



OBITUARY

Brian Powell AM

(14.02.1926 - 25.05.2010)

Life Member FAALBG

Brian was the third youngest in a family of 7 children. He grew up in Reynella, attending Reynella Primary from Year 1 to Year 7 and then Morphett Vale High School. He spoke fondly of an enjoyable childhood growing up in this almost idyllic environment even though this was during the great depression. Growing fresh vegetables in the kitchen garden was learned then and the practice lasted his lifetime. Music was a big part of family gatherings and though he never played an instrument himself, Brian had a lifelong passion for music, particularly live performances, of all styles.

On leaving school, he started work as a delivery boy in Woolcock's Store, then as the Second World War was in progress, Brian joined the Air Training Corps (Air Cadets) for basic training. He wanted to be a pilot, but after only about 8 hours on Tiger Moths, with the tide of war turning in the Allies favour, it was decided that there were enough men trained to see it out and all pilot training was cancelled. His group was directed to aircraft maintenance training. Brian did a number of communication courses and moved to air traffic control. He took part in the invasion of Borneo and was stationed on Labuan Island. He finished service as Leading Aircraftman and was demobbed in April, 1946.

In 1947 Brian started work as a cellar hand for Walter Reynell & Sons at the winery back at Reynella. On 14th February, 1948, Brian married his childhood sweetheart, the girl next door, Fay Dix. This was the start of a strong and enduring partnership that passed many milestones in their 62 years of marriage. There were two children, Ann and Ian. Ann and her husband, Ivano, live in Italy, and have two children, Dario and Isabel. Ian and his wife, Robyn, live at Mylor where they run their successful nursery business, Tupelo Grove. They have two sons, Tim and Chris.

In 1951, Brian took a job as a farm hand at O'Halloran Hill and he and Fay moved there to live with their two small children. In 1956, well known South Australian pastoralist and race horse breeder, Mr. H.C. (Slinger) Nitschke, bought the property and Brian was appointed manager. He continued to run the farm successfully until 1963, when Mr. Nitschke offered him the manager's position on Partacoona Station, a pastoral property of around 540 square kilometres, in the Flinders Ranges north of Quorn. This was a major change in lifestyle for the family. Partacoona is set in a very scenic area of the Flinders, but much of it is off

the beaten track and not on the regular tourist routes. The property had been run down to some degree under previous management and presented many challenges for Brian. He approached these with his usual energy and enthusiasm. Partacoona was built up to be a very successful and smooth running property.

Most of the stock work was done using horses and these were also used occasionally for off-property recreation. There were a number of local horse events, picnic race meetings or gymkhanas for station horses and it was good for staff morale to attend these. Brian was also interested in country thoroughbred races and at one stage owned his own horse, Mateship, which won 19 country races, including a Pt. Augusta Cup and Provincial Cup before being retired. The interest was not about betting but mostly to do with the social outlet. There was always a great deal of fun and humour at these events but to have a winning horse was certainly a bonus.

Apart from the normal duties of running the station, Brian's natural curiosity covered a wide range of interests. He became interested in archaeology as there were Aboriginal grindstones and cooking middens and "factory" sites where the ground was covered in stone flakes, hammer stones and discarded core stones, from which smaller tools were struck such as knives, scrapers and points. Brian became a Warden of Aboriginal Artefacts.

On one fox shooting expedition he spotted and captured a small marsupial mouse and this was the beginning of years of research with Dr. Peter Crowcroft of the SA Museum, who was conducting research into this particular animal (Fat-tailed Dunnart – *Sminthopsis Crassicaudata*). Brian invited him to Partacoona to look for more specimens. The hospitality provided by Brian and Fay on these field monitoring trips was greatly appreciated and led to visits by other scientific professionals and as their reputation grew their network of contacts broadened. Brian had discovered an isolated colony of Yellow Footed Rock Wallabies in an area of hills that was well away from the main ranges and known habitat. This colony became important for a research project of Dr. Peter Hornsby from the University of Adelaide. Again, the researchers were made welcome by Brian and Fay, and Partacoona was again a base for important scientific work. Brian looked forward to these visits because it was an opportunity to learn more about his environment and put something back into it. Living and working in this area was

much more than just a job. Every day there would be something different and interesting to observe.

Brian's local knowledge, keen observation skills and common sense were sought and appreciated. Many other scientific operations passed through or used the property as a base. The Adelaide University set up a seismograph which Brian and Fay operated, attending the data recorder daily. There was anthropological research by Dr Ronald Lampert from Sydney Museum collecting and documenting Kartan culture stone tools that apparently pre-dated later aboriginal culture. There were magnetometer surveys, part of a joint research project conducted by Sydney Museum and a Canadian Institute detecting "hot spots" where the earth's crust is thinner and more active. Another Sydney Museum project collected "ripple rocks" to detect and research so called "polar flips", reversal of the earth's polarity. Adelaide University hosted annual field studies looking at astronomy, botany, geology, ornithology and so on.

