

## **How a poem emerged from the Royal Commission into the Failure of the West Gate Bridge**

The Royal Commission began on 28Oct1970 and had its final day of sitting on 15June1971. Its final report was dated 14Jul1971. It involved a total of 80 days of sittings. The Principal Commissioner and Chairman was Mr Justice Barber, a Judge of the Supreme Court of Victoria. A fellow Commissioner and the key Technical Advisor was Professor Frank Bull, the Professor of Civil and Structural Engineering at Adelaide University.

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When the bridge collapsed in October 1970 I was a very recent civil/structural engineering graduate working in the Melbourne office of a newish Adelaide-based engineering consultancy. The founders of the consultancy had been encouraged by Prof Bull to found it, and for many decades he maintained contact with them. This contact included technical advice when they had particularly "knotty problems" to deal with. As I evolved into one of the knotty problem specialists in the Melbourne office I had occasional contact with "The Prof" over the years, and we developed a low level friendship.

Many years later, when The Prof was approaching retirement, my employers invited him to Melbourne to give a lunchtime talk to the staff. The subject was to along the lines of "lessons from the Westgate Bridge collapse". Frank and I had not had any interactions for a while, so the two of us had a bit of a catch-up while he was in the office.

I can only remember one specific thing from the excellent talk he gave. At one stage, presumably to provide a brief respite from the heavy stuff, he told us about an amusing incident that occurred during a particularly long and tedious (but absolutely vital) period of technical evidence. Frank was listening attentively, but after many hours he wondered how the Principal Commissioner was coping. So he glanced across to the Bench, expecting to see a pair of very heavy eyelids. To Frank's great surprise, His Honour Justice Barber (hereinafter "HH") was wide awake, furiously scribbling notes down on a sheet of paper. After the end of the day's proceedings, Frank commented to HH how impressed he had been that HH had been keeping up with the extremely technical evidence of that day. HH raised an eyebrow at Frank and passed the sheet of paper to him. It was a poem that HH had been writing. Frank had made a copy of it, and he read the poem out to us at that lunchtime talk.

Quite a few years later, I was having dinner with a group of legal friends. Somehow the conversation came around to matters legal, and I related Prof Bull's Westgate Commission "poem" story to the group, along with my totally inadequate attempt at remembering a few lines of the Commissioner's poem. One member of the group was at that time somehow involved in the publishing of "Victorian Bar News", and he asked me whether I could obtain the full poem for him so that he could include it in that magazine. By that time Frank was fully retired and was living on Kangaroo Island. I wrote to him and asked him if he could send me the poem, and also whether he would have any objection to it appearing in the magazine. Frank then sent me the poem, and said he would be happy for it to be published.

I sent it off to my barrister friend, along with the same sort of background I am giving here. It took quite a while but eventually it was published, in Victorian Bar News, Spring 1991, No. 78,

under the heading "A Piece from the Past", and badly split across its pages 64 and 65. Unfortunately the person who assembled the final article (not my friend) left out quite a bit of the background, which lessens the story a bit. Perhaps that person, presumably a lawyer, did not want to suggest that HH had been writing poetry DURING the hearing?

Here is the item as published, in its entirety.

----- Victorian Bar News extract begins -----

### A PIECE FROM THE PAST

The following poem was written by the Royal Commissioner into the collapse of the Westgate Bridge, during several days of incessant testimony on one superficially minor bracing member. Two key points were, first, that the brace had been manufactured in "mirror image" by using the detailed drawings of the East approach span for the West span, and secondly that on top of this the drawing had been mis-read and the bolt holes placed in the wrong location. Either one of these on its own would have resulted in a piece that clearly did not fit, and the mistake would have been found. The combination of the two produced a piece that looked OK, fitted perfectly, but was seriously weakened.

The very worst thing in this whole damn case,  
Is the long sad tale of Diagonal Brace.  
From birth to death we had to trace  
Its history. Was it a damn disgrace,  
Or was it the Freeman Fox's ace?  
If you look at the transcript at any place,  
You'll see why we dropped to a funeral pace,  
Seeking to find if it had enough space,  
To clear the edge of the carapace.

When at the end I have run my race,  
And come to my final resting place,  
You will find, carved deep on my tombstone's face,  
"His sins forgiven, by God's good grace,  
He's been troubled enough by Diagonal Brace."

----- Victorian Bar News extract ends -----

Now, in 2026, after seeing the excellent play "Westgate" and consequently doing a bit of digging on the internet (including reading parts of the Commission's actual final report) I know that the bracing members concerned were in no way "superficial", and they were not part of the original design or erection plan. They were part of an attempt to reduce and/or stabilise some buckling that had developed in the bridge section during the erection process. All extremely difficult to explain to a non-engineering audience. Small wonder HH's mind wandered to poetry.

Robert Niall  
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