

## Obituary



Peter Chapman  
1934–2008

Peter Chapman's first two degrees were in Aeronautical Engineering and Science at the University of Sydney in the mid-1950s. He graduated with First Class Honours and a University Medal. He subsequently continued at USyd under the supervision of John Mahony, completing a PhD entitled *Some Problems in Wave Propagation*. The thesis was on the theoretical behaviour of shock waves in cylindrical and spherical geometries. Peter had a wicked sense of humour. As John's first student, Peter used to say that John viewed him as an historical curiosity, or perhaps an item of memorabilia. They were of course dear friends.

After completing his PhD, he worked in the Australian Government Aircraft Factory in Melbourne. He soon accepted an invitation to apply for a position in the Mathematics Department of the University of Toronto, won the job, and stayed there nine years.

He then joined the University of Western Australia in 1969. It was a time when mathematics, especially applied mathematics, flourished at UWA. John Mahony was there, at the full expression of his great talent. Colleagues at the time included Joyce Billings, Neville Fowkes, Malcolm Hood, Dave Hurley, Ron List and Peter Wynter. Peter supervised many students at various levels, but just one PhD student — Noel Barton, from 1970–1973.

Undergraduate students were fond of Peter and his quirks of style. Displaying much more bark than bite, there was sometimes an explosion of grumpiness and salty language, which always evaporated quickly leaving his residual good nature. He never lectured from notes — everything went directly from head

to board, regarded by most as a courageous practice, and was presented in his neat handwriting without errors. Peter had broad interests and an intense curiosity in all aspects of life, including the arts, politics, the sciences, aviation, golf and squash in his earlier days, and of course horse racing. He had a distinctive, very individual approach to matters academic and otherwise. It was part dogged, part self deprecating, part cynical. He loved to snort a characteristic ‘grawfooooo’ when he exposed a new truth.

Although Peter worked on a broad range of mathematical problems, his special passion was reserved for really big ideas. He loved to grasp the essence of such ideas, even if they’d been around a long time and were no longer actively researched. He needed to express them in his own particular way, striving always for a better exposition. As an example, in the early 70s he laboured mightily on ergodic theory. As a still-current example, Peter recently finished a manuscript which exposes further connections between classical and quantum mechanics. Another recent example was new important material on geometric optics. Following his retirement in 1994, Peter retained his connection with UWA as an honorary research fellow, and these last two major contributions were accomplished since his retirement.

Peter died on 8 February 2008 after a short illness. He is survived by his wife, Constance, and daughters Sophia and Katherine. He was a dear friend and highly respected colleague of all who worked with him.

Noel Barton and Neville Fowkes