

John Harold McCracken - A Tribute

5 March 1906 - 16 September 1999

We give thanks to God for a full and active life of ninety-three years. John Harold McCracken was always known as Harold. It is said that his mother had been reading a book about the Battle of Hastings. She had been impressed by King Harold! There can't be too many J. H. McCrackens, but the Myer Emporium had more than one in its accounts, which once led Beth to raise an eye-brow and call for explanations of some debits. Harold's father was a successful builder in Western Australia at the time of Harold's birth. His father lived to be 96, so he gave Harold the right genes for a long life. Harold's mother was a lady to whom her sons were devoted. So my first point is that Harold was a *family man*. In regular visits to the firm he founded, the last one only a few months ago, he asked about the families of his former partners and long-term members of staff. He was always interested in what was happening. I said we were losing someone. He replied: "And what are *we* going to do about that?" After his marriage to Beth the focus shifted from the family in which he was born to the family he was making: to Beth and their daughters, Barbara and Elspeth and Heather, and then his daughter's families. Harold was not a proud man. He had a few endearing vanities. But he was immensely proud of his daughters and their achievements. But these were only the successive focal points of his family connections. The McCrackens were cattle rustlers expatriated from Scotland to Northern Ireland. His mother's family of More was more directly Scottish. Through his mother's family he had numerous Australian connections. His mother's sister Elsie married William Henry Buxton: there were thirteen children in that family. His mother's sister Marina married Ernest Clarke, whose sons Murray, Eric, and Noel were very close to Harold and his brothers Bill, Stuart, Gordon and Frank. Ernest Clarke was a missionary in China and as school boys Eric and Murray lived in the twenty room house in Howard street Kew which the McCrackens acquired in Victoria. Harold's mother's brother James Murray More established a prosperous steel company. This had far-reaching significance for the education of the Clarke boys, and for the future employment of Bill and Stuart. Gordon McCracken was to marry Beth's twin sister Margaret. They brought into the range of Harold's family connections all the Whitehead clan. His range of family loyalties kept on growing and he embraced them all. He was a family man.

Harold's early schooling was at ^{Scot's} Scotch College in Western Australia. His later schooling was at Scotch College in Victoria: he was one of the last students at Eastern Hill and one of the first at Hawthorn. He went on from there to study law at the University of Melbourne, as did Gordon too. Harold served his articles with the firm of Westley and Dale and went on to work for five years with Corr & Corr before establishing his own practice of McCracken & McCracken on 4 March 1935, over 64 years ago. Harold was a *professional man*. Nowadays the professions are dying: they are becoming mere businesses, with budgets and profit projections. That is not how Harold saw his calling. His skills were there to serve others. True, the labourer was worthy of his hire, but that was not the centre focus of the service. The facilities of his practice, and the time he spent each day in it, were readily diverted to serve his Christian interests. Harold gave his

clients loyal service, and that loyalty was reciprocated, as his firm now serves the later generations. My evidence is relevant. I joined him in 1958. We were together until he retired thirty years later at 82. It was the happiest of partnerships. We often laughed until the tears ran down our cheeks. Harold was a man to whom nothing human was alien. He accepted people as they were. True, he sought to introduce them to our Lord Jesus Christ. To that extent he would have them different. He had a certain cynical realism in his appraisal of his fellows, Christian or non-Christian. But it was acceptance too, and there was no malice in him. It is not right nowadays to speak of national characteristics, but I will say that he had the doggedness, determination, and industry of a Scot, and the Irish ability to be all things to all men. He was a man of vision and tenacity who got on well with all sorts and conditions of people. It made him *a lovable man*.

