

## Ipswich & West Moreton Inc.

### THE NEWS ~ February 2021 Part 2 of 2

#### Profile of a tutor: Eric Boel



Mining the rich past of philosophy tutor Eric Boel creates a dilemma – what to leave in, what to leave out. Take these anecdotes, for example. Years ago when Eric was working with the University of Queensland Biology Department one of his tasks was to keep the department supplied with live cockroaches. He collected them by placing cockroach traps all round Ipswich, down dark alleys, behind buildings. Around this time CCTV cameras were being installed throughout Ipswich. One evening, having dropped off all his traps, he was tailed, then pulled over by the police. They wanted to know what he was up to. Catching cockroaches, he told them. That must be one of the strangest entries in the police daily log book.

Then there was the time he was collecting prawns in the Logan River for prawn virus research undertaken by the University of Queensland. When he made his usual call to Fisheries to let them know he was headed out he was warned to be wary as a crocodile had been sighted in the river. Somewhat sceptical he headed out as usual. His tinny dragged a metal-framed net to catch the prawns. But suddenly the tinny was stopped and pulled back with such force that it stood virtually on end, Eric clinging on for dear life. When the net was 'un-snagged' Eric examined it and, sure enough, the net was ripped apart and the frame bore the marks of teeth.

But, let's start at the beginning.

He was born in 1943 in Rotterdam, the eldest of three children, a brother and sister. "I was born in the middle of the war when the German army was all over the place." His father was in the underground - "something he would never talk about."

Eric has a vivid memory of, in 1945, thousands of planes flying over. "I was presumably lying in my pram and these were the allies flying over. It's something I can still visualise – I would have been only two years old."

His mother spoke little of that time. "One thing she did tell me was how she would take packages across Rotterdam, obviously for the underground, with the packages underneath me in my pram."

His father was a house painter but was in the army at the time of the Nazi invasion on May 10, 1940. The Dutch army surrendered on May 14, 1940 and he was sent to Germany to work in factories. He later escaped and made his way back to Holland where he joined the underground. "He never talked about what he did in the underground. He became a very difficult man as he got older. He was very negative. Later our relationship fell apart.

"What prompted them to emigrate I'll never know. Dad had his own business and must have been doing well because there was a lot of house building going on." Eric was 10 when the family left Holland. "It was just an adventure for me. My parents said we were leaving because our lives would be much better in Australia. I don't buy that – I'm sure life would have been fine there. Maybe they were trying to get away from memories.

"But we had a good new, middle-class house with a front yard and a little back yard, unusual for Holland. I still don't know why they went. Maybe the house painting business was more complex there than what it is here.

"Anyway, by 1968 immigration had dried up – things had settled down in Europe and most people were happy to stay."

Eric and his siblings did not speak much English though most Dutch children were taught some English at school. His mother spoke English, German and French, as well as Dutch.

Headed by ocean liner for Melbourne they stopped off at Fremantle where they were given a few hours shore leave – their first contact with Australia.

"It was a Saturday and we were allowed ashore about 11am. My parents wanted to buy shoes for us and we got those but most shops were shut – a typical Saturday afternoon back then."

Walking down the deserted main street of Fremantle they saw a pile of newspapers on the pavement outside a shuttered newsagency.

"My parents didn't know why they were there but they assumed they were discarded so took my sister out of her pram and in went the newspapers and we took them all back to the ship. Poor newsagent would never have realised next morning his papers were now headed off on the high seas with the Dutch."

"When we arrived in Melbourne we were sent straight up to a disused army camp in Albury Wodonga. We were probably there about 6 weeks when my father heard of work in Brisbane where he got himself a job and later we came up to join him. "We finished up at a migration centre at the Enoggera army base. But the migration centre was for females and their children only so my father wasn't allowed there."

Then my father found a house to rent, from a Catholic priest. So we all became Catholics and moved in. In fact, my father was a lapsed Catholic and my mother Presbyterian. "I went first to the local Junction Park State School then later to the Mary Immaculate Catholic Primary School in Annerley. After primary school I went to Villanova College in Coorparoo.

"Throughout my time at Villanova my relationship with my father just got worse and worse. While we were renting my father decided to build a house so bought a block of land – the cheapest one he could get, on a steep slope. "My brother and I were expected to help. We cleared the block and started building the house. Because of the steepness of the block we had to concrete stumps in and we had to mix the concrete by hand. We couldn't afford concrete mixers.

"This went on for a few years then the church asked if we wanted to buy the house we were renting. My father agreed to do that but the removalists said too many stumps on our block were in the way so we had to remove them before we could get the house on site.

"We spent years working on that and my father became increasingly cranky. Eventually it got too much so I left home and got a job at the University of Queensland in the Veterinary School at Yeerongpilly."

His relationship with his father never improved. "I've done a bit of research on the effects the war had on men like him. They had all sorts of problems on top of the war, surviving day by day under brutal occupation and a war going on and the stresses of the underground." His mother felt torn but her role was beside her husband.

"Today people might see it differently but not then. I never had her support that I am aware of."

