

THE WOLLONGONG PIG-BREEDERS' GAZETTE 5

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April 16th, 1994

I wrote in issue three of this Gazette about a number of coincidences that seemed to be surrounding my life quite a bit last year. They just seemed to keep popping up everywhere I looked for some time and then just faded away completely. One of the coincidences I mentioned didn't happen to me but was one that I vaguely remembered and used as a lead-in to the piece. This was brought up in a brief conversation I had with Michael Clark in Adelaide over Christmas when I mentioned that he was one of the two people sitting on the steps of the Venice Railway Station, the other being Paul Stokes. He looked blank for a moment until he was able to tell me that he hadn't recognised the story at all. Further discussion brought out the unwelcome news that my story appeared to be an amalgamation of two different stories that he had told me about his trip through Europe in the late seventies. I have no idea what I was thinking of - the two must have melded together in my mind and popped out when I needed it. It just goes to show how time changes our memories and perceptions of things.

Judith Morgan (my ex-stepmother - long story - another time) wrote on this topic to make my ill-feelings about Mike Clark's story even worse.

"I grew up in rural Western Australia but have spent my adult life in South Australia, unlike my father who spent his childhood in S.A. and his adulthood in W.A. He was a great raconteur and was always regaling my brother and myself with tales of his youth. One of those every early stories (before censoring became necessary) was about a little boy he went to school with in Port Pirie whose name was Johnny Wurm. Twenty or so years later, or so the story went, John Wurm married a local lady - a Miss Grub! We children were quite sure that this was pure fiction but it didn't stop me trying to outdo Hans Christian Anderson with a tale about Mr. Worm and Miss Grub and their large family of ugly caterpillar children who had lots of exciting adventures before finally turning into beautiful butterflies!

"In 1982 I married Perry's father, Brian, and found myself in the small S.A. Mid-North town of Laura, not far from Port Pirie. It was several months before I discovered that Brian had bought his pharmacy business (25 years before we met) from the aforementioned John Wurm but, not only that, he had also bought his house. So there I was, forty years down a 3,000 kilometre track actually living in the home of 'Mr. Worm and Miss Grub.' I have since met their son Peter who is neither ugly nor a butterfly - so much for fairy stories!"

Which, if true (and I have no reason to think otherwise) makes all my stories totally inconsequential.

Φ Φ Φ Φ Φ

August 25th, 1995

In his novel, THE INFORMATION, Martin Amis has this to say about his character turning forty: "Richard turned forty. Turned is right. Like a half-cooked steak, like a wired cop, like an old leaf, like milk, Richard turned. And nothing changed. He was still a wreck." A tad harsh, I would say, but then, neither Amis nor his characters have a tendency to evince sympathy.

I find this whole thing very appropriate as I turned forty a few days back. The same day as John Emburey the cricketer, Robert Plant the singer, and Mark Loney of fannish fame. It was also the day that Russia invaded Czechoslovakia and that Trotsky got the ice-pick in the back of the head. Cheery thoughts. I was in London in 1990 when I had my 35th birthday and held a smallish "half-dead" party, as in the Biblical sense. I suppose now, though, the actuaries would have it that I'll most probably get to about 80, given as I've made it this far. So half my life is gone.

I didn't approach my fortieth birthday with any great feeling of dread. My thirtieth was worse. That really seemed to signify the end of things rather than any beginnings. And yet within 6 months of that birthday, I had moved from Canberra to Melbourne, changing jobs in the process, and met Robyn, whom I was later to marry. Not a bad six months when I look back on it. At the time (August 1985) I was still in the throes of throwing off the emotional residue of a broken relationship, which, perhaps, was taking me far too long to come to terms with, and being completely uncertain as to my future. Now, here in August 1995, my circumstances could hardly have been different. I'm married, father to a delightful daughter, fully ensconced in work that could keep me occupied for years to come if I so desire, and getting paid a wage almost three times what I was getting in 1985.

In general life's pretty good. Now I just have to learn how to not take on too many outside commitments. Somehow I don't see there being much chance of that.

