James “Jock” McConnell
1921 – 2008
Knox Staff 1957 – 1981

Knox’s 1st full-time Chaplain, the Rev Dr James Donaldson, a Scotsman from Edinburgh, used to speak in this Chapel about the need for us to have a “backbone and not just a wishbone.” I’d heard this same strong recommendation many years earlier from another Scotsman, born at Coatbridge, North Lanarkshire in 1921, James McConnell, General Duties Master (or, as some called him, Knox’s “School Sergeant”). No one I know ever lived out this saying better than Knox’s “Jock” – as he became affectionately known. I’m sure he had many wishes and dreams as we all do; he also had the backbone, the determination to make things better – not just for himself, but for those others who came into his ken.

As a boy he showed much promise on the pipes, so much so that he was invited to take further tuition as a “boy piper” with the elite Regiment, the Scots Guards. He thus became a “boy soldier”, as they were called at the age of 14, and went on to serve for many years as a piper and a soldier with the 2nd Battalion of that celebrated Regiment. His service continued after WW II in Eritrea when it was placed under British military administration under a UN Mandate.

His piping abilities served him well when he came out to Australia, enlisted in the NSW Police Force and joined their Pipe Band. In 1957 he began teaching the pipes at Knox during his spare hours. His qualities were soon recognized and in 1958 he was appointed as Knox’s 1st General Duties Master (School Sergeant) by the then Headmaster, Dr Ross McKenzie, who recommended him to the Knox Council as a “Fine man with boys”. He was equipped with a grey suit and cap as the uniform of his position (he never wore the cap), and his office was the room at the entrance of the old gymnasium.

The Staff’s initial reaction to his appointment was not friendly. There were some who, with boorish academic snobbery, expressed the view that, as he had no University degree and was not a teacher, he should not be a member of the Common Room! The reaction of the senior boys was initially guarded, even resentful as they feared he would be taking over their job! The Headmaster emphatically corrected these views!

It was not an easy job for “Jock”, but he had never known or even looked for anything easy or ‘cushy’. The responsibility for out-of-class discipline was not a job which makes you popular - he never sought popularity. However, respect, admiration and popular favour he certainly earned in no small measure.

So at first it was a very lonely position – this soon changed as the boys and the staff came to recognize his fine qualities and as he took steps to be worthy of the high regard which he ultimately gained.

Through three years of night study he obtained his Teaching Certificate from the Teachers’ Guild of NSW, topping the course and earning distinctions on the way through. He taught Physical Education, Geography, and any other subject where he was needed. He also served in the Knox Cadet Unit with distinctive understanding and expertise; his tutoring of budding pipers and his substantial work with the Knox Pipe Band won acclaim. In working with the boys in all of these areas they came to know the real man behind the role, and they also learned from his compassion, his experience and steady example.

He was not easily intimidated. One example will serve to illustrate this. We were living in the little cottage at the entrance to the Prep School, when one evening Jock’s daughter, Kim, came bursting into the cottage, desperately anxious for her father who had confronted a group of hooligans (or “loots” as he called such people) – these loots had addressed Kim in the most foul and abusive language and he had confronted them in no uncertain way. His strong moral values, the protective instinct of the father, and his backbone propelled him into action. Kim felt he needed help from me, but no help was needed as Jock had dispatched all five of them with their tails between their legs (and a few bruises!)

Yes, he had very strong moral values — he was totally uncompromising about what was distinctively right or wrong – he didn’t swear nor could he ever tolerate it from the mouths of others. Both at the School and at cadet camp there were a few lads who had a Jock-supervised mouth washing out with soapy water. Jock described it as “a punishment to fit the crime”.

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He was also a vigilant protector of the underdog, the overwhelmed and those who needed help. He “lent” lunch money to boys who had forgotten it at home, but never asked for repayment – surprising for a Scot? He was an implacable foe of the bully and there were many boys at Knox who as men today still acknowledge his canny strategies to protect them. In those days one could ask permission from Jock to don the boxing gloves to settle differences with one’s “foe” - under supervision. One wee laddie had endured months of bullying from a much bigger boy. He bravely sought permission to challenge his bully. Jock recognized the smaller boy’s continuing torment and his courage. The lad didn’t want Jock to punish the bully and he didn’t want to be seen as a “dobber”. Jock saw that this lad should not lose face. The bully appeared before Jock and was very keen to put on the gloves and belt his victim this way too. However, Jock set one condition, “Whoever wins the bout will then box with me.” Colour drained from his face and he slunk away after Jock had asked him to take a close look at what he had been doing to the smaller boy who was so much more courageous than the bully. The intimidation stopped.

As boys at Knox we all have our particular memories and stories to tell, some of them true, some apocryphal and which have grown more improbable in the telling and re-telling. Boys are wonderful re-inventors and embellishers of the past. (I include myself among them). The best known story perhaps is Jock’s use of “green pooder” to entrap a “despicable loot” who was stealing money and other boys’ lunches from the change rooms.

He was a loving husband first to Edith and then dear Margaret, and a devoted father of Glenn OKG 1964 and Kim (both sadly deceased for some years now).

Knox has known a number of Scots or men and women proudly descended from Scots. Each made distinctive contributions to the life and welfare of Knox and its boys. James McConnell stands proudly among them, providing a fine example of manliness and a deeply good influence for all of his twenty-five years of service.

At the induction ceremony of Prefects at Knox, there is a memorable and inspiring biblical reading which names some ideals to value. The reading was introduced by the 1st Headmaster of Knox, Mr. Neil MacNeil, revived by the 4th Headmaster, Dr Ross McKenzie, and I trust still in use at Knox. It is from Philippians 4, and verse 8 reads thus:

"Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report, if there be any virtue or if there be any praise, think on these things."

I choose to think of James McConnell in the context of these words, true, honest, just, pure, even lovely! In any analysis, he was indeed a man of “good report”.

His memory will long be treasured by those of us who were privileged to be counted among his friends or indeed even just to have known him, for we are all so much the better for having known James/ Jim/ “Jock” McConnell. We grieve for him and for Margaret in particular in her terrible loss.

A wonderful tribute to the life of Jim McConnell is the excellent biography finely written in 1997 by Phillip Fresta: *Piper, Dreamer, Soldier, Teacher: Jim McConnell: An Ordinary Man – an Extraordinary Life*. In one part of the story, Jim speaks of his younger brother, Willie’s death from cancer, and of the lament he played for him. The lament was called “The Land O’ the Leal” (The land of the loyal or the true). It is very old and apparently not played very often today. Some selected lines read as follows; and when we hear the name “Jean”, we may want to substitute Jim’s bereaved wife, “Margaret” to feel the full poignancy of the writer’s sentiments:

*I’m wearin’ awa’, Jean, like snaw wreaths in thaw, Jean,*
*I’m wearin’ awa to the land o’ the leal.  
There’s nae sorrow there, Jean,  
There’s neither cauld nor care, Jean.*
The day is aye fair in the land of the leal.
Ye aye were leal and true, Jean,
Your task’s ended noo, Jean,
And I’ll welcome you to the land o’ the leal.

Then dry that tearful eye, Jean,
My soul langs to be free, Jean,
And angels wait on me to the land of the leal.
Now fare ye weel, my ain Jean,
This world’s care is vain, Jean,
We’ll meet and aye be fain (glad) in the land o’ the leal.

May James McConnell now rest in peace, for he has surely earned this.

John A Turnbull