

# A Tribute to Br David O'Neill R.I.P

[Br Damian Roe](#)

We are gathered here today to honour the memory and life of Brother David; a warm man and a doer; well respected and loved by a multitude of relations, friends and past pupils. The presence of so many of you here is witness to that fact.

Chief among those present are his relatives, his special dear ones. One of you wrote "During the whole of our lives Uncle Jack has been our support, sounding board and very good friend, never judging and always being there for us. Our Uncle had a great knack of getting you to offer to do outrageous things. We will miss him enormously but individually we all have wonderful memories of our very special Uncle.

John O'Neill was born in Aberavon, the fourth in a family of six children and we who lived with him know how strongly Welsh he was. It was a wonderfully happy family and staunchly Catholic. Much of sport in his teaching life was centred on training soccer teams but we realised that underneath his main love was rugby, the Welsh rugby team in particular.

One of our earlier memories of the O'Neill family and their love and affection for their brother was the trophy they made which was dedicated to St Joseph's College. The O'Neill Trophy was presented to the winning House each year at Sports Day."

In 1928 a Frenchman, Brother Firme, came to John's school, St Joseph's school, on a roving recruiter's mission, and persuaded John that he was cut out and meant by God to spend his life as a De La Salle Brother. In the summer of 1930 he left home to go to the Brothers' preparatory novitiate in Guernsey, to Les Vauxbelets where he spent the rest of his boyhood happily among French and English like-minded youngsters. The life was hard yet John enjoyed it; the studies, the prayer life and the abundant sport and swimming. At age 16, John travelled to Dover to Castlemount to a lovely big house situated in the shadow of Dover Castle and overlooking Dover harbour. This was the Brothers' novitiate. There on 16<sup>th</sup> October 1934 he became Brother David Joseph. But within three months a letter came from Belgium to say there was already a Brother David Joseph living in South America and so we knew him from then on as Brother David Vincent.

Following three years of religious and secular study at Castlemount Brother David began his teaching career with 10 and 11 year olds at St Joseph's

College, Beulah Hill. He loved school involvement and carried this on for the next fifty-four years. When the war came St Joseph's lost its drill instructor. David's skill on the sports field had been noticed and he was asked to take over in the recently built gymnasium and to look after Physical Education and Games. And that is how I met him when I in turn came to teach at Beulah Hill.

They were busy times for David. David was a doer. While at Beulah he founded the International Catholic Schools Sports Confederation that has survived to this day and he accompanied the English football team to play in France. David had close contact with the English Football Association, particularly with Walter Winterbottom who chose St Joseph's boys to present a film on football coaching facilities. A spin-off was the obtaining of complementary tickets to Wembley. David approached Surrey cricket and arranged a match against Battersea Salesians at the Oval; a match that David was disappointed to lose. A major event for David every year was organising 'Sports Day', attended by over 2,000 spectators. When he obtained the services of George Smith to take over the gymnastics David was released back to classroom teaching.

Every one of the Brothers' English communities appreciated David's strengths and wanted to profit from them; and during his life David moved around among a number of schools. St John's Southsea obtained his services in 1948. At St John's David started in the Spanish department and helped with games as required. The sea was a mere ten minutes away and David had the joy of dashing down to the water straight after afternoon lessons. And rowing was added to David's activities. One St John's boy wrote: "My personal favourite has to be Brother David. He was an amazing teacher who always looked out for the underdog."

When his co-novice, Brother Richard, was appointed Brother Director in Jersey, Richard obtained David's transfer in 1951 to teach and look after discipline in our school in Jersey. Here David was in a very homely community of just four Brothers. He served in turn as bursar, master of discipline and sportsmaster and was pleased when he reintroduced school uniform at De La Salle Jersey.

After six years he was back at Beulah Hill, this time as head of boarding and discipline while teaching history. His football interests brought him in contact with Stanley Matthews and I was one of those able to use free tickets that David obtained for interna-

tionals and Cup Finals at Wembley. Uncle Jack loved his holidays at home and the family account says: "In the long sunny summers there were fabulous 'summer outings'. Terry's camping stove was commissioned so that fresh tea could be brewed and the sisters in law would provide a picnic which included all their specialities. There were copious amounts of hearty fare which would have set the heart alight of any self-respecting De la Salle Brother. Uncle Jack did not let the side down! He offended none of the ladies as he ensured he had at least one portion of everything."

