

Geoffrey James Graham (1934–2014)



Geoff was educated at Fort Street Boys' High. When he was about 14 or 15 his mother died. The emotional impact of this loss caused him to leave Fort Street. He undertook an apprenticeship initially as a motor mechanic but subsequently changing to and completing an electrical apprenticeship. He was awarded recognition for having attained the highest ever pass in his trade course.

He relayed to me at times some of his experiences in the electrical trade, notably working on the ships that then berthed in Darling Harbour and his occasional excursions to the nearby licensed establishments of 'The Hero of Waterloo' and the 'Lord Nelson'.

With encouragement from his lifelong friend, solicitor, Tom Halbert, Geoff went back to study, completing his Leaving Certificate, matriculating and completing the Bachelor of Law at Sydney University part-time. He worked full-time during this period in the NSW public Service as a clerk in the Registrar General's Department. He met and married his wife Fay during this time.

Upon obtaining his degree, and his subsequent admission as a solicitor, he worked in the then Public Solicitor's Office in Market St., Sydney. From his engagement in this work Geoff developed an understanding and empathy for those in the community who suffer disadvantage and the underprivileged. This became the focus of his professional life as most, if not all of it, both as a solicitor and later at the bar was devoted to championing and defending the rights and liberty of these members of the community.

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to Newcastle. In 1969 he accepted a transfer within the Public Solicitor's Office to run its Newcastle office, then conducted from a two room office in Bolton Street. From here, and ably assisted by his articled clerk Ralph Coolahan (later Coolahan DCJ) he conducted a practice in civil work, matrimonial causes and criminal law. Together they developed a reputation of respect for their work and were described locally as 'the Sorcerer and the Sorcerer's apprentice'.

His family, his wife Fay and children, Mark, Julie and Michael, joined him in Newcastle.

I first met Geoff when I, together with John Cobb, succeeded Ralph Coolahan as articled clerks in 1973. Success on exam result mornings was inevitably greeted with a black coffee laced with a copious

Geoff Graham died in Newcastle on Christmas Day, 2014. His death followed a number of years which must have been difficult for him being confined to a nursing home.

Geoff was well known and much loved by those in the legal community in Newcastle and beyond, in the sailing fraternity, particularly in Lake Macquarie, and in the thespian world with the Newcastle Gilbert and Sullivan players.

To quote his son Mark who delivered the eulogy at his funeral service, 'He was a larger than life character, in many ways a bit of a hard act to follow'.

Geoff was born and raised in the inner west in Sydney. His father Bill had fought in the Great War in both the Middle East and France. Geoff was the youngest of three siblings, the first of whom only survived to four years of age. His other sibling, his sister Audrey, lived a long life. She was a Franciscan nun spending years as a missionary in her order in West Africa and then as a school principal in Sydney.

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amount of ‘White Heather’.

Newcastle provided Geoff with the opportunity to indulge in his passion of sailing. I am told that this interest originated from earlier days sailing a heron dinghy on Sydney Harbour. I recall him having a ‘Bluebird’ class yacht named *Impromptu*. I then recall him purchasing an abandoned project being a half completed timber yacht of about 32 feet with beautiful lines and constructed of Canadian fir. He spent many months completing the work, caulking the hull, constructing the topsides and fitting out. The work was a credit to his skill and its launch day on Lake Macquarie is still remembered.

Geoff raced this yacht, the *Noela Rose*, often with classical music coming loudly from within and frequently with an all-female crew. He enjoyed considerable success in the Club point score. He was involved in the affairs of the Lake Macquarie Yacht Club, was elected commodore, a position which he held for many years. This earned him the nickname ‘the commodore’ or sometimes ‘Captain Fortune’. He competed in his first Sydney to Hobart race in 1980 together with his sons Mark and Michael. He competed in following Sydney to Hobarts as well as Lord Howe Island races and numerous coastal races.

Returning to his professional life he was called to the bar in 1976 accepting an appointment as a public defender. I recall him being admitted to the bar on a Friday and turning up at Bathurst District Court on the following Monday to defend an accused on trial for demanding money with menaces. I recall he won the trial.

As a public defender Geoff enjoyed enviable success. He had an ability to

accurately select and focus on the real issue or issues in any case. He was not distracted by the irrelevant. He had a special skill in addressing a jury which amounted to a ‘chat’ with them simply pointing out in very clear terms the logic and force of his argument and sometimes reminding them of the ‘Golden thread’.

Geoff retired as a public defender but continued to practise at the private bar in the mid-1990s. I had the privilege to be his pupil when I went to the bar in 1998. He was, for a number of these years, the president of the Newcastle Bar Association. He continued to represent accused persons in criminal trials for a number of years until his health began to fail. Many of these trials continued to be legal aid trials and he continued to defend those characterised by the shortcomings I have described earlier.

Geoff was widely acclaimed for his ability to deliver a joke, tell an anecdote or funny story. He was sharp witted and amusing company. He had a wicked and engaging sense of humour and it did not seem to matter to him if he was the subject of the fun. I recall one occasion, when I was articled to him, of a visit to the office by Guy Smith, a barrister at the Newcastle bar. Geoff was not in so Guy decided he would wait a while for his return. Eventually after a couple of cups of tea he decided he would wait no longer but left a note in terms I recall as follows:

From Guy Smith to Captain Fortune

I called to see you today but learnt you were at court with me.

I decided I would wait a while for your return but apparently my case took longer than I thought.

Perhaps we could go to court another

day?

I quote again from the eulogy delivered by Mark Graham when describing going to court to see what his father might be doing when he himself was considering a career in the law.

Geoff was good enough to introduce me to many of the judges, barristers and solicitors. In fact it was a bit like an episode of *Rumpole of the Bailey*, in fact Geoff and Horace Rumpole shared a number of characteristics including but not limited to, as the lawyers say, an appreciation of good red wine.’

I should not conclude this obituary without saying something about Geoff’s other talent that being his ability to ‘hold a note’ and his thespian endeavours. He had a great interest in opera. Additionally he had a great love of Gilbert and Sullivan. He was a member of the chorus in the Newcastle Gilbert and Sullivan players. Not a great deal of encouragement was required to persuade him to provide a rendition from one of the G & S operettas. ‘Trial by Jury’ was clearly his favourite.

Geoff is survived by his wife Maxine who stoically supported him through his final difficult years. He is also survived by his former wife Fay and their children Mark, a solicitor practising in Newcastle and Michael, a barrister practising in Newcastle. Sadly Julie, also a solicitor passed away in 2011.

By T J Bates