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# Long life of hard work inspired sculpture

Ben Kelly, an Irish-born migrant who spent many years of hard work in quarries, was not the usual type of person to inspire a monumental piece of public sculpture.

**John Kelly**

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At a time where many are questioning monumental sculptures dedicated to historical figures with dubious human rights records, it may be timely to ask who among us should be honoured in our civic spaces?

One such figure, Ben Kelly, has passed away after a long battle with cancer. He was in his 87th year. Ben was the artist's inspiration for the overall-clad "man" in the monumental bronze sculpture *Man Lifting Cow* situated in Sunshine in

Melbourne's west.

The sculpture depicts a figure in overalls, the artist's father's regular attire during a long working life in rock quarries in the UK and Australia. The sculpture also references Sisyphus, the main character in the Greek narrative condemned by the Gods to eternally push a rock to the top of a mountain, only for it to roll back down each time. The French existentialist Albert Camus used this narrative to explore the absurdity of modern man's repetitive working conditions in the book *The Myth of Sisyphus*.



Ben Kelly.

David Benedict Kelly was born in Lismire, County Cork on October 3, 1930, the youngest son of dairy farmers David and Mary Kelly (nee Burke). Ben dropped out of primary school to work on the small farm with his parents, but as the youngest son of seven children was unable to stay on the land due to Ireland's harsh post-war economic conditions, where family lore spoke of Christmas presents that consisted of a single orange. While very happy on the farm, he and all but one of his siblings emigrated during the 1940s in search of work.

As a 19-year-old itinerant Irish worker he would have had it tough on the road and he recounted stories of his wages being stolen while also encountering blatant racism, epitomised by signs in guesthouses of the day. One famous inscription read: "No Dogs, No Irish".

However, his work ethic and drive always found him work on industrial machinery that took him around the UK and to the Channel Islands, dashing back to Ireland when the British came calling for the compulsory military service.

In 1956, he met his future wife Margaret (nee Smith) at a dance in Bristol and they were married in 1957. Five children (one stillborn) were born to the couple in Bristol. In 1965 the family decided to emigrate to Australia as "Ten-Pound Poms", boarding the *Australis* in Southampton for the five-week sea journey to a faraway land where three Australian children completed the family.

On arrival in Melbourne, Ben was met by his older brother Michael who had promised him work in Birchip. Fresh off the boat from an English winter they were driven into the scorching heat of a Mallee summer, where Ben began work as an assistant undertaker. One of his first jobs was to pick up body parts after a car crash.

He immediately asked "Mick" if he could work in his other burgeoning business, house construction. Ben and Margaret stayed in the Mallee for 15 months before moving to the suburb of Sunshine in Melbourne's west, where Ben found work at

Mountain View Quarries on the site where the Teddy Whitten Bridge now straddles the Maribyrnong River. Ben was to work at Mountain View until his retirement in 2000, at the age of 70.

The sculpture *Man Lifting Cow* juxtaposes the artist's own family history; the overall-clad man referencing Ben but also the fake-looking, box-shaped cow directly alluding to Margaret's winning of a "Wish", the competition held on a side of a milk carton. It enabled their son to go to art school.

The monumental bronze derived from these events and also an absurd World War II camouflage scheme involving artists William Dobell, Joshua Smith and a cast of fake [papier-mache](#) cows. The disparate narratives came together to celebrate the "small" histories that are usually overlooked in monumental civic sculptures, normally associated with "great" politicians, military leaders or significant historical events.

The man clad in overalls symbolically represents Ben who was forced to leave his home because of the deeds of these "great" politicians, ambitious military leaders and the significant historical events.

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***Ben's determination to lift his children to a better future in Australia allowed him to tolerate***

## ***the difficult and repetitive working conditions and his life epitomised the selfless parent.***

Ben's determination to lift his children to a better future in Australia allowed him to tolerate the difficult and repetitive working conditions and his life epitomised the selfless parent.

As Camus did with Sisyphus, we must believe that away from his long life of shifting rocks in the quarry and on his post-work walk down from his mountain view, Ben found happiness and never more so than when dancing an Irish jig with Margaret, his beloved wife of 60 years.

He died at home in Sunshine on August 27, surrounded by his family.

Ben is survived by Margaret and seven children, Margaret, Bernadette, Michael, John, Mary, Petrina and Jason, 15 grandchildren, two step-grandchildren, two great-grandchildren and his sister Ita in Bristol.

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