



Dr Edgar Peter Brooks, a Welshman in Wonthaggi

On Monday 3rd April 2017, a celebration of the life of Dr Peter Brooks took place in the Wonthaggi Town Hall. Although he was exhausted from his long fight with cancer, there was hardly a day he didn't put on his bow tie, his tweed jacket and his fedora and go out to face the world and mingle with friends. On Saturday, 25 March, he was having lunch with one of those friends, after a morning of sitting with his wife, Alison, who was convalescing in hospital, when he suddenly collapsed. Word spread very quickly that Dr Brooks had passed on.



During his 30-year career as a doctor in Wonthaggi, he touched so many lives that there was standing room only in the Town Hall on the day the people came together to commemorate his life. What follows are some of the words his sons and best friends spoke for all of us there. That he had such eloquent people paying tribute to him is testimony to the quality of Dr Brooks' many-faceted character.

Mark Brooks:

Peter was born 3rd March 1934 in South Wales. His father Tyrrell was a miner, but left Wales for America in search of a new life. His mother could not be persuaded to leave Wales, so Tyrrell returned to her and took over her family's butchering business. Many times Peter told his children how lucky they were his father returned to Wales. Otherwise, they would have all been Americans.

That was one of Dad's unexplained prejudices. He had a lot of prejudices, but they never applied to anyone he knew. And mostly it was tongue-in-cheek.

When he was sixteen, Peter entered St Catherine's College in Cambridge to study medicine. At Guys Hospital in Central London he completed his studies and then went off to become a surgeon, which consisted of a series of 6-month rotations where the doctors lived in residence in various hospitals around the UK. At Penbury Hospital in Kent, he met a young Australian doctor named Alison and they got on very well. It appears that the reason he appealed to Alison came down to *smell*. Peter had a habit, which was unusual at that time in England, of having a bath every day and washing with Cousins Imperial Leather soap. Apparently that was enough.

Peter and Alison got married on the 12th of October 1959, and as young marrieds continued with their training moving around hospitals in the UK. Two children arrived. Stephen was born in June 1960 and Mark in 1962.

A number of factors influenced the young family's move to Australia. The British economy was still in a terrible state after the war and Peter thought Australia was an opportunity to get into something a bit more positive. There was also the attraction of coming to a new country for a new start and as well as encouragement from Alison and her family. In 1966, for the cost of £10 the family flew to Melbourne and for the rest of that year lived with Alison's family in Brighton.

January 1967, Peter found he couldn't get an appointment in a big teaching hospital in Melbourne so he looked further afield. And he came to Wonthaggi. He joined the Wonthaggi Medical Group where three young English doctors were already working, and it seemed to us that all of us were just like the members of an extended family. Very quickly all of them became just like the members of an extended family. The family included receptionists, nursing staff from clinic and hospital and maybe in part that became a

replacement for the large family Peter had left behind in Wales.

A major change came to Peter's working life in Wonthaggi in the form of John Crellin, an Australian trained surgeon who was a left-hander...

John Crellin:

I have researched extensively the Welsh character. I've studied the literature and I find the Welsh to be intelligent and eloquent, to be not be so tall, to sing a lot, to be cunning. Those of us who were brought up during the war and shortly after will recall the radio lilt of Wynford Vaughan-Thomas, the famous war correspondent and social commentator, and the words of Dylan Thomas, poet and story teller. Both were Welshmen. My mother's last husband, named Tony Thomas, was also Welsh, and he taught me the sixth Welsh characteristic, that of taking the piss. I thought that all Welshmen were called Thomas, until 44 years ago when I met Dr Brooks. I found him to be intellectual, eloquent, not so tall, he could sing a lot and he certainly could take the piss.

He was a multi-skilled medical practitioner, with extensive experience, including extensive surgical experience. In the early days he taught me a lot. We soon established a close professional and personal relationship, which continued for thirty years on the one hand and until today on the other. Colleagues, past and present, respect and have respected Peter's knowledge, judgement and intervention when required. He knew his patients well, this being the days before computers had interceded in that relationship. He was a popular and competent practitioner, and looked after us all.

He was widely read, rational, with a keen intellect and a sound philosophy. His surgical talent was well-known.

