

OBITUARY

The Hon. Antony Larkins Q.C.

Antony Larkins was born on 20 October 1913 and died on 27 November 1989. His last illness was of sudden onset and short duration. But he had been in poor health for several years.

His ancestors implanted in him a noticeable aversion to authority. He was a rebel at school; also at the University, which he had to leave because of a disagreement with the then Dean of the Faculty of Law. This check to his career was only temporary; he completed the Barristers' Admission Board course and was admitted to the Bar in May 1938.

As an NCO in the Sydney University Regiment he incurred the frustrated disapprobation of his commanding officer (who could do nothing about it) by marching into Holsworthy for an annual camp with an empty kitbag on his back, shaped however to look as if it were full because he ingeniously stuffed it with an inner wall in the form of the shaped outline of a laden bag, made of Arnotts biscuit tinplate kindly supplied by one of his friends in that family. His gear was delivered, painlessly for him, by Anthony Horderns, which in those days carried such small consignments anywhere in the metropolitan area for one shilling and sixpence.

He rendered war service in the Australian Army Legal Corps: his medical condition (he had suffered the removal of his gall bladder) rendered him unfit for a more active role. Not that his martial career was inactive: he served in New Guinea and stamped through jungle areas teeming with the enemy, armed with nothing more lethal than a monocle, a fearsome ginger moustache and a conspicuously large walking stick. His use of such a stick incurred the unavailing disapproval of his GOC, for Tony had consulted the regulations relating to the carrying of canes by officers before cocking that particular snook at authority. Neither the enemy nor his GOC frightened him. He probably frightened them; for he had a capacity for inspiring awe in those of whom he disapproved.

He resumed practice after the war, establishing a reputation for sound law, good advocacy and prodigiously hard work, all garnished with his own very individual style. The Bar was very different in those days: there was not available in Phillip Street, except in the most senior reaches of the profession, the profusion of remunerative commercial work that keeps people of ability busy today. He took a well deserved silk gown in 1955, after doing a case - the Mace adoption case - which propelled him into a limelight from which he had never been far distant. That brief marked the commencement of a long-standing professional connection with the late Frank Packer, who and whose family became his firm friends. He gave them much wise counsel. In his later years at the Bar he acquired the cachet of being a leading counsel who appeared for the rich and powerful. Much of his forensic career, however, consisted in appearing at moderate fees, for people in very different circumstances - mainly workers injured in their employment. For all his clients, whatever their station in life, he was utterly unsparring in his attention to the case in hand.

Tony became a judge of the Supreme Court in 1971, at the age of 57. Whereas in his private life he was altogether disinclined to adopt a judgmental attitude when dealing with the faults and foibles of his friends and acquaintances, he demonstrated under the call of duty that he could go against the grain of his nature by being severely judgmental, particularly about sloppy advocacy.

He was a competent, painstaking (and because of the latter quality) somewhat slow judge. He had come to the bench at what today is regarded as a late age, by which time many years of intensive effort at the Bar had left him without any burning ardour for giving judgments designed to make the law reports. Any lack of such enthusiasm on the part of a primary judge is not to be regarded as a fault.

Now something must be said about the private Tony Larkins, the wholly civilised and well-read man whose company so many enjoyed and whose wit and joie de vivre enriched those who were exposed to him in social discourse or, if they were fortunate enough, in the ties of friendship.



He fell in love only once. It was a very long time ago - before the second war. The girl was the sister of his best friend. She did not reciprocate his affections. He never tried again to find a wife; largely, one suspects, because of the depth of his emotions and his ingrained habit of arriving at irrevocable decisions which, unlike those of many other people, remained so.

Tony Larkins was the best friend anyone could ever have. He was sparing in his selection; but once he had unlocked the gate and admitted someone to the garden of his friendship and confidence, his solicitude, and his selfless generosity were of legendary proportions. In his eyes, his friends could do no wrong (quite often contrary to the fact). He would defend them to the utmost with an obstinacy of undoubtedly Irish origin. One of his many notable qualities was his capacity for inspiring the admiration and loyalty of young people. Those who visited his home in his last days saw clear evidence of this. He inspired the young because he treated them as equals. Herein lies a lesson for all older people.

Tony Larkins lived to the full the life that he and fate marked out as his lot. In doing so he imparted some of his zest for life and its pleasures to those who were close to him. It is a pity that he was never blessed with children of his own, because he possessed qualities which would have made him a just, wise, affectionate and understanding parent.

He was to the very end uncompromising about the truth as he saw it. He met death without flinching. Just as he had been a stranger to fear during his life, he had no fear at the end. By his passing our world has lost some of its colour. But he will remain in our memory. The light he shed on people and events was so strong that his mere physical absence from us will not extinguish it. □ T.E.F. Hughes Q.C.