

The Millionaire Professor Who Lived In A \$25 Room

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It was some days before the body was found. He was lying on the floor, stretched out on his right side, in the cheap Glebe boarding house where he had spent the last five years of his life.

The fellow residents of the boarding house had nicknamed him "the Hermit" and had often speculated about his identity. For four years he had lived upstairs in number 9 - the small back room, at \$25 a week one of the cheapest in the house - and had scarcely spoken a word to any of them.

They knew his name, of course: they had seen it on the occasional letter he received. But none really believed the name on those envelopes: why would a professor, they asked each other, live in a place like this?

And why would a professor live as this man lived: wearing plastic shoes and a threadbare suit; always walking instead of spending money on a bus fare; living on a diet of oranges, brought home each day in a small paper bag; never receiving a visitor?

In the weeks after his body was found - as the news of his death filtered through to his university colleagues - many others asked the same question.

It had been nearly 20 years since most had heard news of Professor Kelper Hayward Hartley - foundation professor of French at the University of Newcastle, respected scholar of French and Italian literature, an eccentric but prized lecturer.

Professor Ken Dutton, Hartley's successor at Newcastle, was delegated to visit the room where Hartley died. He recorded his impressions in a letter to one of Hartley's few friends: "His room was about 6 feet by 8 feet, paint peeling from the ceiling, a naked light bulb, a small Laminex table and chrome chair, a bed, a coat cupboard, a little chest of drawers and small bookshelves, a pair of plastic K-Mart shoes, a tartan K-Mart shirt, a pullover, socks, a tin of powdered milk - virtually nothing else."

But there was one other thing - a couple of sheets of paper left on a table near where the body was found. It was his last will and testament - bequeathing all he had to the French Department of the University of Newcastle.

That bequest, on latest figures, is worth about \$1.4 million.

Few of Hartley's colleagues know what happened during those missing years - between his retirement in 1969 and his death in February last year aged 78.

For those last 19 years, he had only one friend - the late Grahame Jones, Professor of French at the University of New England and Hartley's most brilliant student.

The two would see each other about once every six months - meeting under the clock at Sydney's Central Railway at 11am and then walking to a small Greek cafe on Sussex Street. There they would talk for two hours about the great literature of the past - about Voltaire, Rousseau and Pascal - before Hartley would murmur his apologies and leave, alone for another six months.

Hartley had become a miser as well as a recluse.

In late 1987, he went to St Vincent's Hospital to visit his friend Jones, who was by then vainly battling cancer. Barbara Jones, Grahame's widow, remembers the visit:

Professor Kelper Hartley – great friend of Charlie Goffet

Newcastle's first emeritus professor was wearing his plastic shoes and battered coat, and had walked to the hospital from Glebe rather than waste money on a bus. His eyes were infested with sores; reading, the one joy in his life, was becoming impossible.

Barbara Jones told him he should see a doctor - perhaps all he needed was some antiseptic cream. Kelper refused, talking of the fees charged by doctors

He had become obsessed with his dream of leaving a bequest to the university - a bequest which would encourage others to study French.

Hartley had always considered himself a genius - a writer and philosopher of world class; a thinker whose ideas would change the world forever. The reality was that he had become a moderately successful academic in a town he despised.

"I'm sure he believed he had failed to make his mark," says Barbara Jones, "and that he could make up for his life by doing something extraordinary - by leaving a huge scholarship to the university."

Hartley's obsession began in earnest on his last day at the university. He had demanded that the university pay his superannuation in cash. The university's bursar considered the request bizarre, but Hartley was insistent

He arrived at the bursar's office on that last day of work - dressed in the grey suit he always wore, and clutching the battered leather briefcase he had carried every day since arriving at the then University College in 1955.

The security van arrived, and Hartley packed about \$30,000 into his briefcase and wandered out into the streets of Newcastle. It was the last any of his former colleagues saw of him.

He moved to Sydney and began the quiet and obsessive work that was to dominate the next 19 years. The money was invested in the stockmarket - in companies like Adelaide Steamship, BHP, and the ANZ Bank; he saved assiduously, spending rarely, and buying more shares.

By 1983, he had amassed \$390,000, and visited the Perpetual Trustees to gain investment advice and lodge his will. His dream, he confessed to his investment adviser, Malcolm Beach, was to leave a bequest of \$1 million.

"That figure," Beach remembers, "was the goal in his mind. He would come in every six weeks or so, and I would calculate the value of his holdings so he could see how he was going."

His lifestyle became simpler and simpler as he strived after the figure. He sold his modest flat in Ocean Street, Edgecliff, and invested the money on the stock market. He moved into a boarding house near Harold Park, and then a few months later, into the \$25-a-week room in which he died - the small back room in Glebe Point Road. He sold most of his furniture and donated nearly all his precious books to the Newcastle University Library.

By February 1987, the dream had been achieved. A rocketing stockmarket had pushed the value of his portfolio over the million mark; by early October it had reached \$1,382,359. Kelper Hartley, the man who had always failed to achieve his own goals, had surpassed himself.

