



Charles Maclurcan

David Salter: Let's start at the beginning with the Charles Maclurcan story. You grew up around here, didn't you?

Charles Maclurcan: My grandparents lived next door to where I live now. In fact, I sleep about 35 feet from where I used to sleep on their veranda. And because I was first born, my sister and I spent a great deal of time with the grandparents next door because my father took his car back to England by ship to have it serviced. Which is what you did in those days, apparently.

DS: You went to school locally?

CM: Loretto Convent Kirribilli, apart from the kindergarten down the road when we were in Mosman, and then St Aloysius College.

DS: All the way through to?

CM: Right through till university time.

DS: Now what about sailing? When did that start?

CM: There's a picture of me or there was a picture of the boat in 1961. I first raced with my dad in *Mirrabooka* (217) at the Amateurs. There's a picture of that boat in the club somewhere; it was there until recently and then I did youth sailing at the Yacht Squadron.

DS: So that was your small boat sailing or?

CM: Well except at the time when mother and I – dad bought a Pelican dinghy before he bought the *Daydream* – and I took my mother out sailing just the two of us.

We'd never sailed an open small boat before and we took out here from Shell Cove and we got almost to Pinchgut where we capsized.

Neither of us had ever capsized before. Anyway, we got the boat upright between us and we bailed it out as best we could, because it's an open type boat, and we sailed home again.

Now it wasn't the first time I'd sailed but it was certainly the first time out here.

DS: Did you do competitive small boat sailing?

CM: Only at Squadron Youth.

DS: You mentioned sailing on your father's boat. That was what?

CM: In the 60s, a Daydream.

DS: Right but then you were at university. You kept sailing then?

CM: No. In between then I was racing with one of the youth sailors whose parents lived at the head of this bay, Shell Cove, and had a Stella and we sailed in the Junior Offshore Group.

And in those days the Junior Offshore Group had overnight races and all sorts of lengthy things, and it became more than I could cope with at the end of the university period, to attend to my studies and still do all the overnight races and things.

So, to cut a long story short I went and drove the tender at the Amateurs, because we had several competitors from the JOGs down there and it meant I could keep in touch with what was going on, earn some money, and I wasn't away for weekends.

DS: Was your connection to the Amateurs through family or...?

CM: Well, I knew a lot of people who sailed there but, essentially, driving the tender.

DS: So, you weren't a member at that stage?

CM: No, I didn't join until '70 something.

DS: So, you finished your studies, started to work, you got back into sailing then?

DS: Yes and no. I was busy because I was an architect and had no employment of course as you can imagine.

I had always dreamed and was intending to go to sea, and the First Officer I think on the ship that my father sent his car to Britain on, he was a Norwegian and they all became very firm friends. So, when he was in Sydney...and in those days remember the ships weren't containers so they could be in Sydney for a week, ten days, whatever...they became very firm friends, and I remember vividly sitting down beside the piano in our place at Mosman and he and my father talked me out of going to sea.

Their words were "It's not what you romantically think it's going to be, it'll all be different and it was like life's different". So, I said "Okay, I'll be an architect", and in that moment that's exactly what I went and did.

DS: Nevertheless, I know from your library that you have a very very strong affection for the sea and seagoing ships.

CM: My father said, "Get your meal ticket and then you can go to sea". So, I graduated and was heading off to sea, waiting for my Norwegian seamen's union papers to come and they didn't come, and a firm that I'd been working with temporarily as an architect needed an architect on site for a shopping centre they'd designed in Dubbo and reluctantly, a week before the papers came, I said I'd do it.

DS: So, Dubbo's gain was seafaring's loss?

CM: Well, Dubbo's still not sure about that, although most of the people I dealt with are dead which is a relief for about all of us. I ended up building a big practice in Dubbo and I kept bringing work back to the Sydney office and I was sent out there to close all the offices, Orange and Bathurst and everywhere, Goulburn, and I kept bringing in more work.

DS: And did that interrupt your sailing?