(As a young medical student, Peter's son, Mark, got to assist John and Peter at the Wonthaggi Hospital, which Mark says was a lot of fun. Sometimes Alison was there as well and so that made for an unusual kind of family activity.)

Stephen Brooks:

Peter enjoyed many things, but one of the things most important to him was community. Our family came to Wonthaggi and Peter and Alison

soon found a circle of friends, which led to many gatherings around the table and later around the fire. Peter loved to cook, to share and enjoy food and wine. He was an early adopter of the budding Australian wine industry He had adventurous tastes and became a dab hand at Indian curries.

His friends in Wonthaggi who are now gone were Georgie McCrae, Vernon Atkinson showing him how to BBQ and sharing poetry, Ted Shrives chasing him through a good argument just for the sake of it, Ed McKenzie sharing fishing, prawns and cricket.

Although not religious himself, he'd had a staunch religious upbringing so perhaps it was partly habit that had him and his family present every Sunday at St George's Anglican church. I think his belief in community rather than God and his sense of obligation to it is what took him to church, that and the singing. With his father an accomplished tenor and choir master and his mother the church organist, music played a huge part in his early life and it is an interest he never lost, from carols around the piano, to local musical productions and groups, and trips to Melbourne for concerts and shows.

Most important of all in Peter's life was Alison. A number of times we heard Peter says, "Ya pays yer money and ya makes yer choice." Well, Peter, you've paid your money and I think you've enjoyed your choice.

David Sims:

I came to Wonthaggi with my wife, Vera and our small son, in 1964 to establish a law practise. When we first settled in Wonthaggi, we lived in white Road and we happened to have as our next-door neighbours the newly arrived Doctor from England Gordon Myles, with his Irish wife, Mary, who took us in to become part of the extended family of doctors connected to the Medical Centre. Three years later, a new doctor arrived to this burgeoning and thriving practice, but he wasn't an Englishman; he was a Welshman, with his Australian wife and his two small sons. It was the beginning of 50 years of wonderful, wonderful times together.

Peter and I were very much involved in the first twenty years of the Wonthaggi Theatrical

group that was formed in 1969. Our first major production was Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Pirates of Penzance*. We were all learners and we had a professional director for that production. Over the next twenty years we produced six or seven other G&S production, which all well received. I was given the responsibility of director and I had as my musical director, Edgar Peter Brooks. Peter had a superb understanding of music and the whole structure of music. The chorus work in G&S was written in four parts: Soprano, Alto, Tenor and Bass. Each of those four parts had to be learned individually before they were put together to make one harmonious sound. Peter was so thorough and so relentlessly meticulous that those choruses over the years were some of the highlights of our productions and it was a wonderful credit to him.

There was a moment of Peter's musical direction that was especially creative. In *Gondoliers*, the two gondoliers arrive in Venice to choose their brides from a group of maidens one of whom was played by the legendary Gwen Derrick. There was a passage where she had to sing to the Gondoliers, which had a high note that she just couldn't reach. Every time she came to that note Peter had an excruciated look on his face. As much as Peter did his best to assist her she just couldn't get it right. Came the dress rehearsal, all of a sudden Peter made a decision to absent himself from the orchestra pit, leave the musicians to themselves, and armed with his little baton, he quietly crept to the back of the stage, stood behind Gwennie and as she approached the note, he used the baton to great effect. She hit the note and never missed it again during the season.

Peter performed in several of the productions. He played the evil and menacing Deadeye in *Pinafore*, and he delighted in playing the foppish duke who was going to be turned into a medieval poet in *Patience*. He had some dialogue in *Patience*, which he absolutely revelled in. He had to say, "I don't like it. I never did. I don't know what it means. I do it, but I don't like it."

