

A LIFE OF SUCCESS, BETRAYAL AND TRAGEDY

Pro HART

dying to be heard

DAVID
HART

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I would just like to honour my father Pro Hart, without him this book wouldn't exist. Thank you dad for being an inspiration, and for all that you have done for me over the years. It was a real joy to write this book in your honour; you deserve it.

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Introduction

The best way for me to introduce this book would be to first introduce myself, then explain what the book is about and why it is written.

Obviously from the cover you will see that my name is David Hart and I am the author of this biography on Pro Hart. What you may not be aware of is that I am Pro Hart's youngest son.

I have never written a book before so this makes this book my first. Before you start to panic about the money you just spent on buying this book, I would like to reassure you that this book would be one of the most life changing and genuinely inspiring biographies that you will ever read. It will make you laugh, and it will make you cry, but most of all it will make you think about the possibilities and the destiny of your own life.

I have often wondered why no one has ever attempted to write a biography of Pro Hart before now. Sure there have been a lot of articles and illustrated books of his work as an artist, but no one has ever attempted to reveal the life of the man behind the art. Personally I think if any journalist had attempted it, they would have met with failure. I don't say that to be elitist or arrogant in any way, it is just that Pro Hart, the man, was such a complicated individual. In fact, there is probably no one more qualified to tell his story than someone who knew him intimately, someone who could describe the man that no one else knew or saw. Someone in the family, someone like me.

The reason I am telling you this is because there are probably

a hundred other ways this book could have been written by someone with a degree in journalism and who is a whole lot better at crafting words than me. I genuinely feel, and I say this with the utmost respect for those with these talents, that no one else could have successfully taken you as far into Pro Hart's life and personality in the same way as I am about to do.

I am going to be really up front with you right from the beginning of this book. I do not have time for meaningless waffle and I can't stand it when people prattle on. I just like to hurry up and get to the point. If I have included something in this book to read, then it's worth knowing. There are other things that Pro Hart did over his life that I did not include in this biography because it would simply make this book too long and boring and would have been a distraction from the facts that are truly important.

I have intentionally broken the book into chapters containing sub chapters or sub headings if you like. The reason for this is that I wanted the reader to have the ability to put the book down and then pick it up again without the feeling of having lost the mood or the story behind what I was trying to say.

This book is about Pro Hart, the man. While I do talk about his art, it is not really a big book about art, there are no pictures of his paintings as there are already a lot of books about Pro Hart's art out there. Yet at the same time, it is. What I am trying to say is that it would be nearly impossible to write a book on Pro Hart's life and not make reference to his art because art was his life. The whole purpose of this book is to tell Pro Hart's story, and to tell it the way Pro wanted it told.

The first section of the book is all about where Pro came from and how he grew up. More than that, it is an insight into the events that shaped one of the most popular artists in our nation's history.

The last section of this book is probably the most challenging to read and without giving too much away, let's just say that it's an amazing series of unfortunate events that are tackled head on by an incredible stand on convictions and faith.

I have done my best to keep my own opinions out of this book because it is a book on Pro Hart not David Hart, so you will have to forgive me if I cross the line here and there. Sometimes I get a bit emotional.

You will also discover as you read on, that Pro has some very deep religious beliefs and strong social opinions, and with that I have been very careful to articulate them exactly the way Pro Hart wanted.

This book has been a privilege for me to write. It is a tribute, if you will, to a truly great Australian. Much of what you are to read is a result of hundreds of hours in research and personal interviews that have never been made public before. Some of the material and stories were even previously unknown by his family and friends.

This actually was Pro's last chance to tell his story. During the weeks of conducting my last interviews for this book, Pro lost his ability to communicate. He was debated by his critics his whole

himself above the man in the street, he saw himself as a vessel, a carrier of an incredible gift. He spoke his message through his hands and paint, crossing cultures and social status. He connected people together through his art.

This is Pro's story.

chapter one

A STAR IS BORN

The Mulga Hill wedding is probably one of the most well known paintings that Dad has painted and it features, of course, the Mulga Hill pub, one of Broken Hill's most popular watering holes for travellers and thirsty locals alike. It was a hive of activity and an endless inspiration for Dad, so it was only fitting that his birth should take place just a few metres up the road at the Warrawee Hospital, which was actually more like a large house with hospital beds. Little did people know that as they crowded the public bar at the Mulga Hill Tavern talking about the horse that lost them money or sharing a joke or two, that just up the road on the 30th of May 1928 on a crisp cold night, a baby boy named Kevin Charles Hart was taking his first breath in the town that he would grow to love and make famous to the world through his life and art.

