

Mick March - excerpt from Penelope Hanley, *Inspiring Australians: fifty years of the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust*, Australian Scholarly Press, 2015, pp. 114-15.

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While it is important for Australian students to learn about their native species and about Indigenous people's ingenious methods of survival in a hostile environment, it is also important that they learn about a wide range of other subjects. Many Churchill Fellows over the decades have gone overseas to witness the latest developments in education and to learn innovative skills to pass on to Australian students on their return.

It is a difficult job they do. Poet and playwright T. S. Eliot had this to say about school teaching:

I have never worked in a coal mine or a uranium mine, or in a herring trawler; but I know from experience that working in a bank from 9.15 to 5.30, and once in four weeks the whole of Saturday, with two weeks' holiday a year, was a rest cure compared with teaching in a school.¹

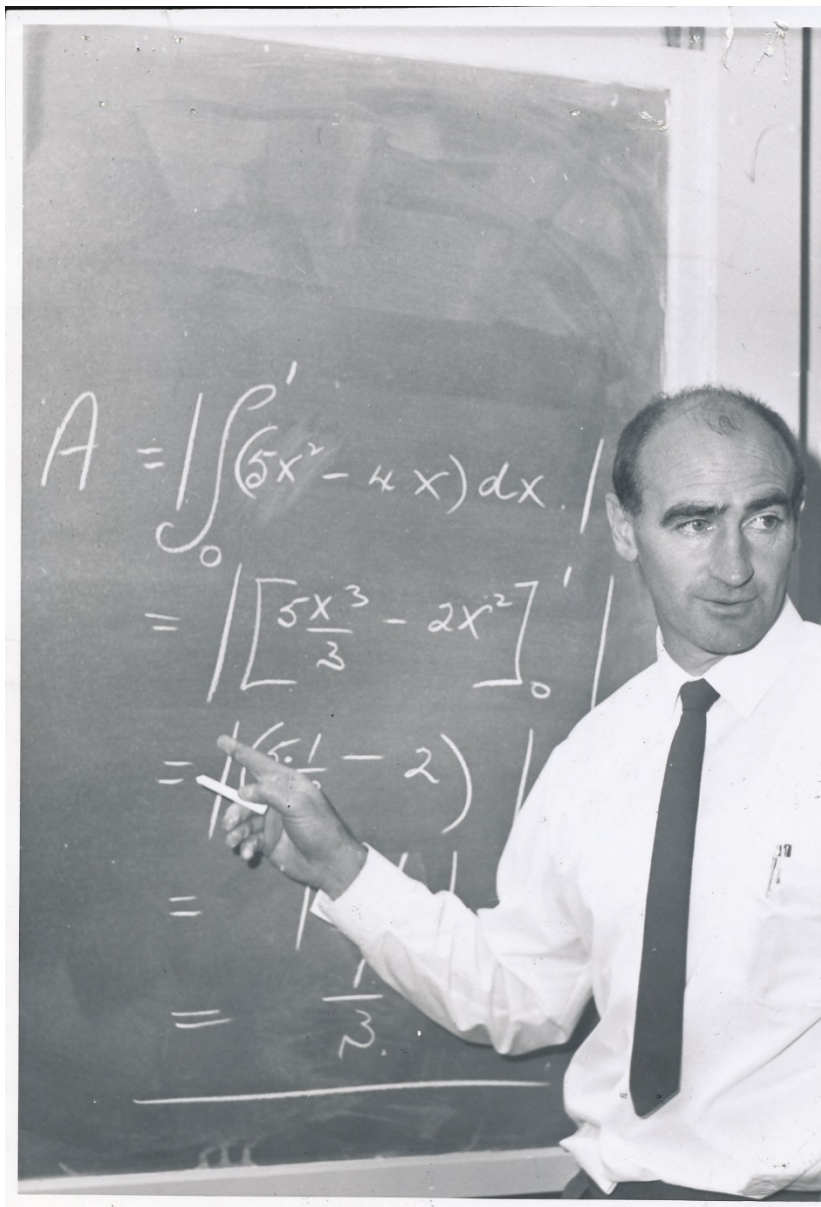
Churchill Fellows in this field have covered the gamut of teaching, including maths, distance education, dyslexia, educating pre-schoolers or adolescents, teaching philosophy or physical education.

Milton (Mick) March had been teaching maths at various schools in New South Wales and the ACT when he was awarded a Churchill Fellowship in 1969. He was active in the Canberra Maths Association, the Teachers' Federation and was Chair of the Education Working Group. Mick wanted to look at what American and English schools were doing with the 'New Maths'. While the Fellowship gave him insight into this, it also broadened his view about other areas of education.

As we sat in his small but comfortable study in his north Canberra home, Mick recalled that time when students were rioting in Paris, pulling up the cobblestones to hurl at the authorities, and it seemed that all over the world revolution was in the atmosphere. 'The anti-Vietnam War rallies created a focus for young Australians who felt dissatisfaction with the way they saw the older generation controlling and directing their lives,' said Mick. 'The time was ripe for change, and the political will was there to support it.'

At the time, the New South Wales Education Department controlled what Canberra teachers taught. The Canberra teachers wanted to create their own syllabus. Mick said that the senior students felt alienated. They resented being treated as children when, in fact, they were approaching adulthood. Surveys confirmed that the students wanted more freedom, a greater choice of subjects, and a more egalitarian dynamic between them and their teachers. Mick saw the benefits of the British idea of separating students in the last two years of schooling on his Churchill Fellowship and he gained support from teachers, students and parents for trying it in Canberra.

¹ T. S. Eliot in Dirda, *Book by Book*, p.9



‘They were exciting times,’ said Mick, ‘and there was a strong teacher push for greater professional autonomy. The teachers were willing to accept the extra responsibility and there was a feeling of partnership amongst parents, teachers, students, bureaucrats and the government.’

Inspired by an American idea he had seen on his Fellowship, Mick also initiated a Summer School for bright maths students all over Australia to meet one another in the summer holiday and share an intensive period of maths at a single venue. Another innovation was to set up a Teacher Resources Centre as a meeting place for teachers to talk about ideas and improvements. The first of these was at Canberra High School. Others followed.

‘I went over there as a maths teacher and came back and reformed and restructured the education system for the ACT,’² he said. ‘I was able to apply the principles I learnt there [overseas] to a wider range of activities.’ The separate college system for the last two years of school was a resounding success; it achieved important social reform while maintaining academic results.

As well as being a Foundation member of the ACT Schools Authority and Chairman of the ACT Schools Curriculum Committee, Mick March also helped to set up the ACT Churchill Fellows Association, still running strongly today. He was part of the Churchill Fellows Selection Panel for many years.

Mick March MBE said that he was ‘exposed significantly to other ways of thought, it opens your mind to different things, and when you come back ... you’re able to exert influence into other areas.’³

² Milton (Mick) March, oral history transcript, p. 25

³ Milton (Mick) March, oral history transcripts, p.29