



THE WREKIN HEAVES

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It is Good Friday as I write, and Sally's birthday, and John Foyster's, 13 April 1990. Later today Sally and I and my mother intend to make a kind of pilgrimage to Springvale Crematorium, about an hour's drive south-east across Melbourne. My father died on Good Friday 1965, 16 April. On my twenty-sixth birthday, 21 April 1965, he was cremated at Fawkner Crematorium, north-west of Melbourne. That day is as clear in my mind as yesterday. A bright, cold day. Someone, my Aunt Hilda, I think, brought Leif Bangsund's father, Sigurd, to the funeral. My grandfather stood about, gracious, beaming, totally unaware of what was going on. The Freemasons took over the ceremony when the minister of the Northcote Church of Christ had said his piece. It was as though my father had been mislaid, somehow forgotten, the man we'd all known and loved now just an exemplary member of organizations. This tragicomedy has continued. A few years ago I wrote the most powerful, distressing and rewarding couple of pages I have ever written: a letter to the Department of Veterans' Affairs in support of my mother's claim to a War Widow's pension. It took about three weeks to write. Under new legislation introduced by our much-maligned Labor government, my mother's claim was reviewed and recognized, and this had an unexpected consequence. The government has established permanent memorials to ex-servicemen, but only in one place in each Australian capital city. So the only tangible public memorial

of my father is a plaque on a wall at Springvale. On this twenty-fifth Good Friday after his death we will go and look for his official plaque.

Friends of mine, not least among them Bruce Gillespie, for years have asked me why I have never written about my father. The short answer is that I haven't got round to it. The longer answer is that I do not have Bruce's urge to produce something like his *Good Night, Sweet Prince* - that extraordinary tribute to his father, so moving, so much about Bruce as about his father.

My father was not a bank manager. He could have been if he'd set his mind to it, but he didn't. He was like me, a wanderer, an innocent, forever putting faith before common sense and experience, an inveterate optimist. At Mr Gillespie's funeral I met a friend of my father's, Reg Hillbrick. Reg is old now, hard of hearing, but a bright, interesting, neat, well-preserved kind of man. I could happily spend hours talking to him. During the Depression of the 1930s Reg's father had employed my father on his farm, and Reg recalled the passionate discussions he had enjoyed with my father about religion and other subjects. Reg and I entered theological college in the same year, 1957. Some years later he told my mother that I was regarded then as the brightest student the college had ever had. We did not broach such matters at Mr Gillespie's funeral, but his fondness for me and my father was obvious, and heart-warming.

On that morning twenty-five years ago, my mother called me. I was asleep. My father had started painting my sister's bedroom. The night before I had called him from Essendon Airport – my girlfriend's flight from Sydney was delayed, I would be late home; he sounded tired. He was dying when I rushed into the room, and trying to say something, but it trickled out unintelligible with his last breath. I held him – I recall, absurdly, that it didn't seem right, me in my singlet and underpants, cradling my father in his dying moments – as he fought that dying of the light, struggling to say something he wanted us to know before he went.

I said to Jack Brideson, the undertaker, 'Was he asking me to try mouth-to-mouth respiration?' I felt so guilty about that. Jack, so wise, so experienced, said no – and that if by some chance I had succeeded in prolonging my father's life, that life would be no better than a vegetable's. My father had died, it seemed to me, slowly and in anguish, and there was nothing I could do about it. That, too, is partly why it is taking me so long to write about my father.

17 April It was quite a pleasant excursion. My father's plaque is on wall 73, row F. I had a sense of relief, looking at it, a feeling that it was OK to let go now.

On the way to Springvale we passed the old College of the Bible at Glen Iris: the Mulgrave Freeway literally passes its front door. Then we went to see the new college, the Churches of Christ Theological College at Mulgrave. It looks like a large toy building: there is nothing to give it scale. There isn't even a sign saying what it is.

On the way home Sally drove past the house we had lived in in Kew

and the hospital in Fairfield where I was born, and within a block of the flats where my grandmother Holyoak spent her last years and the house that Lone and Sigurd Bangsund lived in. Altogether, the day's journey turned out to be a sort of unintended biographical tour.

Philosophical Gas 79 is printed, but I don't know whether I can get it to FAPA for the May mailing, hence these pages. In 1981 I wrote to Ursula Le Guin that I was thinking of dropping the title *Philosophical Gas* in favor of a quote from Housman's 'Shropshire Lad'. She replied: 'I do believe THE WREKIN HEAVES is the title you have sought all your life without knowing it. Was it you that produced Plumbers of the Cosmos? another of my favorites; but THE WREKIN HEAVES – man, that is *class*.' So, a UKL-approved title, whatever you think of the rest. And it's pronounced reekin'.

PG 79 is sort of devoted to my life in poetry. The first comment on it came from my niece Juliet Kirsten, age 15. One of the 'poems' doesn't make sense, she said; there's a line missing. Oh, the ignominy of it! Not that it makes sense *with* the line, but it's supposed to be the definitive version.

FAPA mailing 209 arrived in February, 210 early in April. I have enjoyed reading them, and I have a stack of notes here for mailing comments. I promise – no, that's foolish – I *intend* to do mailing comments more often; that's the other reason for starting *The Wrekin Heaves*. But I am so short of time. I can write today only because I discovered mid-morning that Easter Tuesday is a university holiday and I shouldn't have gone to the office. And writing is one thing, but finding the money for printing is something else. I'll ask Bruce how he does it.

Cheers! 