When death comes without reason

MYFANWY GOLLAN looks at the life of Ian Reed.

WHEN Ian Reed said he intended making a will leaving a large amount of money to the ABC Radio Drama and Features Department, there were mixed reactions.

But whether his statement was seen as eccentric, intriguing or amusing, such a proposed bequest seemed of little practical significance. Reed, when he made his intention known in the late 1970s, was a robust man in his late 40s, to his acquaintances "a lovely, cheery man, always whistling or singing, a very warm person, very good-humoured humour with an unexpected quirkiness that made you laugh".

But, it soon became of practical significance. In 1979, at his flat in Victoria Street in Sydney's Potts Point, somewhere between February 23 and March 2, he died, according to the coroner's report, "from effects of poisoning by amitriptyline, self-ingested but whether with the intention of taking his life the evidence adduced does not enable me to say".

His death shocked his family and friends, and the mechanics of carrying out his bequest caused creaks in the ABC's machinery. The result — after years of frustration — is the Ian Reed Foundation, administered by the ABC, with a capital sum of $221,000, and concerned, as he wished, with encouraging potential and aspiring radio scriptwriters.

The first Ian Reed Fellowship, $12,500 for a six-month writer-in-residency with the ABC Radio Drama and Features Department in Sydney, was awarded last year, and this year the Drama and Features Department is conducting a series of competitions for radio plays, four prizes of $3,000 each, and an extra $10,000 to the overall winner.

"The Ian Reed Foundation has only just started doing what Ian wanted, and I think it is going to be enormously important for encouraging radio writers," says Julie-Anne Ford, the head of ABC Radio Drama and Features.

Who was Ian Reed and why should he make such an unusual bequest? It is not unusual for people to bequeath money to good works, including artistic and literary endeavours. But to the ABC? To a government authority? To bureaucracy?

REED, single, born in Muswellbrook, NSW, in 1929, an old boy of Scots College, Sydney, graduate in pharmacy from Sydney University, a tennis player, Rugby referee, a pilot, violinist, pianist, drug referral centre counsellor and a writer of radio features and plays, was determined that the money should go to the ABC and to its Radio Drama and Features Department.

He had taken Julie-Anne Ford and Richard Connolly, then head of the department, separately to lunch to check that they were still concerned with encouraging young writers, as he had been encouraged.

After his death the ABC moved slowly, to the chagrin of those involved, both outsiders and insiders, too, like Richard Connolly, who found the delay hard to understand.

Peter Collas, the Gold Coast solicitor who was executor and trustee, remembers the limbo period with feeling. He had been flattered when Reed, with whom he had had only minor professional dealings, appointed him executor and trustee, although it was a normal procedure for a will — even if this one had taken three weeks to draw up because of the unusual bequest — that seemed

Then, when nothing happened at the ABC end, he decided that it was his job as a trustee to invest the money. An interesting sub-plot developed, scattered with communications from lawyers. The money was put into what Collas saw as a very safe investment, a "very valuable property", a first mortgage on a development site. Then "the borrower went bust" and the subsequent auction in 1983 caused an outcry. *The Gold Coast Bulletin* described the property as "a little-known mangrove-edged island", and the suggestion of millionaire power moving into the area produced statements from local aldermen about what was allowable development, and cries from the Gold Coast and Hinterland Branch of the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland that the island be preserved as a fish habitat. The auction, however, was to return all the money due to the Reed estate and this, along with a Queensland Supreme Court order issued in 1983 outlining the terms on which the ABC was to be trustee, meant that the foundation was ready to move.

"In spite of fears that the money might be swallowed up in general funds, it is entirely separate. It's rather nice to have this personal touch in a big public organisation," says Julie-Anne Ford.

"And, in spite of the initial headaches, it was a good idea to leave it as it was left, rather than establish a separate foundation. We have the resources and structure to train and help writers, which is what Ian wanted."

Reed had told his sisters, Margaret Matheson, of Balmain, and June Hilliar, of Berry on the NSW South Coast, how he was changing his will, and they had thought it was his business. He had been a generous brother and uncle and, anyway, it seemed an academic question. He was young and healthy.

SINCE his death, his family and friends have tried to make sense of his life. There have been lengthy discussions. Did this "life of the party" kill himself? Acquaintances wonder whether this "loner", seen as an intensely private person, with few close friends (but those — torn-mite and broader very loyal) was a latent homosexual with fears of becoming "a lonely, aging gay". Was he a victim of "mid-life crisis", worried that his writing talent had dried up?

