

Unveiling of portrait of the Hon. Rod Matheson AM KC
Introduction by the Head of College, Professor Don Markwell AM,
St Mark's College, Adelaide
27 October 2023

The magnificent portrait by Robert Hannaford AM that you are about to see unveiled pays tribute to one of the greatest contributors to St Mark's College in our history, the Honourable Rod Matheson AM KC.

In welcoming you most warmly to this very special event, I acknowledge that we are meeting on the traditional Country of the Kurna people of the Adelaide Plains. We pay respect to Elders past and present.

Amongst such a glittering array of distinguished guests, let me simply say what a delight it is to welcome, alongside Rod and Léonie Matheson, their four children and their partners, as well as, of course, our distinguished portraitist Robert Hannaford here with Alison Mitchell.

Everyone is warmly welcome!

Now, Rod Matheson is not one for a fuss, and certainly not for a fuss to be made about him. But this afternoon he must, I'm afraid, endure a little fuss being made about him!

Rod's self-effacing modesty is, of course, one of his many endearing qualities. In 1950, when Rod was 22 and in his third year at St Mark's, the Master of the College, Sir Archibald Grenfell Price, wrote of him, and I quote: "Mr Matheson is a fine character and has a particularly attractive personality."

Rod was a student at St Mark's from 1948 to 1951, joining the College in his second year as an Arts and Law student at the University of Adelaide.

His earliest education had been by correspondence whilst living at Mt Eba Station, off the Stuart Highway between Glendambo and Coober Pedy, and then at Hale School in Perth, and then from 1942 to 1946 at St Peter's College here in Adelaide. At Saints, he gained a considerable number of scholarships and prizes; continued his interest in athletics, football, tennis, and swimming; held a number of leadership positions; and was active in various student groups, including for debating and literary interests.

In his first year at University, Rod was awarded the Justin Skipper Prize for the "best results by a law student in Arts subjects", and in his third year, the Peter Wait Prize for Modern Languages. His Arts studies focussed on French and history; and his active involvement in student activities in the University included serving on the University French Club Committee in 1949, as President of the Faculty of Arts Association in 1950, and on the Committee of the Liberal Union, as well as involvement in the Law Students' Society, inter-faculty debating, the

University Squadron, and other activities. His interests ranged from music and literature to politics and international affairs.

Here at St Mark's, Rod served on the Wranglers' Club Committee, which organised guest speakers and debates, and on the Library Committee. He served as Assistant Librarian, played tennis and golf for the College, and played also in the College's Rugby XV, of which he was Vice-Captain in 1951, and the Football XVIII, being awarded colours for both Rugby and Football. His running prowess, evident in schoolboy hurdles and 100 yards races, was again evident: *The Lion* magazine for 1951 records that on the annual College sports day – and I quote – “In the 100 yards the favourite, G Sreenevasan, off 25 yards, was just pipped on the post by Rod Matheson.” And the year before *The Lion* records that Rod Matheson won the potato race, and came second in the sack race, and the Jose-Matheson pairing won the three-legged race.

In the 1950 reference I have already quoted, Archie Price wrote of Rod: “With his ability in languages, his training in law and an exceptionally good manner I would regard him as an unusually strong candidate for the Federal Department of External Affairs – indeed, one of the best that South Australia has produced in recent years.”

But Rod was to take a different path, instead pursuing a career in the law, being admitted to the Bar in 1952. Suffice it to say that his professional distinction was reflected in his taking silk in 1972, appearing a number of times in the High Court of Australia and once, before appeals to it were abolished, in the Privy Council in London. He served on the Council of the Law Society of South Australia from 1965 to 1977, including as President in 1974-75, and on the Law Reform Committee of South Australia, the Executive of the Law Council of Australia, and the Legal Services Commission.

In 1979, Rod was appointed a judge of the Supreme Court of South Australia, serving until his 70th birthday in 1998 – including in later years serving alongside Chief Justice John Doyle, whom it is a delight to welcome here today with Mrs Marie Doyle. As you will soon see, Rod is painted in this portrait in the scarlet robes of a Supreme Court judge.

In May 1980, Rod Matheson became a member of the Council of St Mark's College, on which he was to serve until March 2000 – just two months short of 20 years. In March 1981, he became a member of the College's Executive and Finance Committee (later the Executive Committee), on which he was to serve for a little over 19 years. And in February 1982, he succeeded Gavin Walkley as Chairman of the College Council, in which role he served until March 2000 – over 18 years – making him, with Sir Henry Newland and Gavin Walkley, one of the three longest-serving Chairmen of the College Council in our history.

Portraits of Sir Henry Newland and Gavin Walkley have graced these walls for many years, and it is very fitting that this brilliant portrait of Rod Matheson, commissioned by the College earlier this year, should join them.

In 1982, writing of Gavin Walkley's retirement as Chairman of the College Council, the Master of the College, Dr Peter Edwards, wrote: “To succeed [Gavin Walkley], Council elected Mr. Justice R. G. Matheson, a Collegian who, in a relatively short period as a member

of the Council and latterly Deputy Chairman, has already demonstrated great energy and enthusiasm.” Energy and enthusiasm have been among Rod’s hallmarks.

In the meeting of the College Council in April 1981 that decided that St Mark’s – founded as a male-only college – should admit women, Rod Matheson spoke strongly in favour of that move; and as Chairman of the College Council from early 1982, the year in which women students joined the College, he helped to ensure the successful introduction of coeducation. We were very grateful for his active and generous support for the celebration last year of 40 years of coeducation at St Mark’s.

