

Denis McLean

Denis McLean, as we have read over the past few days, was a diplomat, author, academic and civil servant. Those few words give us some notion of the extraordinary breadth of Denis's life. That life, though, can be summed up even more briefly. His was a life given to public service. That service in all its varying forms was the expression of an abiding love of what was best in New Zealand, whether its countryside, sport or pub humour. At its close we can look back and see that Denis's life was a declaration of what New Zealand could be, and his achievement was that for those who knew him he has quietly shaped the view we carry of our country. His convictions, his energies and his standards have over the eighty years of his life have brought home to us what is best about being a New Zealander. No life can leave a more worthwhile legacy than this.

Though born in Napier he was a dedicated Wellingtonian for whom this city was an inseparable backdrop to the rest of his life. He was educated at Nelson College, one of the great schools which have contributed so much to this country, and took a master's degree in geology at Victoria University, starting that lifelong passion for tramping over the hills, scrutinising the rocks and giving a fascinating commentary to those who, panting slightly, kept up with him.

Denis's great intellectual abilities, not to overlook his prowess at rugby, won him a Rhodes scholarship. After working his way to Oxford as a potato peeler on a ship, he abandoned geology for a liberal arts degree and continued to play football. He said ruefully that an untimely attack of boils prevented him from playing for the University. When he graduated in 1957 he ignored enticing possibilities in Britain to join his country's Department of External Affairs in the London High Commission.

He made an even wiser decision, persuading Miss Anne Davidson, a beautiful girl of suitably Scottish descent who had grown up in Argentina, to marry him. It was not only a happy and long-lasting marriage, giving us three very talented children in Margot, James and Gavin, it also helped guide and determine, in a way no outsider can measure, the trajectory of Denis's career.

A succession of foreign postings followed, in Washington, Paris, and Kuala Lumpur where he had his first acquaintance with the New Zealand forces stationed there. After a year's study at the Royal College of Defence Studies in 1972 he became Deputy High Commissioner in London. All these positions demonstrated his commanding abilities as a diplomat whose easy nature opened doors and whose reporting managed a rare combination of insight and wit. In 1991 his experience brought him the most important and sensitive position in the foreign service – ambassador to the United States where his huge capacity for making and keeping friends meant he was already known to many in the Clinton Administration.

In between, though, he left diplomacy for defence, serving as Secretary of Defence from 1979 to 1988. It was a difficult time to be secretary, though looking back I wonder if there is ever a comfortable time to be a Secretary of Defence. But for Denis there was not only the chronic underfunding of the Muldoon years and the upheaval of the Anzus rift. He had a Minister whose crankiness was endearing to all but those who had to work with him. Frank O'Flynn was a militant pacifist whose dislike of defence and distrust of its staff made

things difficult for Denis. Even so his sweetness of nature still triumphed. When Frank had a massive stroke, Denis was among the first at his bedside.

By then the diplomat and civil servant had opened another window in his life, publishing in 1986 *The Long Pathway*, an account of his walk with his family down the East Coast of the North Island which has become a classic of New Zealand writing and has given its name to Te Araroa, the project for a North Island walkway on which Denis has been working with Geoff Chapple and others. The McLeans have form as writers; his father was a journalist and newspaper editor and Sir Terence McLean was his famous uncle. Denis as an author showed his characteristic breadth in publishing *The Prickly Pair*, an historical study of New Zealand's relations with Australia; *Pathways to Adventure*, on the military career of Major-General Sandy Thomas; and most recently *Howard Kippenberger, Dauntless Spirit*, in which he chronicled the qualities Denis himself most admired in a New Zealander.

Then there is the academic. After his service as ambassador in Washington Denis became Professor of International Relations at Simmons College in Boston. By that time those who knew him were past being surprised by this further incarnation. His male friends were a little envious of a life spent lecturing to classes of adoring girls but Denis's work ethic meant he spent much of his time in reading and preparing lectures, revealing to us what we had only half-suspected – that it is hard work being a professor.

All of this, as you will already be thinking, touches only the more familiar of Denis's interests. He was in demand as the most graceful of public speakers, and was for years a member of the Press Council and of the Victoria University Council. He served on the War Graves Trust and the Army Museum Trust Board, the Te Araroa Trust and the Air Force History Board and was a longtime supporter and former President of the Wellington Branch of the Institute of International Affairs and the Rhodes Scholarship programme. Listing them all is like trying to remember the number of Elizabeth Taylor's husbands and I apologise for those passed over.

But the formidable list of Denis's interests is not the real reason we have come to say goodbye. What we will miss is Denis the man, Denis whose sweetness of nature meant that he was ever interested in the doings of other people, whose easy friendship meant that even his friends' children saw him as their friend, and whose inability to bear any resentments impressed us even for the one or two occasions when we thought he had good reason to do so.

One of the most enduring memories of Denis must be his unflagging enthusiasm. 'Why don't we do this?' he would say, planning vast walks or excursions to remote places. Even in these last few weeks, walking with painful determination on a stick he was talking of another walk in Crete, while Anne wondered silently about the chances of getting a wheelchair for the rocky parts. Whether or not you were as physically vital as he was, that bottomless enthusiasm for living was catching; it was somehow invigorating just to be with him.

He was generous with his time because he liked company. He and Anne provided famous hospitality in their Khandallah home which, remodelled by a very good architect, managed neatly to reflect their welcoming feelings. A large part of Wellington society, legal, business, artists and bureaucrats, would assemble there for memorable parties, on occasions such as the annual viewing of the waves of clematis blossom surging across the roof.

There was also the chance to meet, cautiously, Brigadier, a beautiful but notably short-tempered cat. Like his contemporary the then Prime Minister, Brigadier believed in getting his retaliation in first and the unwary guest who bent to stroke him would often get a sharp bite.

The house was above all a family home. The wider McLean family was famously close-knit, forming almost a clan of their own. No-one's first thought of Denis was as an ambassador or departmental head; it was as a husband, brother, father and grandfather presiding over and cherishing a steadily-growing family group with a deep enjoyment. Happily both Denis's brothers, John and Fergus, are able to be here, Gavin has joined his brother and sister from London and Anne's sister Jean has come from Buenos Aires. It is a clan gathering, you can't help feeling, that Denis would have relished.

On the night of Denis's death, when Anne urged her grandchildren to be brave and not cry, the three-year-old Bruno said, "But we are allowed to be a little bit sad". All of us will be more than a little bit sad for the rest of our lives but there are some consoling thoughts that ought to be added to the other side of the scales. Denis's public contributions have left an enduring mark on the country he loved, but his intelligence, energy and humanity have left an even larger imprint on all those who were lucky enough to encounter him. That is worth keeping in mind as we say farewell to him today. For, as the poet says, Death he taketh all away, but this he cannot take.
