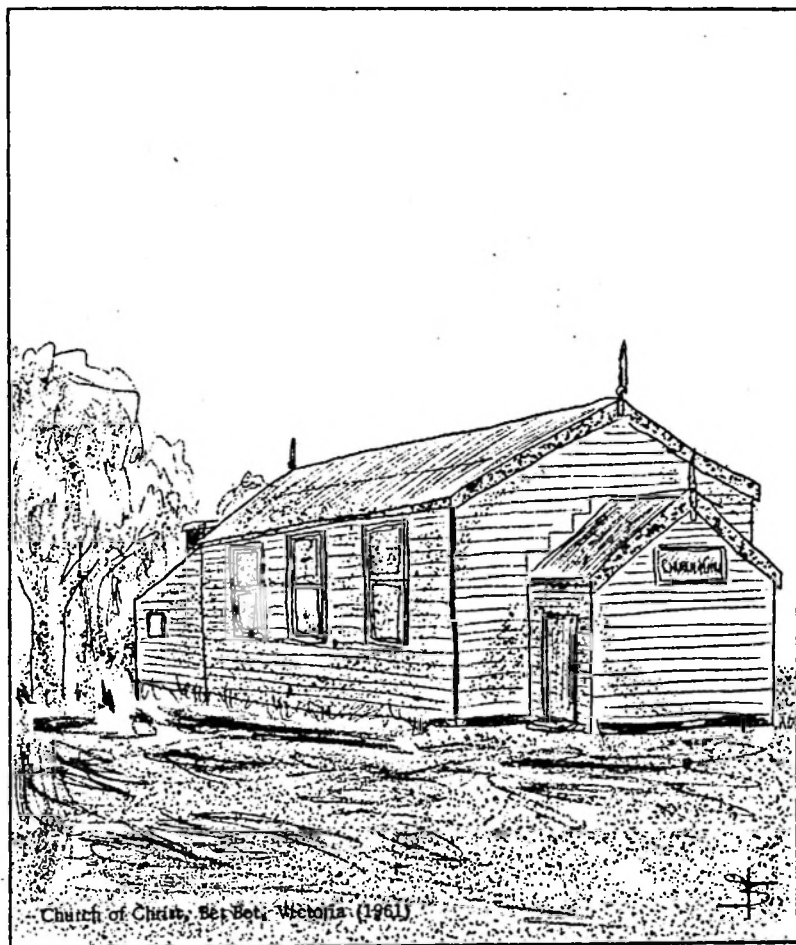


# The New MILLENNIAL HARBINGER

Number Fourteen

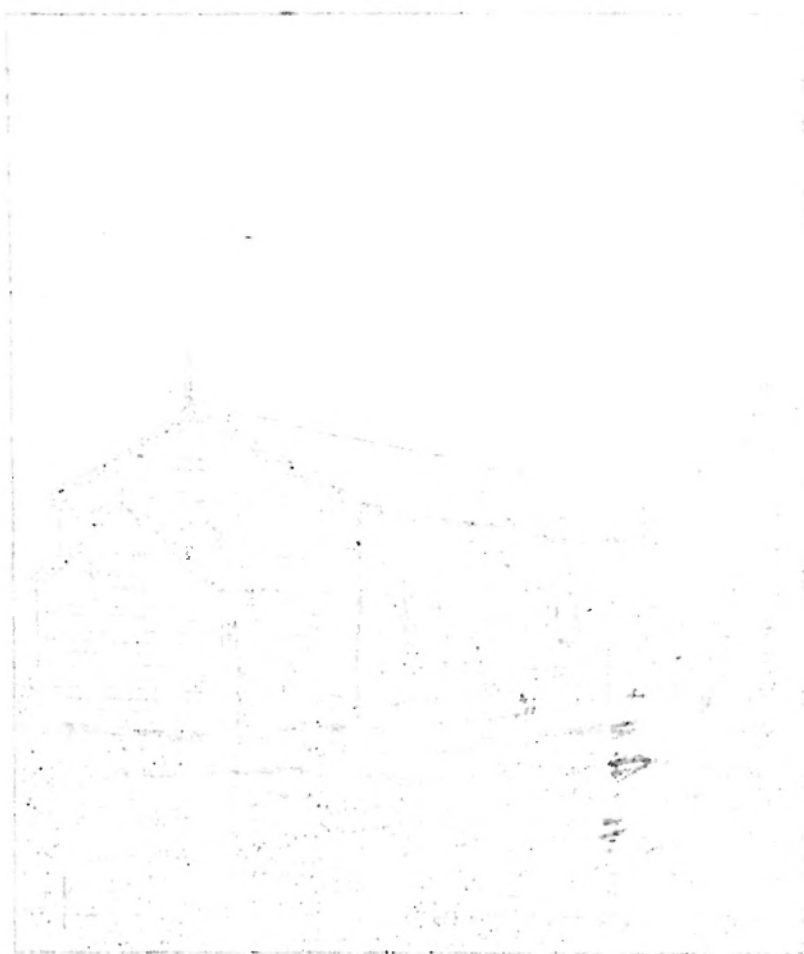
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## THE DEATH OF A VILLAGE