The questions that his life, and death, raise tell something about the fabric and the aspirations and pressures of educated, middle-aged Australia.

There is no doubt that the time immediately before his death was stressful. His mother had just had a stroke. On the day he was last seen alive his father had been admitted to hospital for surgery.

Reed had discussed the idea of suicide and said that he had no moral objections, unless it hurt other people. His sisters think he would not have killed himself while his parents were alive; they tend to the view that on returning to his flat he had had a few drinks, taken sedatives and, waking during the night, had taken more, inadvertently reaching a lethal dose.

Julie-Anne Ford saw him as deeply affected by his work on the Gold Coast at the Mirakai Drug Referral Centre, and the bequest and possible suicide as resulting from it.

"He had great hopes for one of the young men he was helping. He thought he was a promising writer and invested a lot of time and interest in him. But the young man was a recidivist. From time to time he would just disappear, and one day he didn't

ABOVE: Reed as a Scots College boarder in the 1940s. **RIGHT:** Reed with his parents.

lan. He found it very depressing."

Hilliar agreed that the flavour had gone out of life for him.

"I don't know what caused it, but something happened in the 60s. He told our mother that a girl he was close to had been killed in a motor accident and he would never marry. He was wonderful company but later I could almost see him putting on his mask. It was custom-built of course, but it was as if he were surrounded by glass. The spark had gone.

"He told me that there was so much love in him, but there was no way of letting it out. He said 'If only I could feel grief or anger or pain, but I can't.' The nearest he came to it, he said, was when some of the young drug addicts were drying out and lived with him in his home unit at Burleigh Heads, and he felt he had a father/son relationship."

The picture of a person being stretched beyond his endurance begins to emerge.

Dr Robert Richardson, the founder of Mirakai who worked closely with Reed, thinks that at the time of his death Reed felt that he had already had a full life, but also saw him as emotionally drained by his work with drug addicts. "No-one can do it for more than a few years, and he was an utterly selfless person. They were very stressful years."

Richardson, who now works in the casualty section of the Tweed District Hospital, had started Mirakai (an Aboriginal word meaning peace-maker) in the early 1970s as a drop-in centre for young people in an upstairs coffee shop in Coolangatta. By the time Reed began his voluntary counselling, Mirakai had moved to Burleigh Heads.

Richardson had bought an old weatherboard house, where 30 or 40 young regulars would come in a continuous stream for coffee and a chat. "We provided a family atmosphere, but non-judgmental. It worked on the basis that you could be a derelict and still have a friend. Basically, it's a people problem, not a drug problem."

Mirakai proved so successful that the local council, service clubs and the Government provided the money for a new building, but by the time it was functioning, Reed was dead.

REED was the youngest, and only boy, of three children. His father had been a soldier settler on an uncle's property out of Muswellbrook, and had studied accountancy by correspondence. By the time Ian was born, his father had built a comfortable house in the town and had become accountant to Campbell's, the Muswellbrook department store. His mother was a musician and reader, and a good cook. His sisters see his childhood as very happy.

At primary school in Muswellbrook with his life-long friend, James Fitzhardinge, Reed produced a newspaper, the *Juvenile Times*, which they sold to raise money for the Red Cross.

[illegible] because the family took at Cronulla for [illegible] Christmas holidays. They listened [illegible] the radio (especially the *Argonauts*, [illegible] ABC children's radio program, of [illegible]hich Reed was a passionate [illegible] lower). There was Sunday school at [illegible] a Presbyterian church. There was an [illegible]eal of service, especially during [illegible]orld War II, working for the Red [illegible]oss, helping at charity fetes.

Both parents were in the Muswellbrook Musical Society, and Reed's [illegible]ther played the church organ. Reed [illegible]d violin lessons and taught himself [illegible]e piano and organ.

[illegible]e finished school as a boarder at [illegible]ots where he was given the nickname Pussy because of his attempt to [illegible]rescue a cat caught in a tree outside the classroom.

At the end of school, Reed's father told him that he had to take up a profession and, it being the days before university quotas, offered dentistry, medicine, veterinary science or pharmacy. There was no question of not following father's footsteps in accountancy: Reed was seen as being terrible with money. He wanted to be a writer or musician, but his father said: "Once you've got your credentials you can do what you want." Reed chose pharmacy, "the best of a bad lot — and the shortest" he told his sisters.