THEY CALLED HIM PRO

Pro was an amazing man with an equally amazing mind, and there wasn't much he didn't know about. There was, however, one question that used to drive Dad crazy, and that was people at exhibitions

coming up to him and asking him why they called him 'Pro'. Obviously it's a long story and he hated explaining it, especially when he would get asked the same question by almost everybody that spoke to him. It drove him up the wall and I'm sure it was the reason he lost most of his hair. He would even try to avoid attending opening nights or doing interviews because he knew he was going to get harassed with the dreaded question, "Why do they call you 'Pro'?"

The long and the short of it is that aside from his painting, Dad had a fascination with anything mechanical. Even whilst working in the mines he was an active inventor and became renowned amongst his work mates for his ingenuity and many inventions. Because of this he became known as the 'Mad Professor', which his mates eventually shortened to just plain old 'Pro'. So it's a name that has stuck with him all of his life.

Dad has invented some amazing things that really worked. I recall once he made a pram rocker out of a few bits of steel, a plank of wood and an old windscreen wiper motor from one of his cars. When you switched it on it had three speeds and would gently rock a pram back and forth along a wooden guide that sat between the pram's wheels. I can tell you now that it came in pretty handy with some of the grandchildren.

As a kid I would spend a lot of time with Dad in his shed helping him work on his inventions, but I could never work out how he knew so much about so many things. He really did have a brilliant mind and the fact that he could even find anything in that shed of his was a miracle in itself. Both the shed and the

yard surrounding it were a sea of tools, magnets, scrap metal and engine parts. He built engines that ran on water, engines that ran on air, engines that ran on magnets, air cannons, machine guns, a perpetual motion machine that stopped, an anti-gravity machine and a zero pollution carburettor that actually works and is listed on the Stock Exchange under 'Save the world air'. During a short spell in the army Dad worked on a trigger design for a machine gun which he claims the army stole from him and eventually used in the F1 machine gun.

Despite Dad's dislike in repeating the story of his nickname, it's fair to say that his remarkable inventions were what inspired the people of Broken Hill to call him Pro.

GROWING UP

One of the things I enjoyed so much was spending quality time with Dad over the few months before he passed away, listening to him reminisce about his early years and about the people and places that shaped his life. It was as though he had turned on a light switch for me and suddenly I could see so much more deeply into my father's paintings. And it's not until you understand him and get to know him that you realise just how wonderfully and accurately his paintings depict not only his experiences, but also the harshness of the landscape and the character of its people.

Dad's early years were spent growing up on the family sheep station with his older brother Bob and two sisters Margaret and Marie. The property itself was a vast expanse of gum tees, red

earth and salt bush. It is situated 14 kilometres east of Menindee, a little town one and a half hour's drive east of Broken Hill.

Larloona Station was owned by Dad's grandfather Arthur Edward Hart, or as he was more commonly known, A.E. or A.E. Larloona Hart. His wife Mary had the maiden name Lindsay. Dad claims she was a relative of Australian artist Norman Lindsay. Dad's father Robert Lindsay Hart, or as he was more commonly known, R.L., was employed by Dad's grandpa A.E. to manage the property. This included looking after sheep, organising shearers, running the shearing sheds and pressing and bailing the wool during the shearing season. According to Dad, his pay was a joke at only three and a half pounds per week. They never seemed to have enough money to get by, and it seemed that the harsh reality of a battling family would be his lot in life.

Dad recalled doing things tough most of the time. There was very little to do at Larloona and Dad found station life as a child somewhat boring. It wasn't so bad if you were an adult and you could work, but as a kid he had nothing to do.

None of the kids rode horses. Dad told me that he hated horses; he reckoned you 'couldn't trust 'em' which I find ironic coming from someone in an industry that was built not only on the back of sheep but the good old horse as well.