Φ Φ Φ Φ Φ

September 30th, 1995

Being contactable by email and having some of your writings accessible via the World Wide Web sometimes leads to receiving some rather strange email notes. One such occurred about 6 weeks ago when I was contacted by someone in the National Library of Australia with the news that the Wollongong Pig-Breeders' Gazette had become the subject of a paper delivered to an academic conference. Odd to say the least. I was lead to a Web location (<http://www.nla.gov.au/oz/ausejour/henty.html>) where the full text of the lecture had been stored and it made for some interesting reading.

In essence the paper deals with the problems of the new online journals that are rapidly appearing around the world and the difficulties libraries are going to have in indexing and storing them. Somehow or other my personalzine was chosen to illustrate the subject matter. Why my fanzine was chosen over any others I have no idea. Just lucky I guess. Or maybe the weird title caught someone's eye. In any event the events raised in the paper almost demand some level of examination.

The author, Margaret Henty, introduced her paper by quoting the following paragraph which I have included on the WPBG Web page to offer some sort of explanation to Web surfers who find themselves washed up on this strange shore:

"The Wollongong Pig-Breeders' Gazette is the personalzine of Perry Middlemiss. If you inadvertently entered this page in the vain hope that it might have something to do with either Wollongong or pig-breeding, then I feel you are going to be sadly disappointed. Firstly, I've never been to Wollongong and secondly, my association with pigs runs purely to culinary pursuits." (I wonder if it got a laugh. I somehow doubt it.)

Henty then goes on to list a number of points which she feels makes journals of this sort interesting:

1. It is vanity publishing.

This stung a bit when I first read it. I've always associated vanity publishing with those poor souls who can't bear the thought of not seeing their names in print, and, after being rejected by every publisher in the known world, decided the only course of action open to them is to publish the bloody thing themselves. A last resort in other words.

After the heat of first impression died down I came to the view that maybe she was right. So long as you accepted a wider meaning of the phrase "vanity publishing". I was certainly publishing it myself and not getting paid for it. And there is a certain amount of "hey, look at me" about publishing a fanzine, whatever other reasons one might have. We do it to gain a level of recognition, self-aggrandizement, or just that good old fannish term "egoboo". Any of which are reason enough, and any of which can be construed as rather vain. It doesn't really matter, so long as the issue is published.

Even though I could see Henty's point of view on this I was starting to suspect that she might not have a full grasp of what I was trying to do.

2. It is irregular.

Well, I certainly couldn't argue with that.

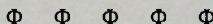
3. It is available free of charge, and without any form of registration for access.

Yes, to the first part and yes and no to the second. Any true fanzine worth its salt is free, or available for "the usual", ie some form of contact between the reader and the author. But the freedom of availability "without any form of registration for access" only applies to the Web version. There the issues are presented as if in an electronic library, where it is possible to get details of the numbers of people accessing the document and even to determine, in many cases, what part of the world they are from, without getting full name and address information. That is just the nature of the storage system. But the printed version can, theoretically, only be obtained from me, either by direct mailout or in response to a written request. So something seems to have been misunderstood.

4. It does not have a print equivalent.

And here the reason for misunderstanding is made clear. The Wollongong Pig-Breeders' Gazette is first and foremost a printed fanzine. The Web version was purely an afterthought, stored that way as a means of cutting postage costs, and hopefully, as a pointer to the type of things I'm interested in. But it is clear that if a reader were to come across the electronic version of this fanzine on the Web, they would have no reason to believe that any other form existed. A clear case of what you see is what you get.

I have no problem with the thesis outlined by Margaret Henty in her paper, and, in fact, found it most illuminating. What intrigued me was the view of the environment of this fanzine which is at odds with my understanding of it. I have come across this mis-conception before when trying to explain to non-fans (either relatives who might know something of my fannish interests, or friends who may not) what I'm actually trying to achieve by publishing this thing. Everything seems difficult for them to come to grips with: the non-financial aspect of the transactions involved, the circulation numbers and geographical variety of the recipients, and the hardest being the fact that I refer to it as a science fiction fanzine but rarely refer to the literary genre within its pages. The major question is always: "But what is it for?" Maybe Margaret Henty's paper will give me a few pointers as to a possible answer.