Another of Brian's keen interests was botany. He and Fay hosted Deputy Director Rex Kuchel and trainees from the Botanic Gardens of Adelaide to gain experience in the field in plant identification and environmental studies. Botany was a passion that Brian carried through to the end of his life, but what he was most passionate about was to see the knowledge applied in a practical way. He could see great potential and many uses for hardy drought and salt tolerant native plants and gained a lot of satisfaction from the huge number of planting projects he undertook in later years.

In 1971, Brian and Fay purchased Endilloe, a property on the northern outskirts of Quorn. It had an historic old homestead, built from natural stone, on the edge of Stony Creek, which ran through the property. They undertook the renovation of this house and moved into it when they left Partacoona in 1975. Many of the institutions and people that they were connected with followed them to Quorn. For example, the seismograph was moved to Endilloe and they continued collecting the data. In total, they clocked up 25 years of daily monitoring. The property was used as a base for helicopter wallaby counts and feral goat control.

In 1974 Brian formed a partnership with the CSIRO to develop an experimental orchard growing wild peaches or quandongs (*Santalum Acuminatum*) on the Endilloe property. He had long been interested in developing quandongs as a commercial fruit and had grown a number of trees on Partacoona after collecting seeds from wild trees. The trial orchard was planted

with quandongs grown from seed sourced from all over Australia. Brian also planted many quandongs in the native garden he was developing on Endilloe. For many years he and Fay collected data on the fruit produced in the orchard and from some of the other trees. Fruit was picked from individual trees, counted, weighed, cooked and samples were also sent to CSIRO for analysis. There was great variation in the size and quality and out of all the seedlings a small number of superior trees producing high quality fruit were identified. Material was grafted from these and made available for commercial planting. Work is still being done to find a reliable method of propagating these superior plants on a large scale. Brian's vision, from nearly 50 years ago, for the commercial potential of this fruit is still to be fully realised.

In the late 1980's, an invitation to speak on the School of the Air in Pt. Augusta about growing quandongs led Brian to offer help in planting native plants to improve homestead environments. He volunteered his time and vehicle and managed to get many plants donated. Demand for his services quickly increased and Greening Australia came to his rescue supplying a vehicle and running costs, though he still volunteered his time. Through his friendships and wide circle of contacts he was able to obtain up to 25,000 plants each year. The station people supplied fencing material, driplines and so on and for over 10 years Brian and his friend, Basil Bowden, travelled through the north of the State laying out systems and planting native trees and shrubs. Basil recorded their efforts in his self-published book, "Outback Plantings – People and Places".

After moving onto Endilloe, Brian took a job for some time working for the Plant Control Board and covered a lot the local and neighbouring districts searching out and advising on the control and removal of invasive plant species. In October of 1978 he had a serious accident on the Carrieton road when a kangaroo came over the bonnet and through the windscreen. The vehicle rolled and Brian was knocked out. He suffered whiplash and some spinal injuries and was hospitalised. His recuperation was slow and it was mainly through his spirit and determination that he was able to get himself going again. On top of football injuries as a young man and physically active working life, this accident was a set back from which he never fully recovered. To those who hadn't known him before it didn't seem to slow him up too much.

Brian was never one to sit around and he started work on a native garden of his own on Endilloe. This became a very extensive project, over 12 hectares, and he collected and nurtured many rare plants collected during his trips around the State. Apart from native plants, he and Fay maintained a large vegetable garden and an orchard with a wide variety of vines, fruit and nut trees. These were grown on brackish bore water that was considered only good enough to grow the most salt tolerant plants. They preserved much of their produce and Brian made wine from his Shiraz vines. A feature of their hospitality was a tasting of home preserved treats such as olives, dried figs, apricots, pistachio nuts, currants and many more, washed down with a glass or two of wine. On many occasions the garden was opened to the public under Australia's Open Garden Scheme and there were always requests from individuals or groups for conducted tours.

The garden spread across the redgum creek in front of and around the house. It was a discovery trail of winding paths, hundreds of metres of low dry stone

walls, all carted and placed by hand and a diversity of native trees and shrubs. Brian was always ready to try something different and liked the challenge of getting things to grow where they shouldn't. Visitors came from all over Australia and overseas as well, and the garden received both National and International acclaim. As each section was finished, Brian would say "that's it – no more", but before long, he would be laying out a new area. The stone walls were a great refuge for small reptiles, skinks and geckos etc, which helped to control insect pests and the wide variety of flowering plants gave food and shelter for many bird species. A dam which was topped up occasionally with bore water provided a haven for a number less common and unexpected water birds and waders. Greening Australia set up a building on the property to act as a centre for botanical and horticultural training.

