

TRIBUTE TO MICHAEL BRUCE TAGGART  
1955 – 2009



*The measure of a man  
Rests not on how long he lived  
Or even what he achieved,  
which may be greater or lesser,  
But on how well those who knew him  
Tell his story*

*Whaia te iti kahurangi: me tuohu koe he maunga teitei*  
Pursue that which is beyond you: bow only to lofty mountains

## Mike Taggart – teacher, colleague and friend

*Dr Nin Tomas*

Mike Taggart was a big man with a kind heart. But in the classroom he could be a tyrant. The faded denims, running shoes and sweaty T-shirt were thin disguise for a physical giant who made no apology for his pursuit of excellence. Mike taught me Contract Law in the mid 80s. I remember spending 4 classes on Mistake, at the end of which I still had no clue what he was on about (it had something to do with oats). I and the other students had, nevertheless, by then long succumbed to his arm-swinging, bug-eyed, enthusiasm as he became increasingly heated over some point. Classes had a predictable (to some of us anyway) format. 10 minutes telling us that he really knew nothing much about the particular aspect of Contract he was teaching; another 10 minutes or so detailing what made the entire subject unclear; 20 minutes explaining how issues might or had been addressed doctrinally; and the rest of the time disassembling articles that erudite others had no doubt spent hours pondering over before finally putting pen to paper. Only the bravest students, who the rest of us secretly derided as already knowing the answers anyway and just showing off, asked questions. I remember sitting in the front row and whispering to my neighbour, “what happened to Representation?” Mike overheard, and quick as a flash responded, “Yeah, tell me, where was I during the 4 classes I just missed on *Mis*-representation?” All the more embarrassing because I had attended every single class. I am not sure whether it was the lesson he intended to teach, but I learned from Mike that to *clearly articulate what you do not understand and what does not fit*, is far more important than blindly following established pathways.

Later on, as a colleague, I realised that my first impression of Mike was actually accurate. He gave no quarter in any intellectual debate, although he insisted he was a realist and thinking too much about principles could drive you crazy. But his in-house wardrobe did improve after he became Dean. He bought a “good” suit for “official” wear, which he kept in his office and took off as soon as events were over. Dancing, however, was not one of his strong points. Moreover, despite his extended decanal wardrobe, the sight of a sweating, helmeted, Mike, carrying his bike up three flights of stairs in consideration of other lift-users, after riding in from Mount Albert in the morning, was not an uncommon sight. If the phone went soon after, or students were waiting for him, that condition could persist for some time while he sorted out their needs first, before his own.

There were other aspects to Mike Taggart that I and his other colleagues knew and loved. Mike the family man, who carried Nicky and the kids in his heart wherever he went and always talked about them; Mike the mother hen, protecting anyone he thought was getting a rough deal and making sure he or she got a chance; Mike the funny man who laughed longer and louder than anyone else because he actually did get the joke, but always added several nuances of his own; Mike the big kid who liked to play – and to win – even if he was playing with other, *real* kids.

In 1996, I spent several weeks with Mike, Nicky and the kids in Saskatoon, Canada. It was my son Inia’s first experience of staying with people who were not his own relatives, for any length of time. The kids “jelled” in the unorchestrable way that kids sometimes do, and it was the beginning of a friendship based on “wedgying”, and practical jokes that often ended in tears, tantrums and self-imposed solitude. During this period we spent time at Thunderchild (Indian) Reserve with Trish Monture and her family. Mike helped build a Mike-sized hitching rail, we all learned

how to make dream-catchers, watched the northern lights over a bonfire, sang songs, paddled Indian canoes on the lake and watched some beavers making their house. Katie, Trish's youngest girl who was only about 3 then, was very mindful of the "mo'kitos" (which were enormous by any standard) and kept a keen eye out for any that might be about to land on her new friends and bite them. It was a happy time.

The Taggarts are fond of practical jokes. One of Mike's favourite tricks was, whenever he ate a creamy dessert and there was a likely sucker around, to insist that his cream was slightly off. He would delicately sniff the cream on his spoon, cringe, and then ask the unwary recipient of his intended prank whether their dessert was all right. At some point, after a bit more to-and-froing, the other person would always be suckered into leaning over and sniffing Mike's cream-filled spoon. Once they were up close and focused, his spoon would "slip" and he would roar with laughter as they snorted in shock through a cream-covered nose. Clever variations of approach could catch the same person several times. He got me at least twice.

The weetbix eating contest, therefore, was some form of recompense. Mike had it on good authority (either from his brother or his rugby mates) that no one could eat 8 dry weetbix in one go. During dinner one evening, Inia, now in his 20s, insisted that he would do it for \$20. Mike agreed, brought out the weetbix and his wallet, and then watched in disbelief as Inia chomped his way through the 8 weetbix, non-stop. Only after Mike's \$20 was safely in his pocket was it revealed that paying Inia to eat weetbix was like throwing Brer Rabbit into the briar patch. Additionally, at Med School he had learnt how to keep his saliva pumping throughout. Never gracious in defeat, a while afterwards an anonymous post-it, in familiar handwriting, turned up in my law school mailbox. Attached to a Craccum photograph of a saggy-eyed, under-the-weather Inia at a university student Ball, it simply read, "is there a doctor in the house?"

We farewelled Mike at the University Chapel, on Saturday, 22nd August 2009. Throughout the service, I could not help thinking how proud he would be watching Nicky and the kids from his new vantage point, and how fortunate each of us is to have shared different aspects of his life. As a Faculty, we could compile a book of "Mike" stories of all kinds. These are just mine.

One of the truly endearing qualities of Mike Taggart is that he never ever really twigged to just how brilliant he was, he just kept striving to be good. Neither did he truly appreciate the extent of the love and esteem his colleagues have always had for him, or the unmendable tear in the wairua of the Law School that his leaving would create. Some people are not expendable – Mike was the heart of Auckland Law School – we are making do without him but the gap remains.

3 days after Mike died, Katie Monture-Okanee, beautiful little Indian dancer, also passed away, aged 16. It is some comfort to know that she has Mike to guide her on the other side, and that he will have her to swish mo'kitos for him and finally, maybe, teach him that white men *can* dance real good.

*Na reira, haere atu ra e te rangatira, haere ki te hono wairua, ki te ukaipo o nga tangata katoa. Mau e tiaki to matou kotiro i tera tua o te arai. Noho kouruatahi i to kourua takotoranga. Haere, haere, haere atu ra.*



With Katie swishing mo'kitos at Thunderchild Reserve 1996 – photo Nin Tomas



After the weetbix contest in 2003 – photo Nicky Taggart