

ENDGAME – Farewell Bill Bottomley

On Bill's 76th birthday he announced to us that this would be his last. His father died age 76, and Bill had decided that since he had inherited many of his father's characteristics, that he would die at 76 as well. He certainly did not want to live to just short of 100 like his mother did, enduring considerable pain, and suffering in her last years. But Bill did not die at 76, and celebrated several more birthdays.

The anti-androgen therapy Bill had undergone for many years to manage his prostate cancer had taken away his strength and stamina. He could no longer do many things he had excelled at. He lost the ability to "swing" when playing the keyboard. He could not do wood turning, his fine motor skill which he used in drawing and painting had gone. So many of the talents he had explored and enjoyed throughout his life slipped away from him. He could still write, and continued to produce several books, but his aging computer – he refused to upgrade – kept making mistakes. It wasn't always the computer... The black dog, who had been an occasional visitor to Bill was almost always hanging around.

Bill decided he was going to live whatever life he had remaining his way! The rest of us heavily involved in his life had to fit our lives around that. After 15 years of not smoking, Bill bought some Erinmore tobacco and took out his pipe again – smoking was a habit he had enjoyed and he was only going to do things he enjoyed.

His health was deteriorating. Gangrene in his left foot, due to poor circulation. Surgery improved the circulation. But a couple of years later, same problem with the right leg. More surgery. Several falls – at one stage breaking 11 ribs, several other times only a couple! Low red cell counts meant frequent iron infusions, and the occasional blood transfusion. I can't count how many times I took him to Wyong hospital A & E. Plus many planned visits for surgery, investigations, and treatment. It was exhausting, for both of us.

It finally reached the stage where I could no longer look after him. My health had been deteriorating for several years, and I no longer had the stamina to look after him on a daily basis, let alone take him back and forth to the increasingly frequent medical and hospital appointments. It was time for him to move to a nursing home. Bill, Fi and I agreed he should be close to Fi, rather than near my place, as we were unsure how long I would be able to drive, to visit him or take him to medical appointments. Or even be alive!

He moved into Bethany Aged Care in July 2020. It took him a while to adjust to life in the nursing home, but he became more settled when he moved from a respite room into his own room – large, airy, and with a balcony. The sociologist in him kept making observations about his new situation and writing about them - on the new computer he had to adjust to.

The aggressive prostate cancer which Bill had been diagnosed with back in October 2004 had been in remission for many years, but it flared again in early 2020. He declined any further intervention, except pain management. His condition deteriorated over the next few months, and by Xmas 2020 he no longer made his occasional visits in to town. He rarely left his room, except to go to the smokers' area two or three times a day. His other routines – Bill liked personal routines - involved a stiff whisky at 4 o'clock, a glass or two of red with dinner, some chocolate, and an hour chat with me on FaceTime - at 5:30, on the dot! Fi visited regularly and took him out to medical appointments, and for a drink or a meal.

In late May Fi took him to an appointment with the oncologist. Bill was most unwell that day. He was taken straight to the hospital, where they determined the cancer had aggressively spread throughout his entire body. The next day he was taken to palliative care at Wauchope. Once there,

after talking to the staff, he relaxed. All the anxiety he had about unwanted heroic interventions, like he had seen his mother endure subsided. The caring staff there listened to his wishes, followed them and supported him for the couple of weeks he remained there. He was 84 when he died on June 9, 2021.

In those last days, weeks and even months Bill did not want to see anyone other than Fi and me. I was no longer able to drive distances, so my granddaughter came up from Canberra and drove me up to Wauchope a few days before he died. The staff brought him outside in a wheel chair and we spent the afternoon sitting and talking in the garden under a large Jacaranda tree. It was lovely, and the last time we saw each other after 25 years together.

He would occasionally talk to friends on the phone. But he could not cope with talking to people face to face, once he knew the end was near. Just as he couldn't face seeing his mother in her dying days. That she might have wanted to see him and give him a hug good-bye, did not matter. Or that his friends would want to come and see him one last time. Bill had been adamant for many years that he wanted to die his own way, in his own time. And with no-one by his bed at the time.

Bill, being Bill, had planned what was to happen to his body years before he died. He wanted his body to go to science, and about 15 years ago arranged with the University of Newcastle that they would take him. There was always the possibility they might not be able to accept his body, if for example he died of an infectious disease, or his body could not be embalmed. So Bill also arranged Option B – burial - he did not want to pollute the atmosphere by being cremated. But if he was to be buried, he wanted to be buried on his property, at Wirrimbirra. So he sought permission from Wyong Council to be buried there, should the need arise. Yes, at 100 acres the property was large enough. But we had to be sure he would not contaminate any waterways, so a hydrologist had to be engaged, at significant expense, to verify it was OK. Yes, that was fine, all approved. We tied a yellow ribbon around a crow bar, and put it in the ground where the grave would be dug, if and when he was to be buried. It sat there, marking the spot for at many years. Bill even arranged with his mate Kent, who had suitable machinery, how the hole was to be dug.

The palliative care people contacted Newcastle University just before Bill died, to let them know they would be receiving his body sometime soon. Bad news! Newcastle Uni had changed their rules since he had made arrangements with them - they now only collect bodies locally, within 100 km. And he was in Wauchope! Suddenly Option A was ruled out. He was devastated. Did this mean we had to go with Option B? But the wonderful palliative care team at Wauchope assured him they would solve the problem, and within hours had found another University who would take him, putting his mind at rest. So Bill continues to be of assistance to students at the University of Technology in Sydney.

A couple of weeks after he died, we held a farewell for Bill at Wirrimbirra. He hadn't lived there for a number of years, as he chose to permanently stay at my place once his health started to deteriorate. The young couple leasing the property were happy for him to be farewelled from the place he built with his own hands, and they love. It was a sad but happy send off, Bill's music playing in the background, and many of his friends there to talk and share stories about the creative and talented individual that was Bill Bottomley. He lives on in this website, and in his many creative endeavours, including the mud brick house he built at Wirrimbirra.