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Sweet smiling village, loveliest of the lawn,  
Thy sports are fled, and all thy charms withdrawn.

I HAVE JUST RETURNED from the meeting that closed the Bet Bet Church of Christ. That was the church where once Banger thundered from the pulpit (a metaphor of course: I doubt if John ever thunders). The church - more correctly, chapel - stood long years after John went from bad to Canberra, but today it has closed its doors. Its membership had fallen to fourteen, with half of that number aged over 80 and the youngest member a grandmother. A community without children, young people or middle-aged people.

(For those of you who wonder about such things, knowing the writer to be a mere 24 in a little while, I should explain that my membership is at Maryborough but that I worshipped at Bet Bet.)

Once - well, Bet Bet was never very big, a mere township on the edge of Havelock, say a couple of thousand in its prime. Enough for instance to run two pubs. Grant's hotel was the first to close. Within its walls the local Presbyterian Church began way back in 1863 (it still continues as the United Church), and the Church of Christ began there in 1886. Grant's closed I am not quite sure when, but my dad related that in 1914 he nearly kissed the daughter of the owner. (I can only stand aghast at the morality of the time!) It was on the other side of the Bet Bet Creek. Gormon's pub was on this side, diagonally across the bridge. It was a two-storeyed place, and there is a painting of it in the Goldfields Historical Museum, with a white horse tethered to the veranda post, and the owner, one James Salter, sitting on the veranda. James was my great-grandfather. He was the first and only elder the Bet Bet Presbyterian Church ever ordained, but he, misguided fellow (Presbyterian view), attended a Churches of Christ mission at Dwyer's Bridge, two miles away, and was converted. Our family is ever seeking new truth (writer's view). Regrettably, James Salter fell from grace. He drank heavily.

In those days Bet Bet fielded a fair sort of cricket team. The story goes that a Melbourne team, and one of the best, came up to play them and got the pants beaten off them. The opening bat for Bet Bet strode

out with a bran-new bat, took the first ball in the centre of it, and lofted it through the first-storey window of Gormon's pub across the road. The impact of that mighty hit left a dint in the bat an inch and a quarter in diameter and one-sixteenth of an inch deep. For the life of that bat the glorious scar spoke of the crack Melbourne team so terribly beaten that they never returned. The cricket team persisted for many years, until most of the players were outsiders, but it folded about twenty years ago.

Gormon's pub was destroyed in a huge flood in the 1930s. I remember dad reading the account of the piano floating out of a top-storey window. We were in the Mallee then, and had only heard of Bet Bet as the place where dad grew up.

