Tribute to Max Teichmann

Delivered by John Dalton at Max Teichmann’s funeral at St Peter’s Eastern Hill Anglican Church, East Melbourne, on December 5, 2008.

We are gathered here today to celebrate the life and honour the memory of Max Teichmann, a remarkable man of charm, intelligence and wit.

Max was born in 1924 and his boyhood years were spent growing up in Carlton which, in the 1920s and ’30s, was a working-class suburb with many returned servicemen, Italian immigrants and Jewish refugees. Max’s father was German — “teich” means pond or pool in German. Max’s mother had Parsee origins, plus English blood. His maternal grandparents met in India in the days of the Raj.

Times were hard for the Teichmann family; they were the years of the Great Depression. But Max told me he relished his poor but cosmopolitan neighbourhood with its cast of characters worthy of a Dickens novel. He attended local state schools and received a solid education which inspired his love of learning.

A university education was out of the question for a poor boy from Carlton.

He worked as a junior in a newspaper office for a time until he joined the Army in 1942 and saw action in Papua New Guinea in the 2/2 Australian Anti-Aircraft Regiment as a signalman.

After the war, he went to the University of Melbourne as an ex-serviceman to study philosophy. I would say that the Academy and Max had simply been waiting to meet each other, for what a meeting it was!

Max found his real home in the world of books and ideas, arguments and debates in the intellectual and political hothouse that was the post-war University of Melbourne with the likes of Geoffrey Serle and Ian Turner as fellow ex-servicemen students.

He was a brilliant student and a scholarship eventually took him to Balliol College, Oxford, where he undertook a B. Phil. in philosophy, a very tough degree. He was especially interested in political theory and counted Dons such as Isaiah Berlin, Max Beloff and John Plamenatz among his teachers.

After Oxford, there were various research and academic appointments. While in England, he became actively involved in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) movement and was an Aldermaston March veteran.

He returned to Australia in 1964 to take up an appointment in the department of politics at Monash University where he was to remain for the next 25 years until his retirement in 1989.
I first met Max in 1967 when I joined the Monash department of politics. I was also a Balliol man and an Aldermaston March veteran, so we bonded from the very start.

Max was already a Monash icon when I arrived because of his role in the Anti-Vietnam War Movement. These were the days of the so-called Monash Soviet when names such as Albert Langer and Michael Hyde enraged Henry Bolte, Frank Knopfelmacher and B.A. Santamaria.

Max’s attitude to protest was that one bore witness but did not engage in provocation or violence. This attitude caused him to fall out with those in the movement who advocated violent confrontation with the police. He also disapproved of the demonisation of military personnel, especially conscripts, whom he saw as the victims of unscrupulous politicians who were using the war in Vietnam for electoral advantage.

Max had established a reputation for himself as a brilliant and inspirational lecturer. He could walk into a lecture theatre and without a note deliver a fascinating lecture that kept students enthralled for the entire hour. There are former students of his here today who will confirm this.

To be honest, it has to be admitted that Max occasionally came to a lecture a little tired and emotional. On one such occasion, he delivered an evening lecture on the subject of liberty which he likened, while he sang the song, to a bird in a gilded cage. This captivating performance has passed into Monash folklore.

But Max’s audience was much wider than Monash. He gave lectures to Victorian police cadets and to Victorian police officers at Airlie College. As a result, he had many friends in the Victorian police community. He also gave lectures to Council of Adult Education classes, VCE politics seminars, current affairs groups and, until only a few years ago, the University of the Third Age. He believed that education is a public good and those who can, should help to provide it.

Another area of Max’s professional life which made him a public figure was his role as a radio broadcaster and commentator. He occasionally did TV appearances, but radio was his natural medium. His gift for language and his ability to ad lib or to toss off witticisms made him a star performer. He regularly gave broadcasts on the ABC programs, Notes on the News and News Commentaries, which gave him a nation-wide audience. He was the resident commentator on the Elizabeth Bond Show which was relayed all over Victoria. I came in contact with people from all walks of life who were devoted listeners.

Max had a genius for the written word. His academic output was not large. Instead, he saw it as his duty to reach a larger readership; his task was to inform and enlighten the public. He was a prolific author who wrote for a very wide range of newspapers, magazines and journals. Some of you will remember his contributions to the old Nation Review, surely one of the best series of articles ever to appear in the Australian press. Whether it be The Adelaide Review, The
Australian Left Review or News Weekly, whatever he had to say was always very well written, witty and thought-provoking.

Max was a public intellectual before it became fashionable. He was a savant who shared his thoughts with the people through both the spoken and the written word.

I have given some idea of the range of Max’s professional activities. What of his own philosophy and the way he viewed the world? Max was both a liberal and a humanitarian, but he never allowed sentiment to cloud his mind. Max was an intellectual, but he was an empiricist who followed where reason and the facts led. He had an enormous respect for history as a guide to human action.

Max was too intelligent, sceptical and cynical ever to become a political pilgrim or a useful idiot which is why he was not popular with the true believers of the Right and the Left.

I saw Max as the eternal gadfly who stung those in power with wit and scorn. He was a deadly enemy of political correctness which he saw as restricting individual thought and imposing intellectual conformity. Again, he was not popular with the political lemmings in our society.

Some have questioned Max’s apparent conversion to conservatism in his later years. But I think he preserved a George Orwell approach to politics of opposing the Establishment, be it of the Right or of the Left, and questioning fashionable opinion. Being politically unpopular never bothered Max.

Max was a man of enormous charm, especially towards women. He had an abundance of intelligence and wit. He was one of the best read persons I have ever met. There did not seem to be a book on history, philosophy, politics or psychology, or a work of literature that he had not read.

He had an amazing variety of friends and companions, academics, actors, artists, authors, journalists, politicians, publicans, restaurateurs. You never knew who you would meet with Max. It could be a Macedonian taxi-driver, a Muslim school-teacher or a Polish philosopher, all of whom he had befriended.

To be with Max was a real joy. He was one of the funniest, wittiest persons I have ever met. He could toss off brilliant observations, wise judgments and hilarious comments without effort. How often did I think to myself, “I wish I had said that”!

Max could be, to put it mildly, difficult at times, especially if he had run out of cigars or the waiter was slow bringing the next bottle of red wine. There was still a touch of the Carlton street-fighter in him. I am sure you all have a Max story to tell. Things were never dull around him.
He could be very cantankerous at times. He had a quick mind and a sharp tongue. He could be very cutting at times, but his remarks were usually a comment on the content of character, the manner of behaviour or a whiff of intellectual pretension. But that was Max and such were the gifts of his friendship that you willingly took the rough with the smooth.

Max was not interested in the conventional glittering prizes. He marched to the beat of his own drum and, in the process, endeared himself to many and did much good for our society.

In so many different ways, he was his own Incomparable Max.

Goodbye, old friend. I shall never forget you.