CM: No, I didn't live out there until the shopping centre was on. I lived out in Dubbo for I don't know nine or twelve months while we finished the shopping centre. Kept bringing back all this work. I did 27 jobs in the main streets of Dubbo in the meantime, much to the fury of the Sydney firm who didn't want any more country work. And then after that I did the new bank in Dubbo. Got a whole lot of other work, and work for people who are now dead, but had connections with the club through Chris Manion, whose wife is the eldest daughter of my original clients in Dubbo.

I was working in Neutral Bay by that time, because I was told when I went and finally got to sea after the shopping centre was finished, I went and joined the ship, and the proprietor of the business said, "There'll be a job for you when you come back". When I did come back there wasn't. We're in the 1962 or '63 recession.

So, I went and worked for an architect in Grosvenor Street, Neutral Bay, which was the worst period of my life. He practiced architecture with his firm not in a way we did. Charged like a wounded bull. Every time the client opened his mouth there was another, you know, it was bad news. And then one day he tore the wonderful old architect who was teaching us so much, me and the other drafts people and whatever else, teaching us all this information. He tore him to shreds in the middle of the office.

I remember the drafting girls were in tears. It was just awful and at that moment, I was not his favourite person as you can imagine, at that moment I decided architecture was not for me.

That evening a letter came from Dubbo for a new house for one of the doctors and I rang him back and said, "Are you willing to pay the normal fee?" He said, "Oh yes". That, I realised, gave me about 10 months to look for another job if I got it built. And that's exactly what happened.

He and his wife lived in it till their end. It was the first doctor's house in Dubbo that had a tin roof. It wasn't Glenn Murcutt standard, from Glenn Murcutt's point of view, but it fitted that family beautifully. We had a wonderful fire in it. I used to go and stay there. Fred Bevis has stayed there with us, (and his wife) Beverley.

Anyway, cut a long story short, we had many a wonderful time in that house with wonderful people, and that saved my career in that it gave me the impetus to have the confidence to set up my own business, which then carried on till the end.

But at the same time, I had been working with a couple of people in the radio industry, tinkering with radios because I was what was known as a 'wire boy'. I'd get bits from the various suburban shops that would maintain radios for people, fiddle around with them.

Now that business went all the way through to the end, which meant that I had two incomes which meant I could say no to clients and I did. Not very often, but many an architect's been ruined by a client that wants something that's inappropriate or pays him so much money that they can't not take the job and it's a compromise. Well, I was able to say, "I'm sorry I can't help you", and I walked away from some interesting work but very glad I was able to.

DS: So, you didn't need to drive the tender at the Amateurs anymore?

CM: No, but at the time the money was a bonus. You know, any money was a bonus.

DS: Okay so what caused you to join?

CM: I'm not sure, I obviously got caught in by people like Bob Lawler who had an interesting effect on me because I enjoyed sailing offshore in his company with others and he had by that time picked up Hughie O'Neill and Hughie's first boat.

I was active and keen to contribute. My father was very keen on you contributing to your sport and that's where I got involved with the race management, in that a wonderful girl called Rosemary Hay and I did the calculations for all the point scores and the results each weekend and we had to do them on the Sundays, and get them out by the Monday for the papers.

We introduced with the help of Ross Munn, who had introduced computer results at the Middle Harbour Yacht Club if memory serves me correctly. He came, and eventually had his boat at the Amateurs and raced with the Amateurs, and we took his program and made it work...and the way we had to do that was the upriver boys were so anti any of this, and fair enough, that Rosemary Hay and I sat down over a weekend and we redid the whole season and I drafted it out like a draftsman. I've got it somewhere but I couldn't find it in time for today.

This enormous sheet of all the results redone by the computer. The results were the same but much closer, exactly the same...same people won, same people lost, but the results

were much more exciting because there was only a point or two here difference, and we convinced them to take it over and we took it over.

DS: Can I take you back to you said that Bob Lawler got you into offshore racing?

CM: Partly, yes.

DS: Tell us how you were now established as an architect, you're a member of the club, offshore racing back then was a much more important part of what the club did.

