

Harold Morton: CWL's last days

Harold Morton (1904-1988) was one of the many pupils of CWL at The Manor in Mosman, Sydney, and was at one time his personal secretary. He was a popular broadcaster for Radio 2GB which was started originally at a cottage in The Manor property in 1926. He was also General Secretary of the Australian Section of the TS and served as a priest in the Liberal Catholic Church. The following letter by Morton narrates the events surrounding the passing of CWL in Perth, on 1 March 1934, and the subsequent cremation and funeral service which took place in Sydney.

c / o Theosophical Broadcasting Station
29 Blight Street
SYDNEY
14 March 1934

Dear Friends:

I have just returned from Perth, and wish to share with you as soon as possible the latest news concerning Bishop Leadbeater. He had been ill most of the time from Bombay to Fremantle. Heather [Heather Kellett, CWL's private secretary] having to adopt the further role of nurse. When the *Mooltan* arrived at Fremantle on February 13th, the Doctor said he must go to hospital immediately as he could not possibly stand the journey through the Great Australian Bight while in that condition. The trouble was dropsy, and its worst feature was congestion in the right lung. Accordingly, the Bishop was taken straight to St. Omer Hospital, Perth, and put under Dr. Nelson. The ship's doctor and another consulting specialist held out no hope of recovery from the very first, but Dr. Nelson was an optimist who talked of recovery until the beginning of the last week.

As he knew he was dying, C.W.L. asked Heather to send for me to assist in some arrangements he wanted made, and the 2GB Directors gave me leave to go straight across to him. By taking the plane from Adelaide I arrived in Perth on the Sunday afternoon. (I do not like flying for I get airsick; but apart from the urgency of the visit, I was glad to see this part of Australia from the air. It was particularly interesting to come down at Forrest, away out in the treeless desert, with only a dozen wooden huts to represent civilization, and discover a clean and up-to-date hotel with hot and cold water, electric light, sewerage, good food, ice, and radio. But I came back by train!)

When I saw C.W.L. that Sunday afternoon [18th February], I was surprised to discover him looking so well. He was weak; but he was exactly the same cheerful C.W.L. that we have always known, and his thoughts were all about the different departments of work which needed strengthening. He was concerned with the future of all the T.S. activities; wanted everything done to see G.S.A. [George Sydney Arundale] elected President of the Society with an overwhelming majority; wanted the E.S. to work as an army for the Brotherhood ("...they are thinking of personal progress, many of them. Confound their progress. They are an army, and must work!"); wanted the ideal of discipleship held up and made real; expressed himself as satisfied with the future of the Church in the hands of the Bishop he has nominated to succeed him as Presiding

Bishop; and he was concerned that people should not make Krishnaji's teaching an excuse to return to meat-eating, smoking, and other similar habits. He talked along these lines most of the time, but when he referred to his own condition it was with an amused twinkle in his eye. He knew he was dying, and he remarked how odd it was that "They" should send him to die in Perth and not let him do so in Adyar or Sydney; but of course "They know what they are doing, and we must obey instructions".

During that week the Bishop grew steadily stronger, and it looked as though our hopes of bringing him on to Sydney might be realized. The change came at the weekend when the temperature rose to 108° and the Bishop's strength waned accordingly. The treatment for the dropsical condition was proving successful, for without tapping the doctor's drugs were eliminating the superfluous liquid. Actually, the day before he passed on, the lung was practically clear, but the heart had been subjected to too long a strain and was worn out. Though the Bishop's condition became worse at the weekend, there was a slight improvement even after that. It was only temporary, for by the Monday Dr. Nelson gave us his first intimation that the Bishop could never leave the hospital; on the Wednesday he said it was only a matter of a couple of days; and on the Thursday morning he told us to expect the end during the coming night.

All this time, however, Brother was by no means idle. A number of matters were brought up and he gave instructions. He even went so far as to dictate part of an article for the next E.S. publication and sent a special message to the Perth E.S. group whose meeting he could not attend personally. Heather and I made it a point not to introduce any business on our own account. When he asked a question, we answered. When his remarks required comment, we made it. But all the time we refrained from bringing up business on our own account as it was so important for him to rest as much as he could.

