

# John L. Tierney, Teacher Extraordinary

A Tribute, by Ray McCulloch

**R**AY MCCULLOCH was a pupil of Fort Street Boys' High School in 1931. On leaving school he became a teacher, then a psychologist and educational planner, and finally a professor of education.

In February, 1995, he wrote reminiscences about John L. Tierney for Mary McPherson, Historian and Archivist of the NSW Department of School Education:

## HIS TRIBUTE

**J**OHAN TIERNEY was very different from the other two English teachers I remember — Charles Harrison, James Baxendale — and from the one or two others I had who were unremarkable enough then to be unrecallable now.

Charles Harrison, Master of the English Department and Deputy Headmaster, knew the public examination requisites and past examination papers in fine detail, followed with great care every word of the outlines in the Syllabus of Studies and stuck rigidly to suggested editions of the prescribed texts.

His comments on plot, character, style and so on were very often quotations read out from the current 'cribs', which he recommended to us for purchase. His methods were appreciated by many pupils, particularly, I thought at the time, by those whose real interest lay outside the subject.

His undoubted success as a teacher was due to his being able to get to, and stay at, the level of the student who was battling with the subject. I later met other teachers teaching that way who illustrated the point that the easiest way to get anywhere is to be there.

**B**Y CONTRAST, Jim Baxendale and John Tierney ignored to a great extent examinations and syllabuses, but in quite different ways.

Jim Baxendale used any writing being studied as an example of the creativity of the writer and challenged everyone in the class to analyse how the author had achieved his effects and then, using the writer's piece as a model, be equally as creative by writing a parallel piece.

He said regularly that no one had to be creative and that creativity had to be volunteered, so any proposals of his were simply suggestions or invitations.

But he was very severe on those few who did not hand in any suggested work on the due date. He told them that this was a school where people could choose to participate or not. If a pupil had chosen not to participate then he as a teacher would exercise the choice he had and would not have that pupil in his class that period. So the unfortunate pupil was stood out in the corridor.

After a week or two of this, all pupils got the message and handed in something, whether original

or copied. He would then praise the class for all volunteering, collect the work and later pass it back. Every pupil's work had a tick on it, with no further mark or comment, and was never referred to again.

**W**HEN I got to John Tierney, in Fifth Year, I took a new view of English as a subject. It came to life.

John Tierney was, as far as I see him now, a very committed teacher who paid little or no attention to trends or fashionable slogans, but tried himself to live out the values of literature as he knew them to be, and to give his pupils enough view of him doing just that for them to start gaining the same commitment in the same direction. A true professional.

John Tierney put a lot of himself into his teaching of literature, at least to a Fifth Form [Leaving Certificate] class, which is where I had him for a year in 1931. He told us often what writing he liked and why, how he thought people formed and lost personal relationships, how, in his understanding, movements in history came about and dissolved.

His voice was fairly quiet, his fluent speech very easy to follow, and his eye contact with pupils very intense. As I recall it, everyone took him seriously and accepted without question that he was putting his all into every lesson.

The highlight of every week was Monday, when he handed back our written assignments with his notes written everywhere there was space.

Other teachers used to give us a mark out of 10, and leave it at that. But his marginal notes suggested other ways of saying what we were trying to say, or other things we might have said, or books, stories and poems we might read to get better ideas of how to develop our thinking and writing...

What I carried away from that year with John Tierney was a recognition of the unlimited scope of literature, an awareness of the joy of reading as a life-style, and of its value in understanding myself and others.

## OTHER TRIBUTES

Eric Rolls was author of *They All Ran Wild* on the various species of animals and plants imported into Australia, and how often they proved to be an ecological disaster, especially the rabbit. He gave Dad an autographed copy inscribed with a note thanking him for being a wonderful guide.

Don Hayward had been a Minister for Education in Victoria. In 1974, he wrote a short piece of 90 words for Melbourne's *The Age* among 'in briefs' on 'My Favourite Teacher'. If anyone can find that article on the web, please send me a copy. In 1998, Donald K. Hayward and Brian J. Caldwell co-authored *The future of Schools: Lessons from Reform of Public Education*.

Father James Tierney



## Comment on his father by Father James Tierney

**J**OHN TIERNEY (1892-1972), my father, named me 'James' — or 'Jim' for short — after his colleague and best friend, Jimmy Baxendale, who was killed in a tram smash just before I was born in 1935.