January 5th, 1996

The year just past wasn't one of my better nor happier ones. It started out well enough; Robyn and I were in work, Catherine was in an enjoyable child-care arrangement, and all seemed relatively right with the world. And then, in the second part of the year, it all seemed to fall apart.

On Saturday 22nd July Robyn's father, Bill, died. Needless to say, an event of this nature has a tendency to colour everything that happens to you for the next few months - it makes everything else seem very unimportant and at the same time depressing.

Bill's death wasn't unexpected. His health had been deteriorating for the past couple of years and for the past twelve months or so his mental abilities had been diminishing quite markedly. He had always had trouble remembering my name (which was bearable) but recently he had also been forgetting Robyn's and her brother, Ian's. To the extent that he didn't recognise his son at least once. On this occasion, Robyn held the door open for her brother and asked her father: "Who's this dad?" He replied: "Well, he looks like a bloke I once used to know". Articulate but with a distressing lack of recognition.

This is a very hard process to watch, especially when the person seems relatively hearty and the process is a slow yet steady one. Bill tended to lash out verbally when he didn't understand what was going on around him, abusing those who were the only ones who could have helped. After a number of instances like this you feel loathe to be co-operative at all. When anything you say can be misconstrued and taken as offensive you tend not to say anything. It just becomes easier that way.

I suppose Bill's health started to go downhill just after Robyn and I got engaged (any implication that there is a causal relationship between the two events will be ignored). About a month after we made the announcement (sorry, can't think of any other way of putting it) Bill was hit with the quadrella: heart attack, stroke, kidney failure and pneumonia. The doctors didn't give him much hope and even called Robyn and Ian up from Melbourne to Bendigo on very short notice. We feared the worst then. But he pulled through. I guess he was just a tough old bugger who didn't want to give in. It took him a while but he did improve and seemed relatively well. He certainly ate like a horse, still smoked (at seventy there didn't seem any point to me in making him attempt to give up), and didn't drink much. He and his wife came to visit us in London in 1992, and we were able to take them around for a few weekends driving through Essex and Buckinghamshire. And then we spent almost two weeks driving through Normandy and Brittany in France. He seemed reasonably lucid then. Didn't like making long walks mind you, and wasn't too keen to sit in the car for long periods without a smoke break.

Which, in some ways, made it harder to accept his gradual mental deterioration. You could tell his short-term memory was going because he would ask you the same question two or three times in a day, and tell you the same stories over and over again. You could attempt to get him involved in something like a television programme or a conversation on sport but he didn't participate for long as his concentration levels started to drop away. He started to refer to his wife by her first name rather than as "the wife", which he had been doing for as long as I could remember. It was almost as if the layers of his memory were peeling away and he remembered bits and pieces from the layer that was outermost at any one time.

Then in June his health took a turn for the worse. He came in from the garden one afternoon slurring his words and panting heavily. We took him to the Bendigo Base hospital where he was diagnosed as non-urgent by the admitting nurse so he got to sit there in the waiting room for forty-five minutes even though there was no-one else about - the sign said non-urgent cases would be dealt with in forty-five minutes, it just didn't say that the time lapse was mandatory. We waited around so long that when the time came he refused to be examined and we went home. In the morning he was better. Not great but definitely better. Obviously his health was now slipping in large bounds rather than small steps. It would deteriorate for a

while and make something of a comeback, only to fall away again. One step forward and two back.

Then, about ten days before he died his wife rang us to say she'd called the ambulance. He wasn't eating, wouldn't answer when spoken to, refused to get dressed, and just sat in his chair, not even smoking. He was there in hospital for a bit over a week. Rob's mother told me she didn't think he'd ever come out. By the time Robyn visited him there he was over the worst of whatever it was, and was let home. Two days later he suffered a heart attack at home around midnight and died in the ambulance on the way to the hospital. From what I was told he appears to have lapsed into a coma almost immediately after the attack. I doubt he knew much of what was going on. He was 75.

