

## REMEMBERING PATRICIA KOTAI EWERS AM

So familiar in my life had become that smiling face of Trisha's and the way she glided rather than walked, the way she signed her presidential message 'benison', I cannot believe her to be gone. Trisha was a brave and resolute woman like her father 'J K' and mother, Jean. We became closer friends over many years, especially from 1990 onward when we were both active on the FAW Committee as Presidents. I helped her a little with her PhD thesis, sometimes in writing FAW reports and funding applications and we shared our poems. We even had planned to publish a collection of poems to be called 'The Long and Short of It'—ranging from limericks and haiku to preludes, epics and sagas. Alas not completed. But I did have the opportunity of recommending her for a well-deserved AM.

But in addition to her poetry and her ground-breaking book *Listen to the Talk of Us* (on the suffering and support for those, like her poor mother Jean, who are afflicted with alzheimers), Trisha also wrote for her PhD a thesis on the birth of the FAWWA from 1938-1980 and its subsequent emergence in the WA cultural context of those years. Trisha correctly limited her study to the years before she came on to the Executive. Nevertheless, the thesis highlights three historical matters of great consequence to the Fellowship in WA. Most important of course was the actual establishment of a West Australian Fellowship branch in 1938. They were difficult post-depression and immediate pre-war times.

The Ewers family first entered my life in 1945 on my 9<sup>th</sup> birthday when I was given a copy of Trisha's dad's wonderful children's book *Tales From the Dead Heart* about the legends of the Arunta tribe near Alice Springs. I have kept it to this day. Then at Perth Boys' School in 1951, while Keith Ewers was writing its history, he became my English master and encouraged me to take up writing. When I became an FAW member in 1962 of course I met the whole family at Tom Collins House. I remember later interviewing Keith on early colour TV at the Mt Lawley Campus of what is now ECU. As a President and executive member of the FAW, I saw Trisha herself emerge as the longest serving and most amazing one of us to take up that role. One that she served while also completing her PhD and a number of other leading roles.

There were three major revelations in her PhD thesis: establishment of the FAW in Perth under John K Ewers, her father's care; secondly, the inheritance of Tom Collins House; and thirdly the great struggle to avoid the FAW being taken over by the right or left political interests.

Trisha recounts how timely was the arrival in 1938 of the first US expert on Australian writing, Professor Clinton Hartley Grattan, and his visit to Perth to see our then local array of significant national authors, including Murdoch, Skinner, Miller, Prichard, Drake-Brockman, Casey and of course John K Ewers. After Grattan's visit, these writers were convinced Perth needed our own branch of the Fellowship of Australian Writers. Led by John K Ewers, as President, they drew a deep breath and launched, as Trisha recounted, our Fellowship Branch that is still going strong.

In her thesis, Trisha moved on to the second big forward step that occurred (post-war) for the Branch. It was when in 1948 Furphy's son Sam, having no children, decided that the Fellowship could be trusted with the inheritance of his father Joseph's former Swanbourne-Cottesloe home. This offer immediately was cause of great dispute among Branch members.

Some saw such a permanent financial and physical responsibility as the last thing the new little Branch ought to be taking on. But Ewers really helped resolve tensions again. He led those who could see the long-term benefits in taking possession of their own premises. And so today we celebrate this possession, especially since Trisha led the much more recent initiative to gather up Mattie's house from its original site and bring it into proximity with Tom Collins House as a Centre for the Creative Imagination. It could be noted that two other successful WA writers' centres in this State have followed the example and located themselves in historical houses connected with the literary life of famous authors.

The third major event depicted in Trisha's thesis, and not so much linked with the architectural, was the emergence of political division in the Fellowship organisation. The Communist Party had only existed in Australia from about 1920 but with the Great Depression of the 1930s and the human sacrifices of World War II, many West Australians became sympathisers with the cause of peace and the left wing of politics. Trisha recounts in the thesis the fierce divisions within the Fellowship at the time, where her father (himself a committed pacifist) often found himself ironically the peacemaker—keeping the left and right antagonists from each other's throats. I believe she clearly shows how his efforts succeeded in preventing politics from destroying the FAW's central aims of focusing as much as possible on furthering the writing achievements of its members. Both the right and the left nearly won domination at times but what we have inherited today is a pretty de-politicised writers' group. Dame Mary Durack Miller was also President during these years and one of her fervent hopes was that the FAW could operate just like a big family. Fellowship is something Trisha was as proud of as her father.

The FAW's foundation in 1938, the acquisition of Tom Collins House and the resistance to political alignment are the three themes of her thesis and reason enough for the FAW to see itself obliged finally to bring it to publication, even if only in inexpensive digital (or on-line) form. Not only did Trisha carry this research burden for years but was simultaneously our most active President. In remembering her now at this sad time there could be no more definite way to emphasise to existing and new members our debt to Trisha than by having her thesis published for them.

Unlike Trisha, her father John K Ewers did not produce such an academic thesis but wrote an amazing variety of books and other works in his lifetime. In important ways Trisha followed in his literary footsteps. Certainly, she was herself a creditable poet but Trisha's very detailed PhD study brilliantly shows how the WA Branch of the FAW came into existence; how it mostly numbered (mostly peacefully) almost every important writer in the State from 1938-1980; and why it is, for its historic headquarters, one of the most envied writers' centres in all Australia.

But now it is more important to return to Trisha's own career with the Fellowship, especially her many years as President in the 1990s. I spent 20 years as an FAW committee member, generally with Trisha (two of them as President myself) and, as already said, was pleased to support her Australian Honours listing. Through all these years I found out how great it was to work with her. She was always open to fresh ideas, always open to new ways to promote publishing, readings, writers' tributes, book launches, writers' prizes, critiquing, memoir writing workshops and other events at Mattie's House or TCH. However, she also became involved with the State Library, writingWA, and the other Writing Centres. Then there was her language teaching in schools, ballet, concern for dementia care and other good causes.

We were all saddened as her health deteriorated seriously over the last few years. Still she tried to attend events, including some of my own book launches, until only weeks ago. Many other FAW members, especially Committee members, hold treasured memories and I must pay respect to their need to grieve and record their grieving.

Thinking of many of the writers we have lost recently from our lives, I am sure above all we offer our sincere condolences to the Ewers family, especially Kate, Heidi and Clara and to close friends.

Trisha will be deeply missed.

Glen Phillips, February, 2021.