Playing with toys wasn't an option either. Apparently Dad's father R.L. never let the kids have much in the way of toys, not even a billycart, although Dad said he once found a rusted old pedal car that must have been left behind by one of the shearer's

kids, but it was so far gone with rust that he couldn't resurrect it. So in a rage of complete frustration he threw the rusty pedal car into the fork of a nearby tree where it stayed. Over the years the pedal car eventually became completely engulfed inside the trunk of the tree itself. Occasionally if R.L. was in a particularly good mood he would let Dad and his brother Bob use his 410 gauge shot gun to shoot targets and rabbits, but Dad says it was so "clapped out" it could shoot around corners and was about as useful as an ashtray on a motor bike. It's a good thing he wasn't relying on rabbit meat for his dinner.

When R.L. was out of the house, Dad and Bob would peel off small strips of cane from an old cane chair on the back veranda and sneak off into the scrub and smoke them like tiny cigarettes. He said "It tasted like crap, but it didn't cost us anything."

Dad's grandpa A.E. owned the property and lived in the Larloona Homestead while Dad and his family all lived in the station manager's house just a few metres away. It was cramped and small, but it was home, and you had to make the best out of what you were given.

Not far from the homestead was a swamp that saw plenty of activity from the kids, especially in the wet. Dad recalls his brother Bob and himself soldering together two pieces of corrugated iron into a makeshift boat which they would sail out onto the swamp. If the season was right, there would be baby ducklings on the swamp and Dad would catch them and bring them back to the homestead, where he would raise them until they were big enough to release back into the swamp again. As Dad got a little older, if shearing season was on and things got

really busy he and his brother Bob would get called upon to help out around the station with rounding up sheep on foot, pressing wool or doing odd jobs around the shearing sheds.

When Dad and his brother and sisters weren't working or doing chores they would have to do school work, which in those days was all done by correspondence. His mother Kathleen would supervise all the children and was very strict, making sure all the school work was completed and posted off every week. Dad's introduction to school work was a very significant turning point in his life and was almost certainly where he discovered his incredible gift for illustrating. He wasn't really very expressive with his words and at times found it hard to say what he really thought about things. So instead of writing stories and essays he would illustrate his lessons, this of course was greatly encouraged by his correspondence teacher Mrs. Cunningham. He loved drawing and would sketch to fill in most of his spare time, illustrating life in the bush and the people he knew. Dad even put together a small book of comical drawings that got passed around to the kids on neighbouring stations for their entertainment. He then began to realise something important: that people enjoyed art, especially when it involved a comical depiction of a situation or person they knew.

His early years spent on Larloona Station weren't his most exciting; in fact Dad would tell you it was really boring. In any case it was a significant time that would etch itself into his mind and heart. During his last years on Larloona Station, times were tough and the work was hard without much reward, until finally Dad's father R.L. had enough of it, and in 1941 he quit his job as the station manager and moved Dad and the rest of the family

to Broken Hill. This left Dad's grandfather A.E. to run the station.

Dad's family moved into a small house in Thomas Street and R.L. took a job as the 'reservoir guard', patrolling the local water supply at Stephen's Creek Reservoir. Dad said, R.L. would ride his push bike to and from work every day with his rifle on his back. He did this for quite some time until he got another job working for Tooth's Brewery, brewing K.B. Lager and delivering kegs and cases of beer to all the pubs in Broken Hill. It was certainly a different life to what they all knew but at least there was work and they had a roof over their head. R.L. was known as a good, clean living man and was as honest as the day is long. He worked hard and did his best to give his family a good, stable life.

REACHING ADULTHOOD

R.L. knew that a good education was the best thing he could give his kids so as soon as he could, after moving the family to Broken Hill, he started the kids' education at the Marist Brothers Catholic College. Dad didn't seem to mind High School and made quite a few lifelong friends, some of whom turned out to be quite successful people in their own right. They included John Connelly, who now owns Australian Aircraft Sales, and June Goff, who was later professionally known as June Bronhill, the opera singer.

Dad's brother Bob however wasn't too fussed on school and town life. He took off and went back to the bush after only six months in town and returned to Larloona Station to take on his

Dad's old job as station manager. He stayed on for some years, helping his grandfather A.E. Larloona Hart.

Dad went on to achieve a year eight level education but did fairly poorly in most subjects, especially mathematics. After about 12 months at school he snagged a job working for a local bakery delivering bread by horse and cart, which is ironic seeing how he hated horses so much. Dad said he had more arguments with that stupid horse than any one he's ever known. It had to be bribed with bread to get it to do anything. Needless to say he wasn't terribly inspired to continue working with a horse for any longer than necessary.