Part of his job at the University was to collect cockroaches for research. "I used to head down Coronation Drive with a bucket on each side of my motorbike handlebars to collect cockroaches from drains and sewers, helped by the Brisbane City Council. "I did 10 years with the research scientists studying parasites. At the end of the 10 years marriage was on the way – I had met a girl working as a secretary in the same department at the University. "She was Presbyterian and I was Catholic so we struggled to find a church that would marry us. A colleague at the University was a Seventh Day Adventist and he heard of the problems we were having and suggested we visit his church in Sandgate. "We did that and fell in love with the church. I totally rejected the Catholic church from then on. We were married in the Seventh Day Adventist church in Sandgate. A little later I decided to become a church missionary.

I left the University after working in parasitology for 10 years and became a colporteur, selling church and religious books door-to-door. "I spent one year door-knocking for the church then looked for something else. Word went out within the church which resulted in me being taken on by a contractor as a house painter. We used to help my father in our school holidays so I knew what the work was all about. "I did that for 6 months then went back to the University, into the same department, working with the same professor."

He has no academic background but had a good understanding of the science around what they were doing, and an impressive capacity to learn, such that he was soon a fixture in the department, covering many areas from research to lecturing. When the department opened a Marine Biology section in 1972, Eric was one of the first employed there, working on parasites in fresh water fish. "I spent a lot of time on trawlers and arranged for commercial fishermen throughout Queensland to provide us with tagged samples and we got a lot of information from those. My job was both field and laboratory work."

By the time he returned to the University the family were living in Ferny Hills and they had three children, one boy having been adopted as a baby. "My life was pretty full on. I prepared teaching materials which I provided to students the night before class. It was a good life."

But before retirement he suffered a marriage breakdown which he says left him "gobsmacked

– I really didn't see it coming and I was very upset. I still loved her. Twenty years we were married."His wife at the time was working as a secretary for Tony Fitzgerald during the Fitzgerald enquiry and those demands contributed to the marriage unravelling. He offered to move out so his wife and children could stay in the family home and, for a while, he camped out on a stretcher in his office at the University. "Nobody knew about but I would use it if I was out on the water late into the night and it was easier to just bunk down in my office. So I had a refuge to retreat to."

He bought a caravan and moved into the Tivoli caravan park where he lived for three years before moving back into the family home prior to the formal divorce after which his ex-wife and children moved down to NSW.

"Some time after that I got an official call to say our adopted son's birth mother wanted to contact him. My ex-wife refused point blank but I felt it was something that should go ahead and told them so. It was arranged that he, now a young man, would come and stay with me for a while and his birth mother would come down and meet him. "I offered for Hazel, his birth mother whom I had never met, to stay at my place where my son would be, rather than spend money on a hotel and she accepted my invitation. "The meeting with her son went well but when he returned to his mother in NSW, Hazel stayed and we've been together ever since. And my adopted son, Hazel's son, has cerebral palsy so it turned out that he is more comfortable staying with his mother, my ex-wife, in NSW."

Eric's journey from a 'believer', a practising member of the faith, to his position today which he describes as questioning, maybe agnosticism, was accelerated through his active involvement in Seventh Day Adventist programs and promotions. "I was heavily involved with the Seventh Day Adventist conventions and the last one broke me. The Adventists were the first to use the new Queensland Performing Arts Centre in Brisbane and that convention attracted thousands of people. We filled the concert hall five times over a few weeks. I was very involved in that and at the end was exhausted and disenchanted.

"That's when I started reading more widely, especially the philosophers. That led me to the conclusion that my beliefs, my faith, were misplaced. I embraced the philosophers. The study of philosophy has changed me." His interest in philosophy saw him scour libraries for every book on philosophy he could get and

he then heard of U3A Ipswich's philosophy classes. He joined the class which was then tutored by Gavin Ott, a retired padre from St Paul's Anglican Church in Ipswich who later stepped down due to ill health. Gavin is also a past president of U3A Ipswich & West Moreton. Eric was a natural for the role. Today he runs one of the most popular classes on the U3A calendar. His capacity to lead a class is informed by his reading, by his immersion in Christianity in the past, and, as many of his students attest, his life journey has enriched all the philosophical themes in his character.

"My problem when I was involved in the church was that I never questioned. I do now. Of course there were many aspects I did enjoy and still would. Comradeship, for one. But you've got to come to a point where you ask – does it all add up?" A significant influence on his thinking was the writing of Robert W. Funk who died in 2005. He was an American biblical scholar, founder of the Jesus Seminar. Funk sought to promote research and education on what he called biblical literacy. His approach was historical-critical, with a strongly skeptical view of orthodox Christian belief, particularly concerning the historical Jesus. He and his associates described Jesus' parables as containing shocking messages that contradicted established religious attitudes. Funk taught at the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem, was chairman of the graduate department of religion at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. "His writing had a profound impact on me."

Eric embodies the Chinese proverb that to teach is to learn. After the COVID disturbance of last year Eric is now back in the chair, taking philosophy classes at U3A's Woodend Campus, which he also manages on behalf of U3A.

He and Hazel live in a unit at One Mile and Eric was recently elected chair of his body corporate – a position in which he says he has often to call on the patience and restraint of some of the ancient world's most renowned philosophers.