A turning point in his life, a decisive turning point, came at the close of his year of Articles. Harold was invited by his cousin Murray Clarke to join a camp in the Dandenongs on a property of the tea family of Griffiths. Les. Griffiths, later to die a missionary martyr in Iran, put the camp together. Daily they went from camp to the Upwey Convention. It was the precursor of the Belgrave Heights Convention. Now you need to know that Harold's parents had met in an Assembly of Christian Brethren. There his early Christian faith was nurtured. But at the University it wilted and withered. At the Convention he was to make a fresh, decisive, adult, informed, commitment. He was to be *a Christian man*. This commitment was given greater substance as he sat at the feet of Canon C. H. Nash, an evangelical Anglican who had started the Melbourne Bible Institute in 1920. Les. Griffiths, an engineer, returned to the University to study medicine, for missionary service. They both had a concern for an evangelical witness in the University. At 90, Harold wrote: "I still remember the day when Les Griffiths in his old Dodge sedan and I drove into Spencer street station with palpitating hearts to met the one whom we believed God had sent to commence the Melbourne University Evangelical Union." Harold was then 24. The visitor was Dr the Revd Howard Guinness, of the brewing, banking, and clerical family. So it was that the Evangelical Union was founded on 14 March 1930. Two days later a great Rally was held for secondary students in the New Malvern Picture Theatre, Harold to the fore. A few days later the Crusader Union was formally constituted. Harold was to be its president for over 21 years. It was later absorbed by Scripture Union and lost to sight. I should add that the evangelical witness in the universities flourished and in January 1936 Harold chaired the first Annual Conference of the Evangelical Unions in the Universities of Australia and so was formed the Inter-varsity Fellowship now known as the Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students.

Already we have mentioned a number of associations which were to remain with Harold all his life. There is yet another: his concern for overseas missions. Three students from Melbourne Bible Institute had started the Borneo Evangelical Mission. Harold joined its Council and became its President in 1935, and remained so until it was absorbed in O. M. F. This led to his visiting Borneo in 1940, 1968, and 1970. This mission took seriously the indigenous principle. The missionaries majored on Bible translation and Bible teaching: the peoples of Borneo evangelised their own peoples. The result was the formation of Sidang Injil Borneo - S. I. B. - or the Evangelical Church of Borneo. That was an enduring

monument to the endeavours of those three students and those who supported them and their successors. Harold's contribution was formally recognised by the S. I. B. Harold was to become a Council member, later a life member, of the Melbourne Bible Institute, the Bible College of Victoria as it is now. He became President in succession to Alfred Coombe and Ralph Davis. Bill Clack, who died recently, wrote of Harold: "During his Presidency 1980-1985 he gave a quality of spiritual leadership, the culmination of 45 years association with the College". Under the guidance of God, he added, both Arthur Cundall (the then principal) and Harold McCracken (the President) eliminated a considerable financial burden flowing from the building of the new campus at Lilydale.

You will note how the committed man was becoming *the committee man*. Harold really believed in the positive benefits of group consultation. Leadership arose out of communal deliberation. So he spent countless hours in committees. When in the early days there was little or no paid support the execution of decisions lay with volunteers such as him. Harold had skill in handling committees and the number in which he served kept on growing. Before long he was on the Council of the Upwey Convention. He was for many years a Vice-president. Every year from Boxing day to New year he was on the platform and playing a part in all the planning. As evangelicalism flourished, so the significance of the Convention has waned. But it was in his day the stimulus to much evangelical endeavour and a recruiting ground for missions..

The Committee commitments continued to grow. Mr W. M. Buntine, formerly headmaster of Caulfield Grammar asked Harold to join the Board of the Bible Society in Victoria. He was later to be its Chairman. Mr Walter Beasley asked Harold to join the Board of Australian Institute of Archaeology: he was to serve on its Executive for many years and become a life member of its Council. Harold joined the General Committee of the Melbourne City Mission. He was to be its President for many years. On 30 March 1980 Prime Minister Fraser amid civil tumult opened the Harold McCracken Nursing Home, a hospice for the dying, conducted by the mission. It was named for Harold because of 42 years service on the Committee.

So Beth really knew the shape of her man's life when on 18 December 1941 she married Harold in the Scotch College Chapel. Harold worked at the office until the very last minute: he was *an industrious man*. So this family man, professional man, committed man, committee man, became a married man. Beth has supported Harold throughout their married life. The whole of it has been lived in the same residence in Maysia street Canterbury. Without her he could not have done what he has. She has borne a more than ordinary burden, because of his activities, in the care and nurture of their children. The Christian Church owes much to Harold, but also to Beth. I want to emphasise that Harold was not a place-seeker: he was not looking for scalps for his belt. In almost every case he was asked to take on a task. The external call preceded the inward call. What is to Harold's credit is that when the external call came he responded, and responded positively as part and parcel of his original commitment to Jesus Christ as his Lord and Saviour.

Harold and Beth made the Hawthorn Presbyterian Church their regular place of worship. Eric Clarke had known the then minister Robert Swanton at Ormond College: they had roomed together. In due course, in 1949, Harold was ordained and inducted as an elder. He took on the Superintendency of the Sunday school. I adhered to this congregation in 1951, and became an elder in 1958, so that we worked together at office and at church. Harold and Beth later transferred their membership to Surrey Hills Presbyterian Church. As recently as 4 July I preached here. Harold led the elders in prayer before the service. He was *a man of prayer*: that prayer is a precious memory for me.