Twelve months into that particular job he contracted peritonitis which, according to Dad, almost killed him. After a short recovery from that, he decided his days as a bakery bread cart driver were over and he ventured south to the Victorian town of Mildura, where he worked on the fruit blocks driving tractors and picking grapes for about two years before returning to Broken Hill.

At the age of nineteen he got a job as a miner working underground with the N.B.H.C. Mining Company (New Broken Hill Consolidated). In those days it seemed everyone worked down the mine and if you were born and raised in Broken Hill the chances were that your father was a miner and his father before him. It just seemed like a natural progression and it would be quite likely that you would see your brothers and mates in the mines along side you.

Dad drove the battery operated Loco mostly but also laid a lot

of the underground rail line. He did pipe fitting here and there when required and worked the ore face as a miner. Dad said he also did some time as a plat man (lift operator) and brace man which involved operating the lift cages that took the men from the mine to the surface, letting miners on and off at the different levels in the mine. Like most of the men in the mine Dad hated working underground. He said to me once, "Everything you do down there is dangerous." At the end of everyday he would look forward to hearing the end of shift whistle and returning to safety and fresh air on the surface. He often reflected on mates he knew well that had died in accidents underground, some of them in parts of the mine where he frequently worked. It was dangerous work but you got paid big money to do it, which kept the landlord happy and put food on the table.

ART & MINES COLLIDE

In all my life I don't think I have ever met another person who has such a compulsion and energy to sketch and paint as Dad did. Even on his crib break underground he would sketch and paint, and even today you will find the mines full of Pro Hart's paintings and sketches. Using old tins of enamel he would paint on the crib room (lunch room) walls, lifts and platform doors, old stopping timbers and just about anything that presented itself as a near-enough canvas.

His miner's kit was a hard hat, overalls and a carbide lamp and it was the low light conditions created by his carbide miners lamp that inspired him to paint his 'light out of dark' series of work. One minute you are walking alone in the consuming blackness of the mine, then all of a sudden you round a corner and see

the ghostly shapes of miners in the glow of their hat lamps and candles, as they chiselled and hammered away at the hard and widening rock face. It was under similar light conditions that Rembrandt forged his style, working by candlelight late into the night. But for Dad, it was his miner's hat lamp.

His mates on the mine would often call him 'The Judge' because when the shift boss wasn't around he would quite often be seen sitting on a case (a case of dynamite, that is) busily sketching ideas for paintings on the surface that he would later paint in the comfort of his own makeshift studio.

Many of his mining paintings depicted miner's crib rooms filled with bodiless, flannelette shirts, or miners with metal masks for faces, playing cards and eating or working the mine. Over the years I've heard many journalists, art critics and gallery directors try to give their interpretations and answers as to why Dad painted these empty shirts and masks. Some of them had it partly right and some had no idea, so I asked Dad for the real explanation and he told me that it was because the people in the painting could remain anonymous, and that's because real people didn't belong to the underground. In fact the early figures of shirts and masks were representational of empty shells; robotic workers merely a shadow of the real man who lived and breathed back up on the surface. Although he despised working underground Dad's paintings remain heavily littered with its influence on his life over the 20 years spent working as a miner.

ALWAYS A YOUNG LARRIKIN

Anyone from Broken Hill would tell you that it's not the most

exciting place in the world, so if you're going to have fun you will need some good mates, plenty of imagination and possibly the odd beer or two. As a family man Dad was never really a drinker per se, and I never once saw him drunk, but as a teenager and prior to getting married he did enjoy the odd raspberry (code name for beer), as he used to call it.

One weekend activity Dad and his mates would enjoy was called slurp and slide. The object of the game was to get two slippery dips side by side, and what you had to do then was race your mate by sliding down the slippery dip. The only catch was that you had to drink a schooner of beer before you reached the bottom and you couldn't spill any or you were disqualified. If it was summer time and the weather was particularly hot, Dad and his mates would all head over to the ice works to purchase a 50 pound block of ice each and then take them to the top of one of Broken Hill's steepest hills. They would throw hessian bags over the top of the ice block to sit on and then race each other by sliding at high speed to the bottom of the hill.

Broken Hill's countryside really did lend itself to motorcycle riding with its vast open spaces and dry creek beds, and if you had the money to buy one, a motorcycle could give you endless hours of fun. Both Dad and his brother Bob had a great love for motorbikes. Their near misses and crashes became the subjects in many of Dad's comical sketches and paintings.