Andy Schrape:

Hello Peter, Hi Brooksie, Good morning Dr Brooks, G'dday Doc: all the fond greetings Peter would receive on his regular trips with Alison to the

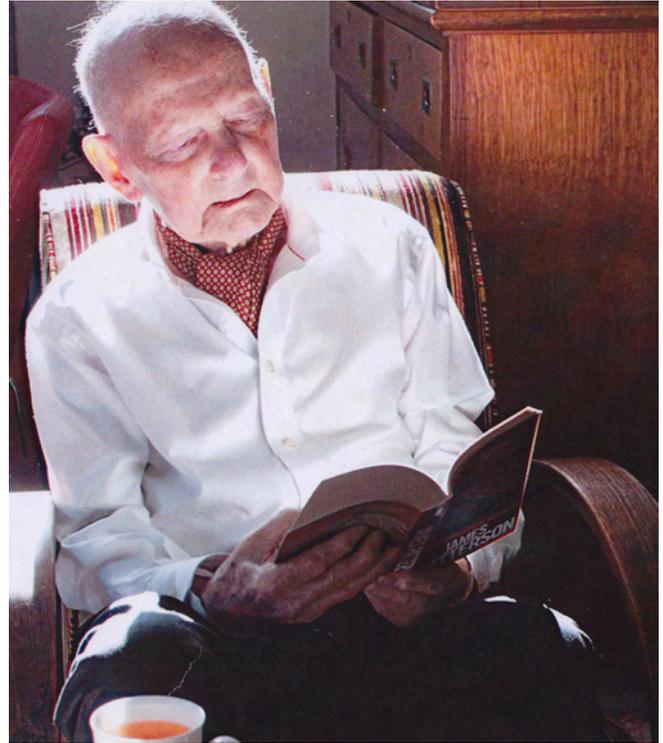
Wonthaggi shopping area. It was a delight seeing how everyone liked and admired them both. Peter was always quick with a friendly quip and a thumbs-up. This level of admiration for Peter came from his genuine interest in people, their lives and well-being, not only during his working life but in retirement too. His care for the population, for many from birth onwards, along with an extraordinary recall, made him a walking genealogical reference for many of the families he came to know over his thirty years of medical care in his adopted hometown. Being able to explain the different lineages of the McCrae family took admirable skill even for some of the McCraes.

I first met Peter through work in the late 70s dealing with various human conditions, which brought people and police together at the casualty section of the hospital. I witnessed first hand his caring respect for every one no matter where they came from or what circumstances brought them there. It was much later at the library, however, that I came to know Peter as a friend. It was there he enjoyed a regular Monday visit and a chat with old and wise Arthur Quilford, who was another famous local historian and coincidentally born in the same area of Wales as Peter. Despite many hours devoted to work he made time for family and his many interest in the town, especially the Historical Society. He valued the importance of preserving local history for the generations to come, the invaluable link to our past that leads to the present and the future. His work with the other dedicated volunteers allows us to understand people and place in the context of their time.

We all know his list of credits well: the hospital, Bass Coast Community Foundation, Wonthaggi Theatre Group, Bass Coast Chorale, to name a few. He has made an incalculable contribution to the cultural and social fabric of this area. Retirement in 1999 didn't mean slowing down for Alison and Peter. While keeping up with social poetry evenings, historical society meetings around the region and several Melbourne concert subscriptions, they put much energy into establishment of the Bass Coast Community Foundation in 2002. The foundation now supports a range of education and community initiatives, including assistance for low income families

education needs, support for tertiary study health life-saving and an performance award to help with opportunities for talented children pursuing music and dance in Melbourne.

It has been a great joy to be in Peter's company. I shall miss that company in the simplest of ways. Late morning coffee at Longstaff Street and serious discussions on such important subject as our hope for one more season of *Foyle's War*, revealing the body count in the last *Midsummer Murders* episode and my consternation as to why constable Barnaby never gets admonished by the chief constable for accounting for at least half of the UKs homicides each week, not to mention the always welcome return of new episodes of the *Antiques Road Show*. I'll miss Peter conducting the backyard BBQ and dispensing the odd drop of his favourite Chateaux Tabilk. I'll miss his enthusiasm for life, his family and his friends. He was always good humoured, kind and generous. Even when he was so unwell himself, he never complained and showed profound concern for others. Despite everything, he lived as well as he could for as long as he could, just to be there with Alison and to cherish every moment he could with family and friends. Peter devoted fifty years to this area with medical and community service, theatre and music, and he now thoroughly deserves his own revered place in our history here. And to use his favourite words, "A Splendid Life."



Peter mostly seemed to enjoy his work. Seeing patients all day in the clinic seemed to wear him out a little so he was very keen, upon coming home, to sit down and read a book while he regained the power of speech.