An interesting point arose one day when he was discoursing on the different methods of Yoga and their place in the School. He referred to the hymn "Three doors there are to the temple". [See the Archives page for CWL's handwritten note of it.] Of course I have sung it many times, but I was not prepared to recite it. Yet he recited it verse after verse without difficulty. A few days later he said something about memory, and I ventured to say it was surely remarkable that he could remember the words of the hymn quoted. Whereupon he reminded me that at one time he knew every hymn in the *Ancient and Modern* by heart (he mentioned that in those days there were only a couple of hundred, after all!), and forthwith recited in Latin the four verses of "Holy, Holy, Holy", the *Tantum Ergo*, "O Salutaris Hostia", and another hymn to Our Lady.

Another little incident of the Tuesday afternoon, two days before he passed over. He had been talking of his forthcoming death with a half-amused expression on his face, when he asked "But does this feel like the grip of a dying man?" And he held out his hand for Heather to grasp and pulled her along. He did the same with me, and we were astonished that he had so much energy left. Right till the very last he used to have most of his meals out of bed, sitting at a table, and less than 24 hours before his expiry I helped the nurse to get him in and out of bed.

The afternoon before his passing over, Brother spoke for about three-quarters of an hour. As he had not slept much during the previous night, the nurses wanted him to settle down as early as possible. On helping him back to bed, it looked as though he were prepared to doze, so I prepared to leave him. When I got to the door, he sat up in bed, waved his hand in characteristic style, and called out “Well, if I don’t see you again in this body, carry on!” Those were the last words to us, for when we went back to the hospital the following morning, he did not speak to us at all. The nurse asked him if he wished to see his visitors. He opened his eyes and smiled, and I *think* recognized us; but he did not speak again. He sank then into unconsciousness from which he did not awake.

The doctor told us that the end was very near and expected the death to take place during the night. However, it happened earlier. At 5 minutes past 4 in the afternoon (March 1st), a haemorrhage occurred; at 4.15 life departed, Brother not having regained consciousness since the morning. Thus passed out of this incarnation one who will be Guru to many of us for all time to come.

The body was dressed appropriately in alb and white stole, and during the evening some of the members from nearby assembled in his room at the hospital to look their last on this wonderful body and to pledge themselves to the teacher who had used it for so long. Calm and confident in life, the Bishop’s features were peaceful and serene in death.

On the Sunday, at Mr. Fisher’s request, I had the great honour of celebrating the Requiem Eucharist in the Perth Church, and of preaching the sermon. The casket containing the body was brought to the Church and placed in the sanctuary – head towards the altar according to the ancient custom for those in Major Orders. [See the Gallery page for the photographs of this Requiem Mass] We had no mournful hymns but sang some of the finest for Festivals of Saints. The feeling in the Church was intense. We tried to make a record that not one tear should be shed in that Church that morning, for we were celebrating the most happy of all events, the release of our beloved Brother from physical bonds – perhaps – probably – his Ascension to the Asekha level. At any rate we were determined that our service should be as joyful as possible. It was a most impressive celebration. I am sure that Brother was there – many felt his presence, some actually seeing him – and as we processed round the Church at the conclusion to the majestic and triumphant funeral march from Saul, many were conscious that our Presiding Bishop took his appropriate place at the end of the procession. My sermon of tribute was that C.W.L. had taught three things which are fundamental to life, viz. Life shall be reasonable, Life shall be useful, Life shall be happy.

There is no crematorium in Perth, so we have arranged to bring the body to Sydney for cremation here. That event will take place on Saturday next, St. Patrick’s Day, at the Northern Suburbs Crematorium. Bishop Tweedie will conduct the service. On Sunday he will celebrate the Requiem Eucharist in St. Alban’s and preach the memorial sermon.

Thus ends my account of the last days of C.W.L. I was more impressed with the last words than I can tell you, for it is a fine thing to be able to quote this teacher of reincarnation on voicing in the last sentence one of the truths that he has battled to establish in the western world. Heather, as Bishop Leadbeater's private secretary, will send the official account to Adyar for publication in *The Theosophist* [May, 1934] There remains for us all the fulfilment of his last injunction, "CARRY ON!"