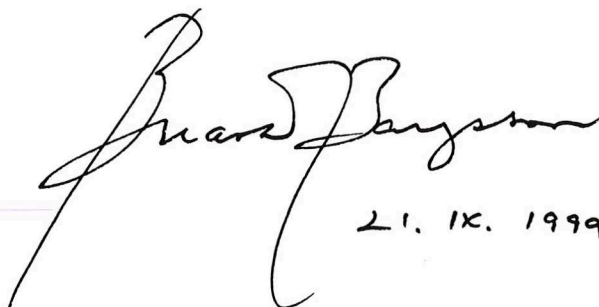
In 1945 Harold became deputy Chairman of the Interdenominational Missionary Fellowship. It later became the Missionary Department of the Evangelical Alliance. Now with similar organisations in other states it is the missionary arm of Australian Evangelical Alliance under the name Missions Interlink. Harold was a foundation member of the Australian Evangelical Alliance in 1957. When it acted as a catalyst to secure an invitation to Billy Graham to conduct Crusades in Australia, Harold organised the counselling after the meetings in the Myer Music Bowl. One activity of I. M. F. was a language school. After five years Wycliffe Bible Translators - Summer Institute of Linguistics took over this work and Harold was a foundation member of its Council. In 1995 he was a guest of honour at a Dinner to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the inception of I. M. F.

In 1959, Harold was approached to chair the Australian Branch of Bible and Medical Missionary Fellowship. It arose out of the old Zenana Mission: it is now called Interserve. As Chairman Harold participated in the fifth and sixth Quadrennial Conferences of the entire Mission held in India in 1966 and 1970. This and other missionary interests caused him to take a part in the Australian-Asian Association and to help Overseas Christian Fellowship. He and Beth acquired a new role: they stood *in loco parentis* for many young Asian brides who married in Melbourne. So later when Harold and Beth travelled in Asia they were often greeted as long lost parents. They won an enduring place in the hearts of many scattered over the face of the globe. Harold and Beth had five or six overseas trips together from 1973 onwards. The excuse was often to visit Barbara and Elspeth in England. But they had a delight in travel: in seeing the beauty of the natural environment, in learning the history of places, in enjoying other cultures, and in renewing friendships in East and West. But most of all their especial delight was to greet, meet and know their six grandchildren, James and Michael Trauer, Daniel and Eleanor McCracken-Hewson, and Andrew and Philip Shelley.

Harold was blessed with good health. he rarely had a day off from work because of illness. But early in 1967 he suffered a dramatic, severe, and almost fatal illness when his gullet burst. In the providence of God, speedy surgical intervention saved his life. He was left with a scarred throat which gave persistent trouble without being a threat to life. In July this year he had a bout of influenza. It developed into pneumonia. He never fully recovered. The pneumonia came back. Last week we knew he was fighting for life. He grew weaker. There was an episode of severe discomfort. Medication made him comfortable. He slipped from us to a better world in the presence of his loving family.

In 1982 Harold was made an Officer in the Civil Division of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire for his services to the community. Harold was *a great man*, not as the world counts greatness, but as the Church counts greatness. He was great in the service of the Most High God, and of His Son Jesus Christ. He was a man, a family man, a lovable man, a professional man, a committed man, a committee man, a man of prayer, a great man, but above all he was *a man in Christ*. He was a Christ-bearer. He had attributes which Jesus Christ imparted to him. Jesus is the Wonderful Counsellor. So was Harold. We will miss that wisdom. We will grieve at the loss of his presence. But Harold has counsel for us still. He had a sister born with brain damage who died at 22. Harold tells us: "My Christian faith tells me that she has been reunited without fault or blemish with her mother and father in that heavenly place where there is no more pain or sorrow." It is in a similar confidence that we face a future without Harold and we hold out that confidence to his loved ones whose loss is far greater than ours.

A friend visited Harold in his last illness. They shook hands in farewell. That it was the last time was an unspoken assumption. As the visitor left he saw Harold raise both arms as if in blessing. It is with Harold's blessing taken from the closing words of his *Memoirs* that I close: "To all and sundry", he says, "whom I have met along life's way, I say, with all sincerity: God be with you until we meet again".



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