It was then, of course, that the stock market crashed. In just two days, Hartley lost \$306,000, with further drops soon sinking his value under his \$1 million goal.

Professor Kelper Hartley – great friend of Charlie Goffet

By the time of his death in February 1988, his estate was worth \$916,197. Hartley was never to know that only a month or so later the market was again to push his shares over the million mark, and then onwards to today's \$1.4 million.

The crash, of course, devastated him. His friend Grahame Jones wrote several letters trying to console his friend, but Hartley was inconsolable. A few months later, when Jones finally lost his battle with cancer, those letters added to Hartley's feelings of remorse.

Hartley wrote to Grahame's widow trying to explain his obsession. "You, and he too, were kind in keeping from me news of the approach of death: but now the matter has fallen upon me with its full weight. That I should have been so occupied with my money-grubbing, dismayed at the stock-exchange crash, when he was suffering as you described, is a matter of great shame to me.

"Nevertheless, it is all I am good for, at 78 and in bad health. The money I grub will serve to found a travelling scholarship which will give students yet unborn the chance to be like Grahame in the lesser part of books read, places seen, teaching received. God send that the happy few among them may be like him in the greater part."

Hartley was born in the Adelaide suburb of Wayville on January 3, 1909. He was the only child of Frank and Clara Hartley, and was born when both parents were relatively old - the father, an accountant, was 39; the mother was aged 40.

It seems he had an unhappy childhood and disliked his parents; certainly he rarely spoke of them. The family moved often - living at various times in Adelaide, London, Melbourne and Sydney. Herald searches of the title deeds of their various homes suggest dwindling financial resources.

Kelper Hartley studied at Sydney Boys' High and then read French at the University of Sydney, graduating with a BA in 1930 and an MA in 1932. His work was of such quality that he won a Commonwealth Government Scholarship in 1933 to study at the University of Paris.

The Sydney Morning Herald of June, 1935, recorded his achievement: "Advice has been received of the success achieved in Paris by Mr Kelper Hartley ... he has now taken the degree of Doctor of the University of Paris, with the highest honours and special commendation on the excellence of his thesis."

But Hartley returned from Paris with more than a doctorate. Studying at the Sorbonne and wandering the streets near his lodgings in the Place du Pantheon, Hartley had developed what was to become a lifelong fascination with Fascist politics.

On his return to Sydney, he taught French at Sydney Boys' High. Alan Barcan, then a student at the school, remembers Hartley claiming he had fought on the side of the right-wing Action Francais during the Stavisky Riots of 1934 - exchanging shots with police.

That claim may be wishful thinking, but certainly Hartley told students of his admiration of the French right-wing leader, Pierre Laval - often dressing in a white shirt and white tie in imitation of his hero.

He taught at the school from 1936 until 1941, when he was suddenly moved by the Department of Education to Newcastle Boys' High. Hartley blamed the "secret police" for this sudden transfer - revealing that police had visited the school to interrogate him about his political views, and that his headmaster had reacted with an angry demand that he should be moved.

Professor Kelper Hartley – great friend of Charlie Goffet

That confession was made to Charlie Goffet, a fellow French teacher at Newcastle High who was to become Hartley's longest-standing friend.

Hartley's views, Goffet remembers, were certainly extreme. Here, bang in the middle of World War II, he would argue that democracy was mere "head-counting"- a victory of the mass over the elite - and that it would be best if the Allies lost the war.

Understandably perhaps, Hartley was obsessed about the secret police, and begged Goffet, a skilled handyman, to make him a swordstick to be used against political attackers. Goffet obliged - fashioning a steel sword in a leather case which Hartley would wear around his boarding-house room.

During the late 1940s, Hartley committed his political views to paper -writing a long philosophical treatise under the title Optimism. The book was found in his room after his death, still in its envelope from the US publisher who had rejected it in 1950.

That rejection - the first of many in Hartley's life - must have hit hard. The book is a vision for a new world, and in its pages Hartley details how his philosophy will change the world for a thousand years to come. He had no doubt the work was of lasting importance - historical dates are rendered in terms of the half-life of radium so that future civilisations may understand his work.

The book presents a variant of fascism, infused with a passionate belief in science. His society will have one supreme leader - a leader chosen objectively by scientific machines which measure intelligence and personality

While developing these views, Hartley was also rapidly changing jobs -teaching at Armidale Boys' High and then at Sydney Technical College, before joining the then Newcastle University College in 1955.

Through all the moves, he kept in contact with Charlie Goffet. It was an odd relationship - Goffet, now 80, was a self-confessed drinker, gambler and swearer; Hartley was pathologically shy, quaintly formal, and in love with high culture.

Hartley appeared to thrive on the difference, proclaiming himself superior to his friend: "I'm the poet," Hartley would tell Goffet, "and you're the peasant".

For 28 years, Goffet was Hartley's only real friend - they would go fishing together and even co-authored a slender French textbook for schools. Yet Goffet never knew where Hartley lived, and when Hartley left Newcastle in 1969 he failed to give his friend any forwarding address.