Dad's first and favourite bike was his 600cc Manx Norton Isle of Man special which he used to race on the dirt circuit just outside Broken Hill on the Menindee Road. He said he never did all that well at racing but he was brilliant at crashing. From an early

age he was a member of the Silver City Motorcycle Club and built most of his life-long friendships with mates he met through the club and its events. When he could afford it, he would also collect antique motorcycles and restore them to their original condition with some help from his good friend Alby Bearman. Together they restored some lovely old bikes including a Vincent 1000cc HRD and 500cc Racing ARIEL, among others.

Back in his younger years his motorbike was his transport and he rode it everywhere, including back home from the pub. Dad recalled running over at least two people on two separate occasions whilst on his way home from the pub on his bike. On both occasions the people were staggering out of pubs and across the road in front of him. Fortunately neither Dad nor his victims were injured but on one occasion the police were called, so when they arrived on the scene, Dad just pretended to be repairing something on his bike near the side of the road. When the police questioned him he said he was on his way to work night shift at the mine when this guy staggered out of the pub and across the road in front of him. No one was hurt so the police went on their way. Little did they know that Dad had just left the pub. Dad bought his crash victim a West End Anaesthetic (a beer) and went on his way with no one the worse for wear.

He recalls that at one stage he and eight of his mates (who all had motorcycles) decided that they would attach side cars to their bikes for something a little different. They were all on a tight budget in those days, so everyone pitched in old parts plus a few bits and pieces (complimentary from the mines). With a bit of outback know-how and some skilful welding, they managed to come up with some great looking side-cars.

They wasted no time fitting these to their motorcycles. They all became so skilful in riding them that they even put on their own stunt show. Every Saturday they would head out of town about twenty kilometres along the Wilcannia to Sydney road to Mt Gipps, where they would do all kinds of stunts and trick riding. “We were there for the fun of it, you know, just mucking around on the bikes,” he would say. They were so good at it that people started to hear about what they were doing, and pretty soon they ended up with crowds of people coming out to watch them ride. I guess you could say they were our modern day Crusty Demons except without the back flips and thrush music.

Their afternoon of fun usually ended up with a few cold beers at the Mt Gipps Hotel before heading back to town. Occasionally they would run into the local police sergeant, who they nicknamed ‘Baby-Face’. Dad would say: “Some people are born beautiful, some are born in the ugly tree, but unfortunately there are some that are unlucky to fall from that tree and hit every branch on the way down.” Baby-Face was one of those unlucky few. “If we were all out on our motor bikes and we spotted ‘Sergeant Baby-Face’, we would all pull up next to him and give him a bit of cheek. Then we would all take off in different directions so he couldn’t catch us.” In those days they didn’t have radar or breathalysers; this meant that Dad and his mates were very lucky to get away with half the stuff they got up to. It is a wonder they didn’t injure themselves-or anyone else for that matter.

To a bunch of your larrikin miners it was all just a bit of harmless fun. If Dad and his mates weren’t riding bikes they would be fixing or building them. Most of what Dad learnt

about mechanics and engines he learnt from working on the bikes. “They were the days when you could actually work on things. Nowadays everything is measured in ‘oozle grammits’ and covered in computer chips and plastic. Back in those days you could fix things yourself, you could even interchange parts and customise stuff. If I was to buy a bike nowadays the first thing I would do is rip all the flaming plastic off it; only there wouldn’t be anything left to hold the bike together. Why do they make everything out of crap these days?”

Dad really enjoyed restoring bikes with his good friend Alby. They were always making modifications to different bikes to see if they could gain more speed. One of their favourite things to do was to build crossbreeds. It started off as a joke but they soon discovered that some of the combination bikes they were building were actually quite good. They would take various parts, like frames and engines, seats, wheels and tanks from one brand of bike, then join them together to make some kind of ‘Frankenstein’ bike. They took old street bikes like Nortons, Erials, Panthers and AJ’s, turning them into some of the meanest looking dirt bikes and mountain climbers that you will ever see. Years later they progressed onto more modern brands like Kawasaki, Yamaha, Suzuki and Honda. They created some real memorable gems, with names like Yamazuki, Yamahonda, Kawazuki, Hondasuki and, of course, the Kawahondazaki. As hilarious as that sounds, they all worked and they withstood the test of time. Some were even used to compete in some gruelling two and three day motorcycle races.