Today the president mentioned his grandfather's marriage certificate, and later I looked at this document. His grandfather is described as a 'vigeron'. Now his name was Alderson, Tom Alderson, and he was my grandfather's brother. The two brothers, John and Tom, began the 'Bet Bet Winery', and 'Alderson's Sacramental Wine' went all over Australia and New Zealand. It was, of course, unfermented, but they used to make the other vile fermented stuff as well. So did almost everybody - and this in a Church where alcohol was regarded as the main agent of the devil! I am still pondering this.

The winery business ceased in the 1930s, and the last wine was made for the local church a decade later. Today the family secret was promised to me - and a secret it was, too, jealously guarded. Old Jack Stevens swore he would discover the secret, so he got his grapes and crushed them - 'then I boiled it and scummed it, and boiled it and scummed it, and boiled it and scummed it. Then I put it away and about six months later I tried it. It was the best whisky I'd ever tasted.' Must repeat that experiment...

The school was closed in the 1940s. It stands to this day, solid reinforced concrete. The locals were sold on 'area schools', so we don't have a teacher in the community and the buses go past an empty school to grossly overcrowded schools in Maryborough. Some of the kids catch the bus at 7.30 am, after riding a bicycle six miles to the bus stop. The world must progress, of course.

The telephone exchange went several years ago. It is now a wooden box in the corner of a paddock. The post office still survives, just, but the exchange no longer subsidizes the store and this closed its doors early this year.

The Sunday School went about ten years ago. The Church of Christ used to run this and the Presbyterian children used to come. Now they are all taken to Dunolly to a combined Sunday School. The psychological effect on the church was severe: the children sometimes stayed to church, and of course we gave them a Christmas tree and a

picnic and an Anniversary. Well, that all went and the old folk started feeling old, and when you start feeling old that's the end.

Today the church went, leaving (apart from those other heretics of course) the railway station - and I have a sad feeling that soon there will only be the Bet Bet railway crossing.

The old church was packed today, and there was an overflow meeting outside. You could hardly go to any of our churches in Victoria and not meet folk from Bet Bet, and many of them were here today. For many years Bet Bet was probably the smallest of our churches, yet they gave a higher proportion of their offerings to total Brotherhood work than any other church. They refused stubbornly to pay their Conference fee - and Conference just as stubbornly refused to remove them from the list of affiliated churches.

There was more than local fame. Stanton Wilson, now secretary of the Victorian and Tasmanian Conference, spent a number of years overseas, and was often asked what Australian churches were like. He had been a student minister at Bet Bet, so this was the church he told people about.

Now the chapel has been sold; the money from the sale has been invested and the interest goes to Brotherhood work, so the work of Bet Bet will go on. It will be a long time before the Bet Bet church is forgotten. Perhaps when Gabriel blows the trumpet and all men's works are weighed, Peter will come up and say 'Youse blokes from Bet Bet can go straight in.'

I have sat in many a hard pew, and only those of one church have been more uncomfortable than Bet Bet's. I won't say which church it was in case they sue me for defamation of seats and refund the place out of damages. All of Bet Bet's seats and furnishings have been given to the new church at Warburton, so those venerable tea-stained pews will go on preventing people from sleeping during sermons.

As I started out to say, I have been far and wide, and the Bet Bet church remains unique. It is not that there I first found a wider world (as I did); it is not that there I first spoke in public and preached my first sermon; it is not even the incredibly old aspidistra they had there (which piece of Victoriana I believe the organist now possesses). Once a missionary named Harold House came to the church, and while people sang hymns he made crayon sketches. One of his sketches, a landscape, or perhaps more correctly a seascape - well, half sea, half land -, featuring a palm tree and some surf, a terribly simple drawing, hung behind the communion table for decades. I have been in many churches, but I have yet to see a crayon sketch such as this hanging above, behind or anywhere near the communion table or altar (it's an altar if it's against the wall). And that drawing is to go to our Church Archives!



never quite regained that sense of fellowship, although I have gone close to it at times. I have experienced it occasionally at work; I felt it for a time when I joined a political party; I have felt it often over the past decade in science fiction fandom; but it has never been quite that sensation which comes from knowing that you and your friends are part of 'the body of Christ'.