The news of his death was a shock, as is only to be expected, yet in the next few days as we tried to shuffle our lives around trips to Bendigo, arranging the funeral and informing relatives and friends I felt the prevailing feeling was one of sadness rather than overwhelming grief. We had all been silently preparing ourselves for the end for the past year or so. Whether this was a good thing or not I have no idea. It seemed to be working. For a few months, whenever we saw Rob's mother on weekends, she'd stop on a Friday night and say: "You know, it's been 6 weeks (or whatever) since your father died". This gradually faded over the months from a weekly statement to monthly and, just recently, to rarely or not at all. It's almost as if the rubber band holding the two together is gradually stretching thinner and thinner as the time passes.

A lot of crap has been written about the "grieving process" over the years, but I suspect it is true that people go through certain phases such as denial, anger, and acceptance. In this instance the denial and anger were over almost before Bill's death. The acceptance is gradually spreading.

I remember someone asking me once whether or not I was over my mother's death. I replied that "you never get over it, you just learn to live with it." It seemed flippant at the time, as I thought the question was rather rude and callous. I still think the question impolite though I'm not longer sure of the flippancy of my answer.

It seemed that we were just starting to get over Bill's death when Ian informed us that he and his other half, Sonya, were splitting up. Taken on its own, this news might not have seemed so traumatic, but coming as it did on the back of the previous family crisis, it assumed a level of drama it might have avoided in ordinary circumstances.

Ian and Sonya had been living together for about three years and had recently been renovating an old house they had bought in the Melbourne suburb of Richmond. I guess I could look back on it now and say that things had been a little tense between them for a few months, though I didn't think this was anything unusual given the two characters and the fact of Ian's father's death earlier in the year. In addition they were renovating that house. Everyone tells me this is the worst time for any relationship. The smallest disputes have a tendency to grow into all-encompassing battles, the number of decisions that have to be made about the smallest details lead to "decision burn-out", when choosing between light switches seemingly takes on the same level of importance (or lack of depending on your point of view) as the colour of the inside walls. There is obviously a graduated level of importance here which gets blurred into one continuous mess if you're not careful.

Okay, so knowing that, why not work your way through the disputes and leave any major decisions on the relationship for a few months? I've mentioned this to Ian who can't work it out either. There appears to be much more going on behind the scenes here than I am ever likely to know or to want to know. The trouble is Robyn and I have been caught up in the middle of it all. Ian has moved into the spare room and looks like staying for the period of time that it takes

him to get his finances together to buy Sonya out. I think this will be in the long term rather than the shorter.

I suppose in many ways I feel myself coming down on Ian's side, firstly, because he's family, and secondly because the whole thing sounds distressingly familiar. As if I was reliving my own break-up twelve years ago. You reckon you get to the point when you can put certain parts of your life behind you and you learn to rise above when, when someone you know brings you back to earth with a thump.

I hadn't meant to get this maudlin, sorry.

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THE MAILBAG

I did receive some letters on the previous issue but they have long since lost any relevance they might have once had.

This is due, in no small part, to the inordinate length of time between issues. My fault, my apologies. I'll try to do better, Just don't count on it.

A couple of letters, from John Harvey and Harry Warner Jr., as I recall, noted that it was rather tempting fate to state, as I did some time back, that the house that Robyn and I bought seems to be trim and sound. As it happens fate was definitely tempted and found wanting. The roof sprung a leak. About three thousand dollars, much anguish, and anger directed at tradesmen later, we seem to have reached a point where we're happy with the topmost part of the house at least. Still not perfect, but getting there.

Almost the same can be said for the garden. The front yard has been completely overhauled: new path, new plants, new trees, new watering system. It felt like I was spending nearly every weekend out the front, pulling up the old concrete path, digging the trench for the new brick one, eradicating the crappy old lawn, spreading the manure everywhere, and planting; forever planting. It seemed like it would never end. However, with a few minor adjustments - like getting the plants we actually paid for rather than the giant variety that we planted, and a bit of fiddling with the watering pipes and sprays - we may have seen it completed. But you know, I can just hear herself say, "I've got this great idea..." I don't want anything to do with it. And don't mention tree-ferns.

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AUSTRALIA