

The man who sculpted for Hawes

Memories of Ewart Johnson.

■ By Anthony Barich

Priest and architect Monsignor John Hawes was a man of “very strong convictions” who knew exactly what he wanted said the daughter of a man who designed many sculptures for him in the early part of the last century.

Betty Foley, the daughter of Ewart Johnson, who was commissioned by Mgr Hawes to sculpt figures such as angels for some of his churches scattered throughout the diocese of Geraldton, including the Church of Our Lady of Mt Carmel and the Holy Apostles Ss Peter and Paul in Mullewa, said her father spoke of the pioneering priest when she was young.

Betty - the wife of John Foley, the cousin of the late Archbishop William Foley - has in her possession several letters to her father signed personally by Mgr Hawes specifying to the milimetre the measurements that he required.

Betty said that Mgr Hawes taught Ewart how to use paint on wood to get the maximum effect, and the results show in the example shown of the carving of angels that sit in the church in Mullewa, a church that was a personal labour of love for the British priest.

Ewart Johnson's art was also personal. A Gallipoli veteran of three landings who was shot in the arm and leg in his first landing, he was an Anglican married to a

Catholic, and Betty says he had an ironic view of the Church, often calling himself “Catholic by contamination”.

However, he understood and believed many of the Catholic traditions. But his works reflected a deeply philosophical outlook. Betty has many of his sculptures in her house that represent maternity and motherhood.

She says that as her mother Elizabeth had three of her seven children die, there may have been some sadness reflected in his sculptures, as she said he viewed women with a sense of awe, “as truly amazing creatures who carried life in their womb”. Betty, the youngest of the seven children, had her eldest brother Jimmy die aged 16 as he had a hole in his heart. Another sibling died of whooping cough aged six and another died at birth.

A crucifix hangs in the Holy Family Church in Nedlands, crafted by Ewart in memory of his first son who died aged 16.

Ewart was also a prolific writer of “philosophical ponderings” and poems, though none of them are published.

But he was most famous for his sculptures. His works are scattered around the country and even overseas among family members who inherited them and he held many exhibitions in his time, but the most cherished piece in Betty's possession was one he gave her when she had her first child, Andrew.

“He created one with the word ‘mother’ inscribed on it, and I loved it so much I wanted it for myself, but he said ‘no’, and I never knew why until I became a



Betty Foley with a treasured work of her father Ewart, who worked with Monsignor John Hawes.

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mother for the first time myself. Then he gave it to me and said ‘now you know why,’ she said.

The wooden sculpture looks like a mother deep in contemplation, but reflects, she says, a certain reverence of motherhood. It still holds deep sentimental value to her. Some priests in the Archdiocese of Perth also commissioned him to do sculptures, including the Gosnells church opened by Fr John Prendiville SJ, the nephew of Archbishop Redmond Prendiville.