Once, at a youth camp at Monbulk, I said during a discussion that 'the body of Christ' is a mystical concept. A young chap (very learned for his age) named Keith Doves said I was entirely wrong. Today Keith is principal of the College of the Bible, and I still think it's a mystical concept. Things don't have to be untrue or unreal to be mystical concepts.

Anyway... I left college and went to work in a bookshop. Also I left home and went to live by myself, in a couple of rooms in St Kilda, overlooking a synagogue. I was desperately lonely. My best friend, a bloke at work, was a German migrant who got me talking and thinking about literature, art, sex and other matters of considerable import, and introduced me to the demon drink. How often we discussed religion over our portergaffs at the Hotel Australia! It seems humorous now, but it wasn't then.

I drifted in and out of jobs: clerk in the Victorian Department of Labour and Industry, motorcycle messenger for a printing firm, security guard at a factory, typist at AAP-Reuter, and so on. In 1961 I landed a job as assistant librarian at the Victorian Railways Institute, and the next year became Head Librarian. I stayed there for four years, and enjoyed myself no end. I organized a music club, which met every few weeks to listen to classical records. I travelled around the state inspecting our branch libraries. I was still lonely, but there were plenty of things to do. Among many other things, I wrote a column for the monthly Victorian Railways Newsletter - and I hated it when the editor rejected or changed my stuff. It was probably about this time that I resolved, somewhere deep down inside, to be an editor (one way or another) and a writer (if possible).

In 1963 I met a bloke named Lee Harding, an interesting, jolly kind of bloke, who liked classical music and had read at least three good books. He not only read science fiction but wrote the stuff - but after all, no one is perfect. Somehow I found myself reading this rubbish, and liking it. There was a kind of speculation in science fiction

about things that really matter which I had not struck since I left college.

In 1965 my father died, on Good Friday. I have still not come to terms with this unspeakable sadness, and on Good Friday 1975, when Sally and I celebrate our first wedding anniversary, I shall have very mixed feelings.

Towards the end of 1965 I joined a publishing firm as a sales representative, and during the following two years saw a lot of Australia (and sold a few books here and there). My greatest achievement in the sales line was subscribing something in excess of 1200 copies of the Jerusalem Bible - a book which I still read with great satisfaction.

In 1966 I married Diane Kirsten, and not long afterwards her brother Barry married my sister Ruth. Ruth and Barry seem very happy on their meagre farm in the Western District, especially since 19 October this year, when they were joined by a daughter, Amanda. Diane and I were pretty happy, too, for a while, but by 1970 we knew that the marriage was quite impossible, and we were divorced after a separation of two years. We had no children, and we remain friends, at a distance.

In 1966 also I attended my first science fiction convention, and published my first magazine. Australian Science Fiction Review enjoyed considerable esteem, in Australia and overseas. Through it I gained many friends (some are still speaking to me to this day) and somehow got in, by the back door, to a career in journalism. From 1967, when I left the publishers, until 1972, when I moved to Canberra, my activity and friendships in science fiction fandom (while indescribably frustrating at times) more or less kept me sane. Diane and I moved house more times than I can recall offhand, and I changed jobs and spent long periods unemployed more often than I care to talk about.

One of my crazy ideas, not long after I started publishing ASFR, was that Australia should campaign for the honour of conducting a World Science Fiction Convention in this country. We campaigned, I lost a lot of money and not a few friends in the process, and in August 1975 the 33rd World SF Convention will be held in Melbourne. It should be a lot of fun, especially since I am no longer involved in organizing it.

Early in 1972 I got a job as a sub-editor with the Parliamentary Reporting Staff in Canberra. In March this year I married Sally Yeoland. And here we are, happy, and looking forward to the future with hope - and faith, and love.