Brian also found time for community service. He was a Charter Member of the Quorn Lions Club when a chapter was set up in 1981. He served on the Quorn/Kanyaka District Council for 6 years during the 1980's. He was involved as a volunteer supervisor in numerous Government sponsored employment schemes around Quorn and Hawker, and was responsible for many tree planting projects in and around the towns. He served on the Northern Consultative Committee of the National Parks and Wildlife Service for 16 years.

He and Fay were active supporters and Foundation Members of The Friends of the Australian Arid Lands Botanic Garden at Pt. Augusta and he served on the Committee until retiring from it in 2007. He received Life membership of that group. Brian was also a member of, firstly, the Advisory Committee when the Garden was being planned and set up. He then served on its Board and, finally, on its Reference Committee. It was Brian who proposed the development of the Eremophila Garden around the Visitor Reception Building and this quickly became one of the most attractive and best known features of the young garden.

Brian assisted on several seed and plant collecting trips over many years, to remote areas of the state, seeking plants for the expanding collection at the AALBG. He also assisted with a Friends major fund raising project, helping rehabilitate degraded areas in the Nullarbor National Park, 1,200 west of Port Augusta. His wisdom and practical approach were greatly valued by others involved in setting up the new Botanic Garden.

In 2003, Brian and Fay sold Endilloe and moved into the township of Quorn. Once again a new garden was set up and very quickly brick paved pathways, plants and Brian's signature dry stone walls appeared. The vegetable garden was soon yielding seasonal produce and the figs, olives, citrus and grape vines were on the way. A suburban backyard, even on a large block was never going to be enough for Brian and soon he was starting work on what was to be his last challenge and a fitting memorial.

At the eastern end of Quorn there was a parkland that had been previously planted with a variety of trees, part of a species trial conducted by the Adelaide Botanic Gardens during the 1980's. Brian had been involved with this trial at the time, but the data had been collected and the area had become neglected. He approached the Council with the idea to take over the area and establish a native garden of local plants that occurred within a radius of 20 to 30 kms of Quorn. With a small group of volunteers the project was started in 2005. Council provided support and some help

with machinery for the initial layout and a grant was received from Australia's Open Garden Scheme which was used to set up the first drip system and purchase plants and tree guards etc. In May, 2007, the gardens were officially opened by the out-going Governor of South Australia, Her Excellency Marjory Jackson-Nelson, AC, CVO, MBE and named "Powell Gardens" in "Recognizing the outstanding pioneering work of Fay & Brian Powell to research, develop & promote the use of native arid land plants throughout the north of South Australia". Further grants and generous donations have seen the gardens develop and mature with new areas opening up and they continue to be a "work in progress".

Through his lifetime, Brian attracted many awards of various kinds for community service, landcare and promotion of native vegetation. Either individually or with Fay, there have been KESAB Tidy Town awards, nearly one a year from 1987 to 2007. He was "Citizen of the Year" in 1983 for Kanyaka-Quorn District, "One of 100 Notable Contributors" for SA National Parks and Wildlife Service Centenary in 1991, SA Landcare "Individual Carer" award in 1991, "Outstanding Individual" from the National Banksia Awards in 1992, "Member of the Order of Australia – AM" for "Service to the conservation of Australian native flora and fauna through the management of the natural environment" in 1992, Greening Australia Silver Pin in 1993, Parliament of South Australia Bronze Medallion in 1996, "Opera in the Outback" National Parks Foundation Environmental Award in 1997, Australian Plants Society Award in 1999, Ivan Holiday Award for "contributions of conservation, promotion and knowledge of Australian plants" in 2007, Flinders Ranges Council "Certificate of Recognition" in 2007 and Northern and Yorke Resources Management Board's "Quiet Achiever Award" in 2010. Brian and Fay together were a strong partnership and Brian readily acknowledged that he couldn't have achieved what he did without Fay's enduring support. They were very generous with their time and knowledge and their network was very wide. People enjoyed visiting them and were always received with warm hospitality.

Brian was a most unique and independent person. He was a free and original thinker who relied on and backed his own judgement and wasn't persuaded by convention. He respected reasoned debate but wasn't afraid to stand up for his own opinion if his conclusions differed. He had a good, some might say "wicked", sense of humour which made him fun to work and socialise with. He was a good judge of character and had the rare ability to pass his enthusiasm for a particular job or project on to those around him. It was this ability to bring people along with him that enabled him to achieve so much in his life.

Brian died in Adelaide on Anzac Day 2010 some days after heart surgery. A small private funeral was held in Adelaide and then on Sunday June 20th a memorial gathering was held to honour Brian's memory in the Powell Gardens at Quorn, attended by about 120 people, followed by refreshments in the Lions' Club Hall. The Friends were represented on both occasions. His was a life well lived. Our sincere sympathy to Fay and family.

Thanks to Greg Bannon for providing much of this information, with additional input by John Zwar.