

RIP Mick Maher – A tribute by the Maher and Dale families

Mick Maher put in eight years as a boarder at St Pat's during the 1960s. To Mick, St Pat's was not a place to hone one's academic or athletic skills, rather, it was one long episode of mirthful rebellion reminiscent of Ronnie Barker's 1974 prison comedy "Porridge".

Having served multiple sentences at St Pat's ourselves, we have come to see the wisdom of Mick's perspective over the years.

Not once have we sat down to reminisce about St Pat's with friends, brothers, and cousins who also attended St Pat's, did we ever talk about who got As and Bs or Fs in Matriculation. Nor did we wax lyrical about how the college's patron saints of football like Johnny James, Brian Gleason, or Barry Richardson could kick a stab pass. Equally, we did not leaf through a first edition of *The Christian Gentleman* looking for discussion topics on public deportment. No, what we talked about into the small hours of the morning with tears of laughter running into our beer was the rascals and rebels that made boarding school life so colorful at times.

Mick Maher was one of the deans of the alternate school of rascally behavior at St Pat's. And he was the emeritus professor of the boarding school story.

We Mahers and Dales have been blessed in life to have grown up in the company of good talkers and characters. A dinner at our houses in the late 60s or early 70s was as good as a night at vaudeville or at an improv. And at those and other occasions there was no finer raconteur of St Pat's stories than Mick Maher. He could replay any story with His Master's Voice fidelity and recount with merciless Dickensian dissection.

Mick told stories of the beloved Brother W. T. O'Malley's protracted battles with farm kids whose working calloused hands made them immune to the sting of the gat. They counted gats; they weren't punishment, they were a badge of honor. Mick told stories of a kid pulling on a Collingwood beanie in class after a Grand Final win over Carlton to incite the tribal sporting passions of old Bill, as he was affectionately known. It was a red rag to a bull, and Bill charged accordingly.

Mick regaled us with stories of "Choco" maneuvers reminiscent of F Troop. He told ripping yarns of elaborate schemes to post Cheeso sentries for dunny smokers that would rival Stalag 17 scripts. Further, he recounted stories of 'prison breaks' where one escapee warmly greeted a member of the search warrant party of freres who found the culprit in a sudsy bath playing a trombone and drinking vodka.

Mick was, justifiably, somewhat looked upon at St Pat's with a jaundiced eye by Brother T. G. O'Brien, who was nicknamed after the Dick Tracy character Mumbles, and also after the Egyptian Sun God RA. We still cannot quite decipher that juxtaposition of appellations. But most happily, the luminous and eloquent Brother came, post-boarding school, to bond strongly with Mick over surf fishing. Mick said he had wonderful visits with Brother O'Brien post-school but that the latter only wanted to know in their conversations "Where are you getting them?"

We would not argue that the fabric of St Pat's was quilted only with rebellion. W. T.'s axiom is still a good one: Play well, pray well, and study well. But the rebels were often the good sportsman, and they

were certainly the ones that led the war cry when the footy team or the rowers needed rallying. And rebels usually have more going on upstairs, anyway. After all, the American Republic was founded by rebels. The eight-hour working day was ushered in by Aussie working rebels.

Mick was a natural athlete. He could keep up with the school's athletics team distance runners around Lake Wendouree, even when he stopped for a smoke at View Point and another at Lake View. He was not a model student at school. Mick preferred to swat over Parade magazine and to dream his way through night study with the aid of some narcotic. But he had the brains to pass irrespective.

Based on experience with our nephew who attended St Pat's in the 1980s, the school had moved toward a policy of purging the characters. That seemed to us at the time as likely to mint a class of vanilla upward strivers and blancmange high priests of the meritocracy. Mick would not have lasted five minutes in a school like that.

And had that policy been prevalent in the 1960s, we would not have had the pleasure of Mick's affectionate reminiscences of St Pat's over the years. In fact, we might not have thought or talked much about the school at all.

But we did talk affectionately about St Pat's. We laughed at Mick's rebellious pluck when asked to rehearse for the school choir and he sang the Julie London Marlboro song to frieres who were trying to extinguish smoking. Mick once told the story of the start of a new year at St Pat's when the headmaster gave a spirited Baptist-like sermon on the evils of smoking, asking the new students "Well, what's it going to be: are you going to burn them slowly, or do we all burn them quickly in the school incinerator?" We asked Mick how did the kids respond. He said: "We went straight down to the main dunny for a quiet smoke to consider his proposal."

After St Pat's, Mick had a career as a Banker with the Commonwealth Bank. He took so much time off from the bank that we once accused him of embezzling annual leave. Mick married a lovely woman, Sharon, and adopted his once-wife's son, Christian, a good young man. Sadly, they divorced.

Mick fished. He talked. He watched TV. And he smoked. That was Mick Maher. A hilarious rascal, who lived by a Marlboro sword and died by it.

We'll remember Mick's wit and elocution. No one can tell his stories now; not the way he could.

We hope for Mick's sake that there are ashtrays in heaven. And some fishing holes. A TV with the cricket on wouldn't hurt either.

May he rest in peace.

- *The Maher and Dale families.*