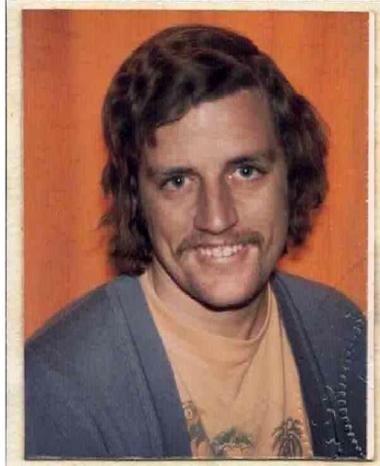


We wish to thank the Special Commission of Inquiry and its supporters for the care taken in exploring Peter's case and are grateful for the opportunity to make a family statement.

Peter Sheil: Outline



Peter John Sheil was born in Sydney on the 7 February 1954, the eldest of five children by Peter Barry Sheil and Patricia Marie Sheil (nee Laing). Our parents were living in Murrurundi at the time, but our mother travelled to Sydney to stay with Peter's grandmother, Margaret Sheil, prior to the birth.

Peter Barry and Patricia had been married a year earlier on 6 January 1953 in Randwick. Patricia was a trained nurse but stopped work on her marriage. Peter Barry was an engineer with the Department of Main Roads, and the family moved around country NSW as he was assigned different roles. After Murrurundi, they lived in Tamworth (where Christopher was born in 1955), Bega (where Hugh was born in 1956 and Robert in 1959), Goulburn (where Margaret was born in 1961), before returning to Sydney in 1967 and settling in a family home they

built in South Coogee.

Peter attended Catholic primary schools in Bega and Goulburn, and high school at Waverley College, initially as boarder until the family moved to Sydney. After school, he studied teaching at the Mitchell College of Advanced Education (now Charles Sturt University), and Business Studies at the NSW Institute of Technology (now University of Technology). He worked for the taxation department in Sydney and was later employed in the maintenance of rental properties and driving taxis.

The person

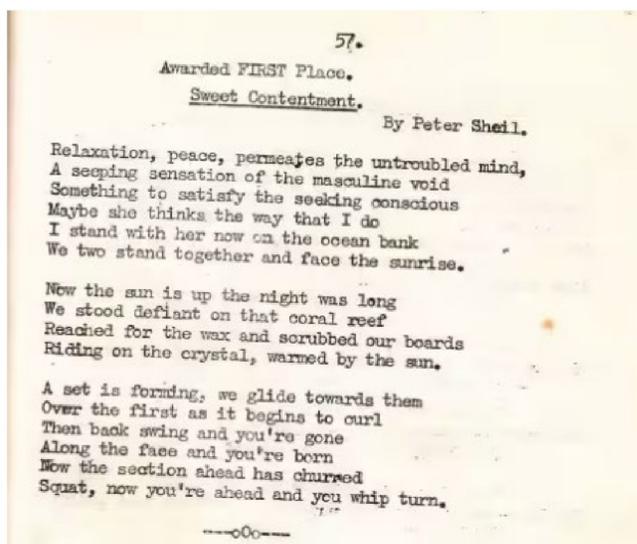
As a child in various country towns with three brothers all close together in age, Peter had a vigorous outdoor life, experiencing many adventures in camping and hunting rabbits (which he loved, almost obsessively). He played sports, including rugby, tennis and his favourite, squash. Peter was a keen surfer at the eastern suburbs' beaches and as part of many vacations up and down the NSW coast. While the family lived in South Coogee, he was awarded his Bronze Medallion for surf lifesaving.

Peter was an above average school student. He completed the School Certificate in 1970 (with Advanced Level passes for Geography and History), and the Higher School Certificate in 1971 (achieving five Second Level passes). He was once awarded a prize for Religious Studies and studied speech and drama outside school. In 1969 he won first prize in the '16 years and under' section of a district competition in the Festival of Australian Poetry. He lacked the application (and probably the interest) to succeed in his tertiary studies, but his innate intelligence told in his 1976 results that showed a High Distinction amid three failures due to abandoning the subjects.

Peter made associates easily, and at times recklessly. He always had a small group of loyal friends, several longer relationships, and many short-term ones with girls. He was attractive, always fashionably dressed, and usually very fit with blonde curly hair, blue eyes, and a tan. He loved music, closely followed the then breaking development of rock 'n' roll and played electric guitar. He was a keen photographer, a voracious reader, and an avid follower of current affairs, with a gregarious polemical personality. Peter's outlook could probably be fairly described as libertarian, but he voted conservative.

Sweet Contentment

Peter's prize-winning poem is reproduced below. Some insight into his mind can be glimpsed in the contrast between the movement in the first and last stanzas, the subtle shifts in tense, and the selective use of rhyme for the climax. 'Now the sun is up the night was long' is a fine line of poetry.



Mental illness

After completing school, Peter had the first of several episodes of severe mental illness including psychoses and extended bouts of depression requiring hospitalisation on a number of occasions (it was between these episodes that he returned to study). At the time of his death, Peter was living in supported accommodation at Clovelly and was an outpatient of the psychiatric clinic at Prince of Wales Hospital (and continuing to drive taxis when able). He regularly walked from Clovelly to swim at Coogee Beach and socialise at the Coogee Beach Hotel, as he did on the night he died.

Family impact

Peter's death devastated the family, visiting an irrecoverable loss.

In a sense, it is difficult to separate the devastation of his death and the circumstances from the impact of his mental illness. The 1970s and early 1980s was a time when those with mental illness were moved from hospitals into the community without a great deal of support and services. Mental illness was discussed in hushed tones and was a source of some shame to our father and constant worry to our mother. Because of the unresolved nature of the circumstances of his death, there was also a view amongst many in our circle that the 'slipped down the cliff' story was a cover for Peter taking his own life — again a source of potential shame to our mother, given the attitude of the Catholic church to suicide.

Our mother used to say that no one can possibly understand the impact of losing a child unless you experience it yourself. Peter's death was a source of deep sadness for the remainder of her life and a well of unresolved emotions for our father. Likewise, we don't think it's possible to convey the shock of losing a loved sibling so prematurely unless you have experienced it yourself. With the benefit of hindsight, we would have all been better off had we known the cause of his death and possessed the knowledge that his life had been treated with more respect.