Matheson remembers him being offered a job as a violinist with the Adelaide String Quartet while he was still at Sydney University, but he gave in to his father's insistence that he finish his course, and would say later he was pleased he had: it gave him the freedom to write as he wished.

At the end of university he took off with two Fitzhardinge brothers, James and David, for six months in Europe. Theatre. Concerts. Art galleries. A camper van. After the grand tour it was back to pharmacy, in a shop in Rocky Point Road in Kogarah, Sydney, which he was later to take over. His apprentice, Tim Watson, the present owner of the pharmacy, remembers him as always whistling and also remembers being sent to his flat during shop hours to record radio music programs.

A single man with a successful business, by the time he was in his 30s Reed had enough capital to retire from a job for which he had no real liking. He had interests to indulge, and it was only during a quiet convalescence — after he had torn his Achilles tendon while [illegible]reeing a Rugby match — that he decided to put a manager in [illegible] pharmacy and move to the Gold Coast where he could swim and surf and get on with writing.

After some time as a full-time writer, however, he began to be concerned that he was cut off from the real world, so he worked part-time in a local pharmacy and took up his interest in Mirakai.

Most of his writing was for the ABC. He started with educational features and then moved on to plays. "He was a remarkably gifted writer, although terribly slow," says Richard Connolly. "He was in love with the idea of radio writing, although that may not have been the best medium for him."

His plays were seen as always technically challenging. They had a strong philosophical bent — his sisters feel that towards the end he was moving into investigations of levels of consciousness that were on an arid plane. He had an interest in strong characters with well-defined [illegible]ense of personal space and the sort of conflict that resulted; the idea of relationships was obviously important to this loner.

There was apparently only one try at writing for television. Summoned to Melbourne by a producer for commercial television, all expenses paid, he found that he was uncomfortable with the idea of a script conference: he took a long time writing and when he had finished, he didn't want bright ideas from around the table.

At the time of his death Reed was working on a script partly financed by a 1977 Australia Council Literature Board special projects grant. His application describes it as "a dramatised documentary for radio of a 22-year-old man who became a heroin addict because of the pressures of society, but is slowly coming to terms with 'reality'". One listed expense is the co-operation of an addict at $50 a week for 13 weeks.

ON THE surface it might have seemed like an ideal life. Writing. Surfing. The warm glow that comes from helping the less fortunate. Reading — Sartre, Camus, Edith Sitwell, Ibsen, Martin Boyd, biographies. Music — Delius (about whom he wrote a radio feature), Scriabin, Beethoven, Bach, Mahler and especially Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*.

He would drive his car to Burleigh where, away from houses and people, he could listen to music as loud as he liked, and when he came to Sydney there were Musica Viva and ABC subscription concerts. Although he was most undomesticated, until he moved to Sydney a few months before his death there were friends and family to stay at his flat on the Gold Coast. Matheson remembers being isolated by floods in Queensland and playing cards, which she loves and Ian hated. He was to say of this period: "We played cards from 10 am to 10 pm, and if Margaret tells you different say it felt like it."

An ideal life? This was the time Hilliar remembers seeing as fixed the smiling, cheerful mask that covered the emptiness. Family and friends have spent hours speculating on whether what seems to have been clinical depression was a result of body chemistry or emotional exhaustion or an inability to find any firm philosophical basis for living.

Although he was seen as a wonderful son, brother and uncle — his sisters' children "thought the sun shone out of him" — he is also seen as not having the normal disciplines of an income to earn or a structured family life.

Hilliar has a memory that has a certain symbolism. Reed had just received his pilot's licence and had come to Wollongong where she was then living.

"We were up in this tiny plane. As we moved over the factory chimneys and the air changed from hot to cold we would be thrown up and then down and then up again."

In the ABC archives there are copies of half a dozen or so Reed scripts, and the tape of one radio play. Matheson has some of his records and books — including a copy of Jaroslav Hasek's *The Good Soldier Svejk* that he was thinking of adapting for radio.

His papers, a big box of unsorted notes and half-finished scripts in his hard-to-decipher longhand out of which it seemed impossible to make any order, were destroyed after his parents died, both within a year of Ian. His death had shattered them.

The death of this still young, good-humoured, caring and compassionate man was a tragedy, whether intentional or not. It would certainly seem that a contributing factor was the toll taken by his work with drug addicts, a side-effect of drug abuse not usually taken into account. ■