In the years that followed, Goffet tried many times to contact Hartley -checking phone books and electoral rolls. Like so many others, the first news he had was the news of Hartley's death.

Apart from Goffet, Hartley kept to himself. Students and colleagues remember him arriving at the university at 7 in the morning so that he could be safely in his office before the corridors filled with people. He was a confident and vigorous lecturer, but at the football would stand on the most deserted terrace.

Students, especially female students, remember his embarrassment when he was forced to pass them in a corridor: he would press his body into the wall, dropping his head down low, or even backtrack and return to his office.

During the break between lectures, he would often lock himself in a lavatory cubicle - emerging only after all his students had left the lavatory. (The more cheeky would noisily wash their hands for 10 minutes to extend the break.)

Professor Kelper Hartley – great friend of Charlie Goffet

He lived in a succession of boarding houses - never buying a home in Newcastle, despite inheriting and then selling his parents' Sydney home in 1959.

But his entry in Who's Who detailed his climb through the academic ranks: "Snr. Lectr. in French and Head of Dept. Newcastle Univ. Coll. 1955-61; Assoc. Prof. 1962-64; Visiting Prof. Rome 1966; Professor of French 1965-1969."

His students remember him fondly - as an eccentric but brilliant man who instilled in his students his own deep passion for culture. He also published regularly in the academic journals - scholarly exercises which charted how writers of different nations influenced each other.

Yet, secretly, Hartley was still dreaming of the moment when he himself would become a famous writer.

His notebooks, found in his room, tell the story. They are filled with ideas for plots, mostly science fiction, with some stories written out longhand into disused diaries and exercise books. He has annotated many with the name of the magazine to which they were submitted; later adding the terse verdict, "rejected". Only one is annotated "accepted" - a story published under his own name in the summer of 1970 in the American science fiction magazine *Worlds of Tomorrow*, and for which he was paid \$US50. Despite widespread rumours at Newcastle that Hartley enjoyed secret success as an author, his name does not reappear in any other major magazine or in any index of science fiction writing.

Also found in his room was the manuscript of a lengthy novel - *Remus Leaping* - a well-written and heavily autobiographical tale involving spiritualism, murder, philosophy, and a fair amount of sex. It appears to have been written in the early 1970s, and submitted to a publisher. It, too, was rejected for publication.

This then is the picture of Kelper Hartley at the time of his death: a man who had dreamed of literary success and failed; who then set himself the goal of raising a \$1 million bequest, and saw that achievement also slipping away.

His landlord, Tony Galego, broke into his room at about 3pm on February 29 - concerned that he hadn't seen the professor for three days. He had clearly been dead for some days. Mr Galego rang Glebe police who sent two officers. They reported there were no suspicious circumstances and had Hartley's body removed to the Glebe Morgue.

The post mortem report recorded the cause of death as: "Barbiturate poisoning associated with alcohol ingestion." Hartley had taken a considerable amount of the sleeping drug Pentobarbitone, and washed it down with alcohol. The levels of the drug found in his liver and stomach indicate suicide: the stock market crash, one guesses, had killed him.

He was cremated at the Northern Suburbs crematorium, as his will demanded: "without rites of any kind". There was no service to attend, and no plaque for the ashes.

A few days later, those ashes were sent to the city office of his financial advisers, Perpetual Trustees, and passed on to a young trust officer, Mr Wesley Lai. Mr Lai already had the ashes of another client who had died without relatives; another man who had asked, like Hartley, to have his ashes "thrown without ceremony into the sea".

Professor Kelper Hartley – great friend of Charlie Goffet

Mr Lai took both boxes down to Hunter Street, and caught a taxi to Darling Point Road. At about 3pm, he stood in McKell Park and emptied the two boxes into the sea.

"Determination, whilst being the most admired of virtues, is often the least valued." The phrase comes from *The Day My Publisher Turned into a Dog*, a new novel by the Sydney writer Gail Morgan. She continues: "This is probably because it implies failure. Once success has been achieved, determination can be abandoned like a dowdy spouse."

Success never came to Kelper Hartley - at least not in the way he dreamed it might. All he had left was determination.

It is easy enough to see his \$1 million dreams as foolish and self-destructive. But it was a goal achieved. That sad death, in squalor and loneliness, represented an achievement of sorts - the culmination of a dream nursed over 20 years. By effort of will, Kelper Hartley made his life remarkable.

The final irony, indeed, may be that he achieved too much. Hartley's will decrees that his fortune be used to fund a scholarship so that a single student may travel to Paris each year, as he did in his own youth.

Yet the university and Hartley's trustees agree that it would be irresponsible to follow the letter of the will: Hartley's \$1.4 million will generate an annual income of close to \$200,000 - too much to award to a single student.

The University is currently preparing to go to court to seek a variation in the will - allowing it to split the money between several students. Professor Ken Dutton also dreams that some of the money might go towards publishing Hartley's autobiographical novel.

Whatever the outcome, it will be years before the first young student follows in Kelper Hartley's footsteps to Paris.