As well as presiding over the College becoming co-educational, Rod as Chairman of the College Council also led the appointment processes for three Masters of the College. He persuaded the first of the three, the Rev’d Peter Thomson, to put his name back into the ring for the Mastership of the College after he had withdrawn it; and he later encouraged Robin Ashwin and subsequently John Bannon to apply for the position. It is so good to have Okche Ashwin and Angela Bannon here today.

Rod has known all nine people to hold this position – from Archie Price to the present incumbent – and for myself I can honestly say that I deeply value Rod’s active interest in and support for the life of the College, and his warm and generous friendship and innumerable acts of kindness and thoughtfulness.

Rod’s time as Chairman also saw major building and renovation work in the College, and it is only right that one of our blocks of flats bears the name “Matheson” in his honour.

When Rod retired as Chairman of the College Council in the year 2000, Hector Brooks, speaking for the Council, referred to many achievements under his leadership, including the strengthening of the College’s enrolments and finances, and the formation of a system of College committees. Hector Brooks said that Rod had been – quote - “an excellent Chairman, a strong communicator, always fully informed about all matters of the College”, giving a great deal of time to the College, including to guide the Council “through many difficult times”. He paid tribute also to Rod’s generosity to the College through the College Foundation, of which he is a Benefactor and Life Member, and in successive College appeals, and his involvement with other aspects of the life of the College. The minutes of Rod’s final meeting as Chairman record, and I quote: “He had done a splendid job in an honorary capacity and this was fully acknowledged by all.”

After Rod had left his final meeting as Chairman in 2000, the Council of the College voted unanimously to appoint him as an Honorary Fellow of the College. It is so good to see several other Honorary Fellows of the College here today, and a number of people who served on the College Council during Rod’s Chairmanship.

At the dinner in May 2000 to honour Rod on his retirement as Chairman and his election as an Honorary Fellow, the Archbishop “made special reference to the support Rod had received from his wife Leonie in all his community service and in particular in the College”. We remain deeply in Léonie’s debt.

In January 2000, just before his retirement from the College Council, Rod was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia for – and I quote – “service to the law and to the community, particularly through the Bedford Industries Rehabilitation Association, the Law Society of South Australia, the Art Galley of South Australia Foundation and St Mark's College Council.”

Rod had served on the Bedford Council for 23 years, including as Chairman from 1981 to 1986, supporting the major expansion of its help to disabled people. His long involvement with the Art Gallery of South Australia included chairing its Foundation from 1987 to 1994.

In subsequent years, Rod has been active in other forms of service to the community. He has served on the Council of the National Trust of South Australia, including as Vice-President; chaired the Minister's Heritage Advisory Committee and been Presiding Member of the State Heritage Authority; and chaired the South Australian Government's Valuation and Land Act Review.

Since his retirement as Chairman of the College Council in 2000, Rod has also, of course, continued to take an active interest in the life of the College. He wrote to the College's law students in August 2000, inviting them to watch part of a trial over which he was presiding as an auxiliary judge. He wrote: “Upon my retirement as Chairman of Council I was elected an Honorary Fellow and I do not intend that to be a sinecure.” Just as he took an interest in the students of the College when he served on the Council, he continues to do so to this day. He has helped to mentor one of our current students, Oliver Douglas, who was chosen this week as Rhodes Scholar for South Australia for 2024. Rod continues also his longstanding interests in our grounds, our buildings, the Library, and the Centenary history, amongst other aspects of the College. It would be impossible to thank him enough for all that he has done for St Mark's.

To paint the portrait of so esteemed a figure it is very appropriate to have commissioned one of Australia's most eminent artists, Robert Hannaford AM, highly respected for many decades for his paintings, portraits, drawings, and sculptures, including most famously for his depictions of such figures as Sir Donald Bradman, Dame Joan Sutherland, Bob Hawke, and Paul Keating.

This portrait of Rod Matheson will be Robert Hannaford's sixth portrait to hang in this Hall – the earlier ones being of the third Master, Malcolm McKenzie; Rod's predecessor as Chairman of the Council, Gavin Walkley; Professor Don Nicholas at the far end of the Hall; the seventh Master, John Bannon, and the eighth Master, Rose Alwyn. And, of course, our joint portrait of Ian and Pamela Wall is by his daughter, Tsering Hannaford.

It is fitting that this portrait of Rod should hang next to the portrait of Sir Henry Newland, Chairman of the College Council from 1926 to 1953 – Chairman when Rod was a student here, and Léonie Matheson's great-uncle, “Uncle Henry” as she refers to him! The portrait of Sir Henry Newland is one of our two portraits by Sir Ivor Hele, who had mentored Robert Hannaford as a young portrait artist some decades ago.

And now, to unveil Robert Hannaford's portrait of Rod Matheson, I am very pleased to call on the Chair of the College Board, Ms Linda Matthews.

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Conclusion

Congratulations again to Léonie and Rod on their 64th wedding anniversary! ...

Very many thanks, Rod, and many congratulations to you and to Robert Hannaford on this portrait.

I hope that Léonie Matheson won't mind if I mention that she has said of this portrait – "that is the face I wake up to every morning!"

As Robert has mentioned, in the portrait Rod is wearing his smart watch, which leads Léonie to call the portrait "Ancient and Modern".

We would like Rod and Léonie to have their own copy of this portrait, and so we have framed a professional photograph of the portrait, which I would like to give to them, along with these flowers for Léonie. We hope that you will enjoy having these. ...

Ladies and gentlemen, that concludes our formal proceedings. Drinks and canapes will now be served, and I hope that you will stay and enjoy looking more closely at the portrait, and enjoy the drinks and conversation.

Thank you so much for coming!