CM: The offshore division at one stage became dominant, and you can see that on the honour boards (in the clubhouse). If you read carefully, you'll realise that the offshore divisions were keeping the club operating. As an adjunct to the harbour days, they were very important and there was a wonderful group of people involved and it was the days when *Nimbus* (A80) was there. Do you remember *Nimbus*?

DS: No, I don't.

CM: *Nimbus* belonged to a cousin of the Lawlers. There were a lot of boats that were connected with the Amateurs through offshore sailing.

DS: Tell us the boats that you remember crewing on.

CM: Oh, the first Hobart I did was on *Thunderbolt* (560) that was moored down the end of the bay for a long time. That was '85 or '86 I don't know, I think it was, and then I did one with subsequently, but not next, with the guy who fell overboard, John Quinn...did a lot of racing with him on a boat he had called *Maid Rosalinde* (408). We did Brisbane races and South Solitary races and God knows what else, and it was a very good, active, fun way to remain involved.

DS: When did you start getting involved in the management of the club?

CM: I don't know. I know that when I eventually ran for the Board the upriver boys panicked because they had a very healthy, and I don't blame them, a healthy dislike for Maclurcans. There's nothing wrong with that. My old man was a bit of a mouth here and there, but not a club man. But they put a fellow called Geoff Paton in to stand against me which was fine, and of course I immediately slipped in quietly behind him anyway. Which worked out well, and then the Board did its usual thing. The personalities came and went, people put contributions in. The powers that be then recognised that there was, there might have been, some people that would be useful to the club if they were promoted. And the natural attrition took place as well. And the next thing I knew I was immersed in it and, subsequently running against poor old Robert Evans, became Commodore.

DS: You're getting ahead of yourself a little bit there. My experience of the Board is that unofficially, somehow, there's a process whereby individual members are encouraged, because of their knowledge or expertise or connections, to look after some areas of the way the club works. What was your area?

CM: Well, my area turned out to be strongly biased towards getting the results done and getting them out in time. As I say, Rosemary Hay was just wonderful, she was such a good worker, and we both worked hard to ensure...because in those days we had the publication deadline. Forget there was no dissemination on telephones or anything like that, but (if) it was in the newspapers we'd done our job...and we had a deadline for that, and we used to make sure we'd get that (done).

DS: I remember a boat *Qui Vive* (A160). What's the story there?

CM: I remember first seeing her up sitting in the river at Laurieton looking very sad, this ugly looking reverse sheer boat. I went down to work on John Quinn's *Maid Rosalinde*; to do the electrics, because I was doing boat electrics for a long time. We were getting it ready for a Brisbane-Mooloolaba race, and I went down stayed the night down there, and said to the boys, "I'm about to buy a boat", and they said, "Oh yeah, what are you going to get?" I said, "I'll get a Hood 23". "Hood 23, really?" "Yeah, oh yeah, good value - four or five grand, whatever!".

Anyway, the disgust that they put on me in that 24 hours meant that Hood 23's faded from glory (laughs). So, I said, "Okay, we'll call in at Mitchell's Marina on the way to *Maid Rosalinde* and we'll have a look at what's available for that sort of price". And there was *Qui Vive* on the picture board, four or five grand's worth or something, with an outboard, and I said, "Okay, let's go and have a look at it, and that will give you an idea why a fiberglass boat with lack of, less, maintenance is the go". *Qui Vive* was cold molded, and they were very keen on cold molding the boys, you know, "Oh yeah, cold molding's alright".

We went and looked at it, and I remember stepping off the tender there and their words were, subsequently, "We knew that nothing we could say would prevent you from buying that boat".

I fell in love with it, instantly. The boat was in my opinion terrific, and I bought it with a very keen desire to make sure it was easier and more pleasant to sail than my father's boat, which I didn't like sailing. It subsequently proved to be the best thing I've ever had in terms of returning joy and happiness

DS: What appealed to you about it?

CM: Not too big, six or seven feet wide. It was the second one, it turns out, that a Mr Pepper built on the slipway at Middle Harbour.

DS: Did you race it?

