

**PATRIOTISM, SQUARE PEGS AND ROUND HOLES - Yallourn High School in the 1950s and 1960s by Stefan Tomasz YHS 1957**



*Picture Theatre dressed up for the Queen's Visit - 1954*

There were two contributions to the June 2007 edition of the YOGA Newsletter which caught my eye back then. One was from John Lewis, the other from John Goold. While both of them were 2-3 years ahead of me at Primary and Secondary school, their reflections resonated.

Not surprisingly, they were about their remembrances of our beloved Yallourn High and it got me to thinking about my own time there between 1957 and 1963.

Firstly there were John Goold's remembrances of the lining up, marching to British Imperial army music (and probably some of Souza as well), flag waving, saluting the flag and the general martial air of it all, was much as I remember it. However, for years I always thought we said:

*I love God and my country,*

*I honour the flag*

*I serve the Queen (as it was by then)*

*And cheerfully obey my parents, teachers and the laws*

As John would have it, the serving bit for the Queen came before the flag bit, though I remember it the other way round. What I do remember is we raced over the last line about the "cheerfully obeying", especially when it came to the "teachers" bit!

Whether parroting off this stuff and reference to other remnants of empire made us more patriotic is a moot point. As John pointed out, it was a different era. We were only a few years removed from World War 2. There were numbers of young men wearing their old army great coats to work, going down to the rifle range on Saturday afternoon to shoot 303s and plenty of homes with war souvenirs – old shells, and, in some cases, weaponry. There was the CMF and the scare that we would be taken over by the Communists – whoever they were! A more poignant memory was Mr Bryson, my Grade 5/6 teacher, who from time to time, turned a pale yellow from malaria he suffered on the Kadoka Trail ("Track" as it is currently called) in WW 2.

Most of us from this era will remember the Coronation and later, the visit of the Queen and Prince Phillip to Yallourn. At school, for the Coronation, we seemed to spend weeks looking at the regalia – the orb, the sceptre, the crown, and the carriage – all presented in miniature to impress upon us the importance of the event. Later, in 1954, the whole of Yallourn was turned into red, white and blue. There was bunting, arches, the flood-lit (red, white and blue lights) metal fountains opposite the Yallourn Library and hosts of flags – as many Union Jacks as Australian – on every significant building in town. Unlike most of my school friends, my family and friends decided to go to the Herne's Oak siding to catch a view of the Queen, on her train, in her blue carriage, while it was being shunted from the main line to the Yallourn branch. We put up a large canvass sign welcoming her and waited for hours. She did wave to us, but whether anyone would bother doing all this today, I doubt. As John mentioned, those were jingoistic days and it is perhaps just as well we have outgrown this type of "For God, King and Country" mentality.

The other John touched upon another, perhaps more important issue, one I have not seen much reference to over the years. He asked, if I have read him correctly, just how good, academically, was Yallourn High School?

He questioned the whole concept of *Streaming*. He writes that this approach made decisions about a person's ability and future school/career choices far too early in life - leading to the "square peg in the round hole" notion. However, he goes one step beyond this to take on a sacred cow. That is, to question just what was the quality of education we received at our school? Based upon his perception of the results of the 1959 Matriculation scores, he is in no doubt - describing it as a "disaster". Apart from the problem caused by streaming, he argues that too much emphasis was placed on maths and science and there was a laid back attitude of students themselves – referring here mainly to boys.

The problem for many of us who attended good old YHS is that we look at our years there through rose-coloured glasses. It is only natural we remember the good times and forget the bad. When I hear people talk about the "good old days" of education, I certainly do not see a golden era.



1961 - YHS Form 5 Girls

What I remember is Grade 1, in 1951, spent with some 30 other urchins in the meeting room of the Herne's Oak Hall. The only things that stick in my mind were the appalling toilets and that for many lunch times there were fully-fledged stone-throwing fights, using the rubbish bin lids for shields, without a teacher to be seen. It is a small miracle that not one kid seems to have come to serious grief. Thence to Grade 2, at Yallourn Primary 4085, an asphalt jungle for kids in 1952, in an army hut along Banksia Avenue. By 1953 into Grade 3 in the Presbyterian Church hall (red, corrugated tin, dirty), Grade 4 in the Bristols (igloos in winter and glass houses in summer) Grade 5 and 6 – eventually in a "proper" classroom (with over 50 kids) near the "Office" and Mr Walton with his green V8 Ford Pilot. Then, gloriously, in 1957, after the "streaming tests" off to YHS a *proper* school with uniform and all, only to start all over again in the army huts near the pine trees, and to one side of the big quadrangle, and the Bristols near the tennis courts. This was NO golden era!

On top of this I seem to remember, certainly at High School, teacher shortages that meant for weeks we were on a "Temporary Timetable". At the time, apart from some notable exceptions, we had some very indifferent teaching. I don't blame the teachers *per se*, for they did their best, were struggling with large classes, were quite often young and/or inexperienced, living away from home in either the Guest Houses in Fairfield Avenue or the back of the Library (that could not have been much fun either) with next to no equipment and, I suspect, pretty indifferent pay. One might ask, how much has changed for teachers in country towns?

