

Patricia Kotai-Ewers OAM

(Remarks by Nicholas Hasluck at Mattie Furphy House 27 March 2021)

We are here to celebrate the life of Trisha Kotai-Ewers, a life well-lived from her birth in 1939 to her final days in 2021. I have little doubt that various speakers will share memories of her cheerful manner and ever-present enthusiasm, especially for the work and aspirations of the Fellowship of Writers. With that in mind I thought it might be useful to begin by saying a few words about the early days of the Fellowship and her father's involvement. Trisha's pride in his achievements as a writer and organiser undoubtedly played a large part in her own commitment to the cause in later years.

Much of what I have to say is drawn from her father's book of recollections, *The Ultimate Honesty*. Within that book one finds a letter from Trisha's father, Keith Ewers, to local poet Annie Marks mentioning a dinner to be held on 6 June 1938 at Billet's Café in the basement of Gleddon Buildings on the corner of Hay and Murray streets in central Perth. It would be a chance for West Australian writers to meet the visiting American author-journalist Hartley Grattan who was said to be deeply interested in Australian literature. Other well-known local writers attended the dinner including Katharine Susannah Prichard, Henrietta Drake-Brockman, Walter Murdoch, Mary Durack and Gavin Casey. This led to the birth of the WA Branch of the Fellowship of Australian Writers with Keith Ewers becoming the first President.

Twelve months later, on 17 July 1939, there was another birth. In his autobiography *Long Enough For A Joke* – an apt title in this context – Keith recalled: *[My wife] Jean was expecting a baby in August for what we*

regarded as inevitable – a boy. After all, from two marriages my father had sired five sons, and Jean was the only daughter in a family of four. When it turned out to be a girl the already chosen name of Peter John was immediately changed to Patricia Jean. Alas, this was to be the only child we managed to achieve but she was to develop into such a happy, versatile, ebullient personality that we became inclined to believe that she combined all the eight children Jean said she wanted to have ... I had thought having a book published was something to be proud of, having articles published filled me with elation, but this was a far more-heart-warming occasion. She added several new dimensions to our lives. She has now presented us with three grandchildren – all girls – and all delightful.

Keith went on to say that towards the end of 1940 he and Jean bought an elderly but roomy house in Peppermint Grove with a spacious verandah and three bedrooms one of which could be used as a study. It was from these premises that Keith added to his achievements as a writer. According to Mary Durack, he was the first writer actually born, reared and educated in this state to gain Australia-wide recognition.

At the First Annual Dinner of the WA Fellowship held at Frascati Café on 16 November 1939, a few months after Trisha's birth, the title of Keith's Presidential Address was *The Great Australian Paradox*. Some years later, in November 1947, his Presidential address given at the Australian Natives Association Clubhouse in Riverside Drive was titled *The Odyssey of the Jolly Swagman*, a lighter speech in which he surmised that the swagman's grandfather probably came to Australia in the first fleet after a poaching a rabbit. This meant that while camping by a billabong 'a sense of the sacred rights of property was not one of the strong points of his grandson.'

Soon after that address property rights became a matter of considerable interest to the Fellowship, for it was in 1948, under the leadership of Ewers and other office-bearers, that the first steps were taken to vest Joseph Furphy's home in the Fellowship, to be known as Tom Collins House. Situated in Servetus Street, Swanbourne, it became the Fellowship's headquarters and the scene of an annual writers' 'corroboree' in the years that followed, a festive occasion often attended by the adolescent sons and daughters of Fellowship members such as Trisha and myself.

Keith Ewers achievements are listed in *The Ultimate Honesty* and are fully described in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*, so there is no need to dwell upon them on this occasion. They include works of fiction, 8 in all, such as *Money Street* and *Men Against the Earth*, travelogues such as *With the Sun on my Back*, and local histories such as his history of Fremantle, *The Western Gateway*. But our focus today is upon his daughter.

Trisha's achievements are set out in *Who's Who in Western Australia*. A few details in passing will suffice. She was educated at Perth Modern School, Claremont Teachers' College and the University of Western Australia. She taught at various places including Collie Senior High School, Presbyterian Ladies College and Subiaco TAFE. She was well-known also in the arts world having dance roles in the 1950s and early 60s in productions such as *Giselle*, *Les Sylphides* and *Pineapple Poll*. Much more could be said about the breadth of her involvement in various charitable causes but, as time is against me, let me turn to the Sphinx Foundation's history of Perth Modern School for a short summary. In an essay about various writers educated at the School Trisha said of her own

career that she came late to writing. *As the only daughter of creative parents, her father was the writer JK Ewers, her mother a studio potter, both former students at Modern School – Trisha wandered through the worlds of dance (classical ballet and Hungarian), fabric printing and song. For 25 years she taught French in government and independent schools and has recently been Writer in Residence for people with dementia. Trisha has a BA in languages and an MPhil in Medieval and Renaissance Studies from UWA. She is currently completing her PhD on the first 40 years of the Fellowship of Writers in WA, of which she was President.*