CM: Oh yes, straight away. That's what it was for. He built it to race, he built it - MH141, I think she was - he built it to be the winner of Second Division. And he built the second one with the modifications that he put into the first one, taking the rudder off the back of the keel, and putting an outboard, and he did all that with the second one - which I don't know

where she is either anymore – and he built it to beat the Second Division point score in Middle Harbour.

DS: But you raced it with the Amateurs?

CM: Yes. Yeah well, it fitted into the Amateurs as well.

DS: And at the same time, you were racing offshore?

CM: Yes, I never had enough money to buy a decent offshore boat. Nor the desire particularly. So, I raced with other people all the way through 15 times to Hobart, which I think was good, and 12 of those were on *Mark Twain* (A113).

DS: In your offshore history one boat stands out and that is *Mark Twain*. How did you find racing with Hughie (O'Neill)?

CM: I never had any problem because I had a talent, and Hughie was smart enough to realize if somebody's got a talent. Now, I wasn't anything other than a helmsman. But I could also do electrical work; I could fix the engine if needed. There were advantages. I ended up doing architecture work for him too, funnily enough, and all sorts of things so it was a lovely relationship. And as I said only last Tuesday, we were talking, yarning, and carrying on.

DS: It's a famous relationship in the club...you, Hughie and the boat.

CM: Oh, but Dal Wilson was involved, I mean...

DS: Yeah

CM: ...and the boat was a lovely boat and you might say, oh old-fashioned something. *Mark Twain* encapsulated everything we have not seen in the last few weeks, with a couple of girls lost on the beach down there, another bloke pulled up from a boat up...that danger is ever present, but *Mark Twain* was a boat that if you could hold on to it, you'd survive. The confidence in the hull and the structure. We knew she was slow. You know, the Hobart race was a six-day event. We didn't, it didn't matter. The point was if we could hold on to the boat we'd survive, which made dealing with people like Hughie piece of cake

DS: Well, let me say I only came into that tradition late, but I did two Hobarts on it and it was a wonderful, wonderful boat. And the company of Hughie and Dal, and a few other guys, absolutely memorable...

CM: And the parties in Hobart were marvellous!

DS: Now, your service at the club continued and you became Commodore in what wasn't an entirely easy period.

CM: No. But remember, if you surround yourself by good men and women you'll survive if your intellect allows you to be generous in your praise to them, and loving what they do, which is how we got involved with Olympics with John Jeremy and people like that, and we had a terrific team of very focused men and women.

You know, I was challenged for the Commodoreship when I stood; I'll never forget it. I said "I'd like to talk to the group, but my challenger should talk too. It's important you give them an idea what the hell you're on about, but I think he should talk first", and in this case the man did talk and he had some fabulous ideas.

I look back now and I think, God he would have fitted into today's politics so well...fabulous ideas, and he was going to do this and he's going to do that, and the Amateurs would do...and something else. Anyway, I got up and said, "Nobody's asked me what I'm planning for the club. I'm not planning anything except to continue what we're doing really well in my opinion". Well, a Mr. (Bill) Gale who was one of the scrutineers, told me later, somewhat furtively, he said "You won by 98%". And I'm still talking to that man as well. Both Bill Gale and the other person.

DS: So, once you're in the role simply 'laissez-faire' isn't a policy. Challenges come up. You have to have an approach to the job. What was your approach to the job?

CM: I think looking back on it, and it's difficult to know, because it was passive not aggressive. We got the pontoon built. I had faith in the system because I'd done pontoons everywhere up at Port Macquarie, doing canal developments up there. So, I had some idea of what we're dealing with. John Jeremy was very helpful with that. We went and visited it being built and double checked that the steel was in there. All that.

It was inevitable my concentration was on keeping our smaller boats racing where we could, because I knew what it was like to run a boat on a shoestring, to run a little boat and keep a good crew going was quite a task, and the Amateurs did it very well for a long time.

And that's why at the prize giving recently I got up and said, "This club is so suitable, such a good club, and aren't we lucky that we've been able to maintain a broadly consistent array of aspiration versus reality".

DS: That's a nice way of putting it. I was going to ask you ,because I've asked everyone I've interviewed in this series...the loyalty of long-term members to the club is extraordinary. What is it that the club means to you, personally?

