then with the French. In 1961 he was posted to Britain again, with family that would be increased when Fiona arrived the next year, to explore the virtues of a French supersonic successor to the Jindivik drone whose radio controls had been Geoff's creation. The long process of learning about the French drone took Geoff to Paris, the Sahara desert proving ground and Canada. One of the French officers with whom he dealt was a certain Colonel Bastien-Thierry who, barely a week after he and Geoff had been in serious discussion, was arrested as the leader of a plot to assassinate General de Gaulle (and later executed by firing squad). By the time the French possibility looked as though it would come to nothing, Geoff was recalled to Australia to take over responsibility for the launch of the ELDO (European Launcher Development Organisation) rocket at the Woomera rangehead.

On their return to Australia the family moved to Woomera instead of living in Salisbury, as they had done before. On the way there Deborah dolefully asked her father whether this was the 'end of the world'. Her parents hardly knew whether to laugh or to cry. They were to be there for three years, during which, after several abortive attempts, the Blue Streak rocket was successfully launched by Geoff's team. Geoff made further visits to Britain and France to become involved in the planning of the program, but was pleased to be promoted and posted to Melbourne, with responsibility for a new rocket project. In fact, he soon became a kind of general manager of what was known as the 'Australian Industry Program' in which Australian companies tried to acquire a little or

larger piece of the action to do with the equipment of the Australian armed forces. When the Department of Supply moved to Canberra the Taylors went too, and built their house in Macquarie, Geoff rather typically deciding to do the interior carpentry and construct the cupboards himself.

In 1975 he was appointed to the Senior Executive Service as Assistant Secretary responsible for the Defence Industry Development Branch. He had for many years demonstrated his practical skills and resourcefulness as a first-class manager of complex technical issues. Now he was in the thick of policy. The next eight years, until he took early retirement, saw Geoff embarking on frequent overseas trips representing Australian interests, and coping with changes of Government, together with changes of Minister, changes of organisation and changes of direction in what was probably the Commonwealth Government's messiest policy domain. Industry policy is inherently full of tension because of contradictory imperatives: best value for money, for example, versus Australian jobs and social context. In the realm of defence there are additional tensions: ensuring that Australia has adequate capacity to build and develop its own machines and processes, but ensuring also that Australian forces have access to the best equipment in the world. Geoff had his own well-considered policy objectives: the development and enhancement of a world-class Australian electronics industry.

This long period in the pressure cooker developed in Geoff an immense frustration. The admiration and support of his subordinates and colleagues were not sufficient when he found himself unable to influence key Government decisions in the direction he saw as best. He came to feel that he was no longer enjoying his work and that, at nearly 55, there were other possibilities that could come from early retirement. With some misgivings on Lorna's side (and probably on his own), he took the step, and retired from the service of the people of Australia on 6 October 1983.

No one who knew him could imagine that Geoff would sit still in retirement. He did some consulting, but found, as many in his situation do, that one's usefulness declines pretty quickly and that one's interest falls away no less rapidly. He developed an interest in inventing and building equipment for people with disabilities, and used his musical skills to go to old people's homes and act as the accompanist and lead baritone for community singing. Music generally, house renovation and travel kept Lorna and Geoff alert and well, especially after Lorna's own retirement. For most of the rest of us, it was to the role of master wood-turner that Geoff seemed to have devoted himself. His achievements here were extraordinary, from the tiniest displays of micro-virtuosity to large and amazing tables whose engineering tolerances were no more than a millimetre. Many of us here today have treasured pieces made by Geoff. As with everything he did, the professional finish of his work was simply admirable, and he won many prizes, one major trophy against professionals in the field.

The motor neurone disease that appeared without warning three years ago slowly brought an end to his vigorous and enthusiastic activity. He never complained, even at the end and, once he understood what he was up against,

accepted the outcome philosophically. He always looked much younger than his years until quite recently, and he died a month short of his 75th birthday. He was such a special person, so full of life and love and talent and performance. I know no one who did not have a high regard for him. He represented the best of 20th century Australia: from humble origins he rose within our country and did good and important things, raised an excellent family, made things of great beauty, and lived the best kind of life. In death, as in life, he stands as an exemplary Australian.

I would like to finish, if I may, by reading some words written by my brother Murray, who is in England and cannot be here with us today. They remind us of another memorable characteristic of Geoff that I have not mentioned — his wonderful sense of humour.

“It's hard to speak about someone you love who has been taken from us at an early age. Geoff always seemed like an older cousin than an uncle, and he always knew more, and had more stories to tell, than I expected. He was so similar to Don in many ways, and to my mother, that I was always totally comfortable with him and with the lovely Lorna. As time passed and Geoff and Lorna's children grew like my own, I gained another family of lovely cousins, though my peripatetic life and workstyle did not allow me to gain the full benefit of their wonderfully rich and loving natures.

Geoff's decline seemed so unfair, such a dirty trick played on him by life, yet he managed to maintain for much of this time some equanimity. On the last visit I made in April, when Geoff was having trouble sleeping and had been in the hospital being assessed for sleep apnoea, he described, in very difficult speech but with remarkable clarity, his experience in needing to use the bottle at night - he could not go to the toilet while connected to 21 terminal wires measuring his every electrical fluctuation. Geoff said firmly to the nurse that he had never used a bottle, and in the process of trying to stand up to fill it he pulled most of his electrical connections out of the wall. His description of this was side-splitting and we were all falling about with laughter. Geoff was annoyed with our reaction and said in his loudest voice "But it's NOT FUNNY!" - but he could not stop his own smile at his great story, so we fell about even more! When Irit and I left Geoff's place in April from our last visit I said to him, "Well, we'll be back in December." He said, "I'll be with you in spirit." It was the spirit that was so impressive.

We all suffer from his death. But it's a great comfort to remember him in life, especially in his full life before, with his handsome face, his great and loving kindness, and his lively and shrewd mind."

Thank you.

Don Aitkin