Then in 1962 St Michael's Training College in Malta obtained David's services for ten years as Senior Lecturer in English and as master in charge of sport. Stan Matthews was also in Malta at that time and David was fond of relating the games where he played alongside Stan. At St Michael's David was editor of the magazine, *The Michaelian*. One of his editorials has "Parents have by nature the right to instruct their children; but they have also the duty to ensure that the child's education and training shall conform to the purpose for which God gave them their offspring."

In Malta he kept up his involvement in sport running soccer, hockey and swimming. At the same time he produced annual College Plays and controlled the language laboratory. He was a good member of St Michael's team and supporter of the Brothers' and staff association. Competence, thoroughness and dedication is the tribute paid to him when he left St Michael's after ten years, which goes on to add: "It was with deep regret that we said goodbye to Brother David who had worked in Malta at the Training College for ten years. It is true to say that St Michael's will never be the same now that he has left us. More than one section of College life will be the poorer. In sport the long tradition of having Brothers playing in the various teams has been terminated with his departure. The literary and drama activities have been struck a serious blow and it will be hard to find a devoted replacement who will have to his credit the production of so many operettas and plays. As if all this were not enough to keep a man busy he looked after the hall of residence called so aptly David Block; he saw to the catering and managed into the bargain to do his good share of lecturing and was a jolly good confrere in community. Everything that he touched was marked by the hallmark of efficiency. Many thanks for all you did, Brother David: Malta's great loss is Beulah's gain!"

In 1971 the Brothers planned the opening of a Catholic day school in Basildon and the Brother Superior told Brother David he was to be its founding headmaster. But it didn't happen, though in later years David was fond of mentioning this appointment. The Brother Director of Beulah Hill became

the Brother Visitor in 1972 and David was asked to replace him as Brother Director of St Joseph's College. It was to be six years that saw Beulah Hill obtain Aided Status. This was a change that required careful management and which David undertook according to his own views which had been shaped by his experience of the previous 35 years. He did a fine preservation and initiating job.

1978 brought a year which David spent in America and from which again he came away with lasting friendships. It was intended to be a year of spiritual renewal at Sangre de Christo, but David fell ill and spent much of the time convalescing in Mexico. At the end of that year he asked to return to Beulah Hill in 1979 but wisely the superiors appointed him instead to St John's Southsea, where he was to spend the longest period of his life. For 17 years he was Brother Director of the Community while also Head of the Upper School from 1983 to 1992. One of his pupils wrote: "Brother David and his gorgeous dog Tara cured my homesickness. He was probably the kindest and wisest man I've ever met." It was at St John's that David took much time playing golf and he became a member of Waterlooville golf club. He was pleased in 1988 to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land of which he left a written record.

David played a leading part in the organisation of St John's Past Pupils' Association taking over from the elderly Brother Maurice. David's friendships in the Association were encouraging and could be supportive in difficult times. For so many past pupils David became part of the family and is now sorely missed. His whiskey marmalade was something enjoyed by both the community and the Old Boys. At age 80 David stepped down into the ranks but continued in St John's community for another nine years.

When taking a team over to France in the 90s David had a nasty fall. This brought an end to his active playing but not to his interest in sport and still less to the care he showered on St John's Past Pupils' Association. He had started an annual La Salle Golf competition and recently he would point out that 2008 would be its Silver Jubilee match this October. Maybe the occasion will survive David's departure. Poor health eventually brought David in his last year to his new home at Clayton Court where he gradually became weaker and where he died peacefully on his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday.

David's characteristics so much stressed by many of you are his devotion to duty, his devotion to the care of his pupils which carried on into their later lives, and the multitude of activities in which he was involved. I hardly need to speak further. The presence of so many of you amply shows the high regard and affection in which he was held.