

Tribute to Robert Alan Cole (1923 – 2003)



Dr Alan Cole, the College's Foundation Master, died on 7 August, 2003 following a stroke. He was in his 81st year. He was Master of Robert Menzies College from 1973 to 1979. He and Shirley lived in the A Block flat, and A Block has now been renamed after him and Shirley. They presided over some difficult years always with great good humour and heartiness of spirit. But Alan was not only the most brilliant wit in the Diocese, he was also one of its greatest minds. With a flair for languages and with a lot of missionary experience in Malaysia and Singapore, he would converse with international students at RMC in Mandarin, Cantonese and Malay. Apart from those languages, he spoke German, French, Modern Greek, and Swahili. Among the ancient languages, he mastered Classical Greek, Syriac, Aramaic, Hebrew and Egyptian. Thirteen languages, including English!!

Born in Ireland in 1923, Alan read Classics and Ancient History at Trinity College Dublin, graduating with a double Honours degree and two gold medals. After graduation, he completed his Doctorate in Greek, and obtained a Bachelor of Divinity and Master of Theology (concentrating on Semitics and the Old Testament) at King's College London, while teaching at Oak Hill Theological College. He was deaconed in 1950, priested in 1951. He and Shirley were married in 1951 at St. Michael's Vaucluse, where Shirley's father was Rector. Accepted by the Overseas Missionary Fellowship (previously known as the China Inland Mission) for work in South-East Asia, they sailed in 1952. After some years of Chinese study in Malaysia, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, they returned to West Malaysia, where they worked until 1962, mostly in village evangelism and theological education by extension.

From 1962 to 1968, they served under the Church Missionary Society at Trinity Theological College Singapore, where Alan taught Old Testament, Hebrew, and Biblical Theology. During that time, he produced Commentaries on Exodus, Mark, and Galatians, in the Tyndale series. After 1968, they returned to Sydney for the education of their three children, remaining there till 1988. During this period, Alan was Master of RMC, taught at Moore College Sydney and the University of Sydney, for the Board of Studies in Divinity, and, from 1979 to 1988, he was Federal Secretary of CMS. In 1988 Alan and Shirley returned to Trinity College Singapore, where Alan lectured till 1994, when they finally returned to retirement in Sydney, and work with the Chinese churches there.

I am sure that most Board members will have fond personal memories of Alan. I first heard him speaking at a University Mission in the early 1960s. His jokes were like bullets from a machine gun in their speed and frequency, and the laughter lagged several jokes behind. He was living at 7, Mount Sophia, Singapore when I was appointed Master in June 1990, and he wrote to assure us of their prayers and to share with us what a precious baby RMC was to them both. In retirement he and Shirley maintained a close interest in the College. They had their 50th Wedding Anniversary here, and Alan spoke memorably at our 25th. On the latter occasion he reported the time when the police rang to say 'We understand that there is a body hanging on a tree in Cottonwood Crescent'. Alan coughed, and said, 'Well actually, they are Cottonwood poplars and they are only eighteen inches high. So it must be a very small man.'

A memorial service for Alan was held in St Andrew's Cathedral on Friday, 15 August 2003. Retired Archbishop, Marcus Loane, preached at the service. Donald Robinson, also a retired Archbishop, and a close personal friend, gave the eulogy, and Archbishop Peter Jensen took the service. A private burial service took place in the churchyard of St Mary the Virgin, Denham Court, on the Friday morning before the Cathedral service. The church was consecrated by Bishop Broughton in 1838 and was designed by the architect John Verge, the most important colonial architect between Greenway and Blacket. One day a Celtic Cross will mark the resting place of one of Australian Anglicanism's greatest scholars and best-loved sons. Blessed be God for allowing us to have such a glorious Christian as our College's foundation Master.

Stuart Piggin (Master, Robert Menzies College)