



# President's Column

**Peter Taylor\***

Two weeks ago I was sitting in the departure lounge at Linate Airport in Milan en route from a conference in Italy to another conference in Israel when I received a text message from Nigel Bean telling me that Charles Pearce had been killed in a car accident in New Zealand.

Many of you will know that Charles was the Elder Professor of Applied Mathematics at The University of Adelaide, and a long-time Editor of *The ANZIAM Journal*. With Bill Henderson, who died in 2001, he was also one of my two PhD supervisors. As might be expected, the news of Charles' death came as a shock to me, as I am sure it did to those of you who knew him. In trying to organise my thoughts since, I have found myself reflecting on the nature of the legacy that those of us who are academic mathematicians leave with our students.

I've always been attracted to the idea that we have academic 'parents' and, if we are lucky, 'children'. As with real families, the academic 'parent-child' relationship endures whatever subsequently happens: your academic parents remain that forever.

My two academic parents had very different personalities. As a verbal person, Bill Henderson was a highly intuitive mathematician, at home in brainstorming sessions. On the other hand, Charles' forte lay in his vast mathematical knowledge and his rigorous approach. He was uncomfortable thinking on his feet, preferring to go away and think through a problem, often coming back a couple of days later with a perfectly worked solution. Over the course of my candidature, and in subsequent collaborations, I learned to work with them both according to their strengths: Bill as a generator of ideas, and Charles as a check that the mathematical development really was right.

Charles contributed in many ways to my mathematical development. Shortly after I graduated with my PhD, he gave me some very sound advice about how I should behave as an academic. He emphasised that having the energy to engage in research was as important as having the ability to do so. He also gave me some practical advice about publishing: that I should always stick to alphabetical ordering of authors on any collaborative paper that I write. His reasoning was that if you do this, the question of the relationship between relative contribution to a paper and authorship order does not arise. Apart from a small number of papers, when I have been collaborating with authors from other disciplines with a different publication culture, this is advice that I have stuck to throughout my career and which I have been very happy to follow.

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Charles made another contribution to my mathematical education that came much earlier, and he probably did not even know about it. It occurred at The University of Adelaide during a tutorial in the third-year subject 'Applied Probability' in 1978. While I don't remember the actual material that we were discussing, I remember this tutorial well, because it was the first time that anyone in my presence took the trouble to demonstrate how to approach the solution of a complex mathematical problem from first principles. Previous to that, mathematics for me had been about learning the techniques and results that were presented in lectures and feeding them back in assignments and exams. In contrast, the problem in this case put students out on a limb, and we had to marshal our resources and bring them to bear in a way relevant to the solution. Charles' discussion of the problem was an 'aha' moment for me: I was fascinated by the thought processes that he demonstrated and, at the same time, given some confidence that I might be able to do similar things myself one day.

So, like any parents, Bill and Charles had a lasting effect on me. I've always been grateful for the supervision that they gave me, and would like to take the opportunity to acknowledge this publicly. On behalf of the Australian Mathematical Society, I would like to pass on my condolences to Charles' family, especially his daughter Emma who, as it happens, is one of my 'academic children'.

I'd like to finish off by reflecting a little further on the effect that teachers, both at school and at university, can have on the future lives of their students. In the same way that Charles did for me, many of us have probably had moments where our words or actions one way or another had the potential to affect the future lives of our students in a profound way. Most of us probably don't recognise these moments and, if we do, we may not feel powerful. However, I think we should remember that teachers often can be powerful and that, if we use that power wisely, people's lives can be enhanced. It's a big responsibility, but one that could lead to enormous satisfaction: I would not mind being remembered for having helped set someone on a life path that turned out well for them.



Peter Taylor became the inaugural Professor of Operations Research at The University of Melbourne in 2003 and held the position of Head of Department from 2005 to 2010. His research interests lie in the field of applied probability, with particular emphasis on applications in telecommunications, biological modelling and healthcare. Recently he has become interested in the interaction of stochastic modelling with optimisation and optimal control under conditions of uncertainty.