One finds in *The Ultimate Honesty* an elegiac piece by Trisha in which she provides a moving account of her father's last days in 1977. It presents not only a picture of her father but also, perhaps unintentionally, a picture of herself as a kind and caring person, a reminder that she was always sympathetic to those in need when help was needed most. Trisha said of her father in that piece: *Since his death I have always felt that the manner of his passing should not be forgotten.*

It may have been thoughts of this kind that led to her increased and steadfast involvement in the affairs of the Fellowship over many years, especially after becoming President in 1989. It was at this time, with other office-bearers such as Glen Phillips and Don Grant, that steps were taken to transfer Tom Collins House from its position under threat of road widening in Servetus Street to the safety of the Allen Park area. This was accompanied in due course by the positioning of Mattie Furphy House nearby.

Towards the end of this period she completed her doctoral thesis covering the history of the WA Fellowship from 1938 to 1980. We are

lucky to have also Trisha's shorter and more general account of the Fellowship in her essay *Coda* that appears in an anthology called *Lines in the Sand*, a book that was published by the Fellowship in 2008.

For my part, I was always greatly pleased to see Trisha at Fellowship events and to chance upon her at writers' festivals and other literary occasions. She was always lively and warm-hearted. In 2014 I supported her nomination for an award within the Order of Australia by saying: *To my mind, it is doubtful whether the Fellowship in this state would have survived as a source of inspiration and support to the local literary community without her ongoing commitment ... As a long-serving President of the Society she has been crucially important in dealing with governmental agencies and securing much-needed support from funding bodies ... She has been not only diligent but constantly good-humoured, and thus earned the respect of her colleagues and contemporaries.*

Like many others I was very pleased when she was awarded a Medal of the Order of Australia (or OAM) on 8 June 2015 with a citation as follows: *For service to literature and to people with Alzheimer's.* A month later, on Thursday 8 July of that year, I attended a social function at the UWA Club when the state President of the Order welcomed new recipients of awards. I spoke to Trisha over drinks afterwards and quickly saw, despite some health issues, that with her customary ebullience she was thoroughly enjoying the occasion. She was there with her friend Ruth Barrett, and we were of one mind that it was indeed a well-deserved award.

How did Trish manage to achieve so much? The answer lies in the note she provided to accompany her entry in the *Who's Who* volume I mentioned earlier. She said: *I am a glass half-full-person, fortunately*

optimistic. For me life is a spiritual journey, without adherence to any conventional religious group. In all things I seek the widest expression of my own abilities and beliefs, while trying to show compassion to others. As a Reiki healer and meditator, I love giving healing and teaching to others, as a doctoral researcher I love intellectual pursuits. Perhaps I refuse to be confined and labelled. I feel as though in my later years I have come to really be myself – seeker, writer, gardener, healer, student, creator, organiser – and most deliciously, grandmother.

These were the ways in which Trisha experienced the world. These were her riches. Like many writers her fortune is to be found not in tangible possessions but in ways of seeing. There is something of this in Tom Shapcott's poem called *Bequest* in which he shows how ways of seeing are handed down. *What I have is an eye that sees the mess / of pittosporum petals covering the concrete floor / under the tree until, for a week, the space is a rare / and fragrant carpet. But, unlike a carpet, this / is a gift that can't be measured. I wish my heirs / (if only once) the same gift. And to make it theirs.*

Her father prepared a piece 'to be spoken when the time comes' including a poem from his book of verse called *I Came Naked*, the final lines of which can usefully be brought to mind today as we come together to remember and honour his beloved daughter. *We all came naked; / we all go naked at the end of our time, / and the truth of nakedness / is the only truth we know / between the coming and the going.*

He added: *Something of what we have done, of what we have been on this earth, may be remembered for a little time. Much of it will be forgotten and that is good, because much has not been worthy of us. But*

most of it has been somehow worthwhile and, most of all, the struggle for change.

My feeling is that most of what our friend and good companion Trisha Kotai-Ewers did was indeed worthwhile. It will be long-remembered by those who knew her, as she herself will be remembered for her many splendid qualities.

** ** *

Nicholas Hasluck

Email: hasluck@inet.net.au