CM: Well, I can tell you straight away. very quickly. You may note that down on Saturdays, in the winter and off season, there's a group of us that go down there and have a beer or a glass of wine or soft drink, and talk. The exchange of ideas as I get older and realize, has been one of the luckiest things I've been exposed to.

There are people that you'll never agree with, you know that. There are also now, as we get older...dementia is starting to take its toll. Which means that some of the memories

are faulty, but there's no point getting into an argument over that's a waste of time. Move on to something you can agree with or talk about.

That club, as it is, with no car parking, no nothing...if we plan it properly, and organize a tender for those that are getting infirm, can still operate as a small group centre, which to me is invaluable. That's why, when we're sitting down there and somebody comes across, come and talk and tell us what you think, that sort of thing...you get my drift.

DS: I do; I do. It's expressed to me in a different way. I can't remember who said to me, "There are no cliques at the Amateurs".

CM: There have been, because that's normal. So, if you say, "Oh, you know, I won't have cliques", that's not real. There are cliques, and there's cliques there at the moment, but not cliques that you can live without. Because they strengthen the club in other ways, and who knows, a clique (is) like a one of those chickens that doesn't ever lay an egg. Until finally it comes out of its box and, all of a sudden, there's this terrible squawk and a double the size comes out. The same thing happens from a clique...out drops an influence from a clique; it's certainly a really useful tool.

DS: I mustn't finish without asking you...race management. You got into race management in quite a serious way.

CM: A very serious way, in that we needed to be Olympic standard (for the 2000 Sydney Olympics). The Amateurs couldn't even begin to offer them the hardware or anything for that. So, the Amateurs wasn't the place to do it. So, I did it at the (Royal Sydney) Yacht Squadron. I'd been a member there (for) many years, anyway four or five years.

I remember saying to John Jeremy, he'd just retired, said to him, "You had 400 men under you two days ago (at Cockatoo Island). You're going to feel a big loss." We'd already talked about race management and I said, "Come and join us at the Squadron. I'm putting a team together. We're going to do it."

The next step was to get the Squadron sailing committee to agree that the minute they interfered in anything I was doing, and I was serious, it was all over. And bless them, through Jim Dunstan and others, they honoured it. We were not interfered with by anybody coming in without full knowledge of what was going on.

Apart from occasional thoughts of marriage, when it was still appealing, it was the best thing we ever did in our lives. Now, you might turn as an observer and say, "Well that is a sad reflection on your lives". I understand that. I understand that because it's always different for everyone.

But it was the most fantastic experience. All down to Jeremy taking pictures from the official boat we were on, I forget which class it was. But they won, we won two gold medals on our course for Australia and they all sailed back into Rushcutters Bay with the national flags as their spinnakers, and then all the workboats, all the mark layers, and everything all moved in behind them

We were very naughty of course, because we couldn't cope with doing it without alcohol, and the boats were all inspected rigorously by the powers that be. And there was no alcohol on the premises or anything else. But we would get onto the boat off the wharf, onto the boat and have a beer.

I remember on the final day we were all having a beer. That meant about 40 people on the boat, which was a bit more than it should have been. And down came the police. Well, now Jeremy looked at me, and I looked at him. I said, "Oh shit, maybe we, this could be it!". And they came out, and they walked up alongside us, and they said, "You wouldn't happen to have one for us, would you?" (laughter).

And we did the job so well that IBM selected us to do the Paralympics, and that was the best of all because we could talk to the competitors. In the Olympics you couldn't. It was absolutely religiously run. Absolutely no interference, or even an indication of it, which meant that we had to be...but the Paralympics was so good!

DS: That's good. Is it fair to say that you brought that expertise back to the Amateurs?

CM: Undoubtedly, and that meant our starting lines were appropriately angled, and there's a whole lot of ramifications of that.

DS: Charles, that's great. Is there anything else you want to say, get on the record?

CM: Yes. I am grateful to the sailing club beyond description. And the wonderful people I've met down there, is one of the reasons why I usually have a toast for absent friends... because how could anybody as bog ordinary as me have such a good time and good life out of it!