The next important thing is that we are at last having the long promised visit from Krishnaji. Owing to my absence in Perth, I have tonight met him. He is certainly a most fascinating figure, and I am looking forward to a conversation with him. He has very kindly asked me to visit him to tell him all about Bishop Leadbeater's last days in Perth. Even in the half hour that I listened to his answering questions tonight, I marvelled at his intense sincerity. How he hopes to give any teaching of a lasting nature by the dialectic method, I frankly do not see. We surely expect a teaching which will stand beside the other great philosophies of the world; it hardly seems as though this method can produce such. I suppose that this was an assembly of at least average mentality. But most people are not trained in this method of logical analysis, and it seemed to me that such training would be necessary before any worthwhile results could be reached along these lines. So far there seem to have been no resignations from the Society in consequence of his visit here, which is encouraging.

With all good wishes,
Sincerely yours,
HAROLD MORTON

P.S. 18 March. I have withheld this until I could add further information concerning Bishop Leadbeater's cremation. The cremation took place yesterday afternoon (St. Patrick's Day) at 5 o'clock. At 2.30 the funeral cortege left *The Manor* and set out for the Northern Suburbs Crematorium. I think that everyone of us who has had to conduct funerals and cremations welcomes a crematorium of such simple dignity in the midst of beautiful trees instead of the unpleasant graveside scenes where we have to console bereft relatives made still more miserable by the cold wind and dismal surroundings – and it almost always rains. This crematorium is a most satisfactory place, for it is light and airy, and arranged so as to remove all sights which would create an unpleasant effect.

There was seating accommodation for 200 people, but the crowd that gathered stood all around in the aisles and up in the organ loft. I was told that there were close to 500 people present (I think the 300 mark might be nearer, but we could not estimate properly from inside). It was especially pleasing to note that Krishnaji and Rajagopal were present at the cremation. Some have suggested that Krishnaji was unfriendly towards Bishop Leadbeater because of his changed view on discipline, ceremonial, discipleship, etc. But (though it ought not to be necessary to say such a thing) I am glad to report that this is far from the facts, and is borne out by the fact that Krishnaji sent for me to tell him about C.W.L.'s passing.

When people were in place, the procession began, thurifer, crucifer, acolytes, priests, Bishop Tweedie, and finally the pall bearers. We processed in to the strains of the funeral march, up the centre aisle to the catafalque on which the casket was placed, Bishop Tweedie meanwhile reciting in sonorous tones "I am the Resurrection and the Life, etc." In the words of the ritual as compiled by C.W.L., Bishop Tweedie called upon that assembly to put aside all thoughts of grief and sorrow, to think not of themselves and their personal loss but of his most glorious gain; and to give effect to this, he called on them to join in singing the Church's greatest hymn of praise, the Te Deum. Proceeding further, there came the sprinkling of holy water, the censing of the casket, and the formal absolution. At the moment when in a burial service the casket would be lowered into the grave, the signal was given to commit the body to the flames. Silently the dark glass door was raised, the casket passed smoothly through the aperture into the further chamber where it was surrounded by golden curtains, and the door closed once more. (Mr. St. John points out how well they have employed the symbolism that here we see as through a glass darkly, the view into the further chamber symbolising the clearer vision of the astral world.) The tension in the crowd was high. It increased in the recitation of the fine address of the omnipresence of God. It found a splendid and confident release in the final singing of "O God our help in ages past", to which the procession returned to the vestry.

Yet the finest tribute of all was that offered at the Bishop's cathedral Church of St. Alban this morning when Bishop Tweedie celebrated the Requiem Eucharist. The altar was wonderfully decorated with the most lovely flowers. We had asked that flowers should not be sent to the funeral service, and the many beautiful flowers that were ordered were used on the altar for this commemoration service. On this occasion the opening March was used as processional. A large congregation had met for the purpose of paying tribute to Bishop Leadbeater, people whom we had not seen for years were there, and one lady, a stranger, told me that Bishop Leadbeater had helped her many years ago, that she never attended his Church, but having come to this memorial she would be coming back again. When the procession reached the sanctuary, the Te Deum was once more sung in joyful thanks for our great Leader's release, and then the Requiem Mass was celebrated. Mr. Edgar Maddocks, our choir master, had arranged special music after the Gospel and during the Communion. Bishop Tweedie's sermon was a dignified and inspiring tribute to a great man (the address will be published later), and once more there was the sure conviction that C.W.L. was very near. Of course it is the congregation that receives most benefit from a service of this nature, and I believe that in doing honour to our Presiding Bishop we were the recipients of great blessings.