I well remember Dad's insistence that a teacher owed it to his pupils to read carefully every word they wrote.

His written comments on his pupils' written work always began with SOMETHING ENCOURAGING and only then went on to the VERY NECESSARY CRITICISMS.

In his concluding years as a teacher, in the late 1940s, until his retirement in 1951, Dad, in his capacity as English Master at Homebush Boys' High School, would assign to himself the 'dud' classes such as 3E.

These boys were doing their final year of schooling for the Intermediate Certificate. Most of them would go into trade courses at the Technical College, mainly in evening classes. Dad himself did some teaching at 'Tech', which has now mutated to TAFE, Technical and Further Education.

Dad thrived on doing something with those whom no one else wanted to teach. And he assigned the brighter classes to the younger teachers to give them the chance to prove their mettle.

He had a fascinating technique for classes such as 3E. On their first day together he would remind them they would be leaving school at the end of the year and so he had decided not to bother them with any work...

When the cheers subsided he pointed out that, as attendance at class was compulsory, he intended filling in time by reading them some interesting stories. It would be entertaining, he said.

In the outcome, they turned out what for them was quality work, including written work. They realized they had been *conned* but they didn't mind.

Dad had never wanted to be a teacher. He longed to be a farmer. Growing up on a small holding of about 80 acres at Eurunderee, a locality north of Mudgee, he would have liked to stay there.

He was the youngest of ten of whom seven survived infancy. One of the earlier children who died had also been named John, which was after their father, John Tierney, 1838-1891.

But it didn't pay its way. They were so poor they couldn't afford kerosene or even candles, and managed at night on slush lamps, burning a smoky flame from animal fat in a saucer, saved from the cooking. So they joined the exodus from rural life into the city, where he supported his aging mother (1854-1927) by becoming a teacher, first in primary, then secondary, and later tertiary teaching.

Only in retirement, 1951-1972, was he 'back on a farm' growing lots of vegetables and at least 80 orange trees on our four fifths of an acre at Beecroft.

### IMITATION

**S**UBSEQUENTLY, in the early 1970s, I used a kindred Strick (technique?) with my Year 8 boys in a Catholic 'Scripture' class at the State high school in Ryde parish.

Towards the end of a term I announced that there would definitely NOT be any exam. *That* was popular!

Then I continued, "But the Archbishop might want to know if I have been teaching you properly."

That puzzled them, but sounded harmless. I continued, "He might say to me, 'Have they really learnt anything?'" Here I paused, to let this sink in.

Then I looked at them earnestly, and added, "Well, *have* you really learnt anything? Or have I been wasting *your* time?"

The novelty of this possibility had not occurred to them. I went on, "The only way to find out is for you to answer these questions..." and I wrote them on the blackboard and handed out the inevitable pieces of paper. "Please answer them as well as you can. Then I shall be able to give an accurate report to the Archbishop. He will probably expect me do better and to teach you much more clearly in the future..."

They, too, knew they were being conned and they didn't mind either. They went at it willingly.

It was at this time I was writing *A Programme for Apostles of Christ in High School*, printed in 1972. It provided the alternative for the disastrous programmes to which the then Sydney's Confraternity of Christian Doctrine launched in 1971.

It was trialled by me and eight catechists. It proved the falsehood of the official assertion that, "If you think you can teach doctrine to the teenagers of the 1970s you're sadly mistaken."

Well, the nine of us were doing it quite successfully and other parishes adopted it as well. It was taken up by a rearguard of orthodoxy in some Catholic High Schools — until banned by strenuous efforts of a trendy dictatorial Catholic Education Office.

*Apostles of Christ* was an overall plan of 9 lessons for each of the then three terms of the first four years of high school. It was not meant for novice teachers, and in 1975 I produced duplicated detailed notes and blackboard summaries in Teacher's Manuals.

### OTHER WRITERS on teaching

**G**ILBERT HIGHET in *The Art of Teaching* says a teacher must wed his own firm purpose with pleasant good humour, and so be capable of instilling incentive and arousing desire for truth, beauty, goodness and God in tertiary, secondary, primary schooling.

**J**ACQUES BRAZUN in *The House of Intellect* is scathing on modern pussy-footing in teaching. He repudiated his popular acclaim as a 'great educationist'. He said, "I am a teacher. An education is far too vast for one man or even one institution."

Father James Tierney

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