The surprising thing, I suppose, is that our school is able to boast so many successful *alumni*. The teachers, engineers, doctors, nurses, armed forces officers, models, self-made business people and lots of other success stories come readily to mind. However, one also wonders what more people *could* have made of their education if so many had not been syphoned off before they got anywhere near Year 12? How many left in that period of the late 1950s and early 1960s because one could, relatively easily, get a job?

In those days of expanding labour markets and the concept of "start as the office boy/typist and work up to Managing Director", one did not need much beyond Year 10 or 11 to make a start. Then, with electricity production and associated capital works in the hands of the government, the Valley was a prosperous. One could start by slapping paint on steel work at Hazelwood and, after a few years, call oneself a painter. Or, one could get hold of an old Bedford truck, turn it into a timber-jinker and feed Maryvale with all the wood cut from the nearby rain forests – and make a good quid at the same time.



1961 - YHS Form 5 Boys

Only those who thought they might need to go on to university, stayed until Matriculation.

Quite frankly, without going through all the old *Pylons* and working out, from any given cohort, how many started in Year 7, finished up with Matriculation, and higher, I really don't know, (based on the benchmark of Matriculation) how good our school was academically. Not much accountability and transparency around in those days! Certainly, based upon John Lewis's experiences, the performances were not so good. I am inclined to agree – based upon two anecdotal insights.

The first relates to my own experience. While I do not remember streaming as a factor in primary school, certainly by the time I got to Matriculation in 1962, there were only a handful of the YPS kids from 1952, Grade 2, left. Sure there were other kids – survivors too, from Newborough and Yallourn North, but the YPS surviving contingent, given that there were 56 of us in Year 6, was small. Not only that, but the Commonwealth Scholarships won by our group, were few in number and a couple of these were by kids from Newborough! Any number of factors could explain this indifferent performance.



YHS 1963 Prefects

Secondly, the culture of streaming was well and truly embedded and hard to break. It used to be said that 4A was for *Academic*, 4B *Basic*, 4C *Commercial* and 4D *Domestic* (also cruelly said to be “deadheads”). It was expected that ONLY 4A would move on to Leaving, eventually to Matriculation, while the rest should leave and take a job. At this point in time, a fellow classmate of mine (and those of you who know him, will know him by what I am going to say) was told by one of our famous ex-maths teachers that he could not go into 4A because he was not “good enough in maths.” His mother would not accept this and insisted he be in 4A. Well, of course, his mother was right. The boy in question not only passed Matriculation and did engineering at Melbourne University, but worked on the drilling rigs in Bass Strait, was employed for years, living and working in Indonesia, in the oil industry, by a large US firm. If income is any judge of success, he told me, at one stage in his career, he could not afford to come and live in Australia because no one could offer him the money he was making overseas!

So, just how good was the school in this era? I have already declared my hand by saying I don't really know, but I have my doubts it was as good as it could have been.

John noted in his June 2007 article: *There was minimal (if any) career guidance for students at YHS in those days, and although those who failed so miserably in their final year must take some responsibility for the outcome, the fault was not entirely their own making.*

I think John is being too hard on himself. Despite the rose-coloured glasses I mentioned earlier, I don't think our school had an academic ethos - at least, not in my time. There was no need for one. MOST of us left before Year 12 and those who stayed did so, in many instances, because they had to. Further, for those of us who did stay, as John has noted, the degree of subject choice was limited. I happened to take the “literary” stream because I found maths hard and words easy. BUT, to get into Melbourne University (or to be considered) I *had* to do French. I know Jim Dooley won't mind me saying this (at one reunion he did say: “Stefan, you old bastard, good to see you again!”) that to be taught French, by a young bloke not long out of college, with no obvious French verbal language skills, was a big ask for both teacher and learner. No wonder, for me, learning 50 lines of French poetry and doing “conversation” with Professor Barco when he came to do the Orals, was one of the hardest damn things I have had to do. While the modicum of French has proved to be extremely useful to me over the years, at the time, I would have liked to have done Economics, Accounting or some other kind of more “useful” subject. These were not on offer and while I enjoyed History, Geography and English, these subjects were also a limiting factor for both future choice of career and how well I performed at university later.

The saving grace for our school was the strong music tradition dating back to the Bartle era and thence through Pyers, Dooley and many others. Sadly, many of our teachers of this era are no longer with us, though I did chat with Rup Harrison a few weeks ago who was in ripe old age.

However, it is appropriate to recognise that while there might be some misgivings about the academic performance of the school as measured by the confines of success at Matriculation, there would be few people who would argue that the cultural enrichment provided by Val, Jim and others was a huge compensation we were very fortunate to have experienced.

I still have that heavy clunky bit of LP record called “Music Theatre – 19 Songs” Yallourn High School Choir Conductor: Val J Pyers.

When I feel like a bit of nostalgia, including hearing Johnny Udowenko shout the last note on one of the songs, (sorry John, they said it was you!), it is only as far away as a spin on my ancient turn table.

Odd to think that we did all that recording on one cold night over in Morwell and it still sounds so good – at least to my ears.