

Inaugural Brian Medlin Memorial Lecture
Function Room, Art Gallery of SA
July 8th, 2006
Flinders University 40th Anniversary

On December 8, 1992 Brian Medlin wrote to the Adelaide Review. In an earlier edition Professor Jack Smart had reviewed his monograph "Human Nature, Human Survival" - and one Dr Casely-Smith had entered the fray hoping, it seemed, to have a crack at a tall poppy.

Either in cheerful ignorance of Brian, or on the basis of some misguided view of his own intellectual superiority, Casely-Smith made some less than complimentary remarks about Brian's work and from it drew certain demonstrably false assumptions. It was immediately clear to Brian that if Casely-Smith had indeed read "Human Nature, Human Survival", he had failed miserably to understand it.

The outing was, for poor Dr Casely-Smith, far from glorious. I recall Brian being irritated, certainly, but amused too and, I suspect, not a little grateful for the opportunity to parade his wit, in print and in public, at Dr Casely-Smith's expense.

He (that is, Brian) wrote:

"During the brief history of our species, human beings have developed many ingenious ways of making fools of themselves. Out of this great wealth of method, Dr Casely-Smith has chosen a way [which?], though effective indeed, is only a bit more imaginative than stepping on a banana skin. In a clumsily written piece, he has commented with disfavour and high disdain upon a text which manifestly he has not read. In consequence he marches through two columns of print triumphantly bearing before him in a charger his own severed head."

Like Monty Python's limbless knight, writhing helplessly on the ground, Dr Casely-Smith refused to surrender. He ventured forth again - and Brian responded again on February 14, 1993

"Like all people who find it hard to imagine themselves to be in error, Dr Casely-Smith can be a slow learner. If he is going to keep on telling the world about my book, then Dr Casely-Smith ought, out of ordinary decency, at least glance at it. I would suggest though, as a reader so determined to be confused by plain, lucid English, he would be best to forget about the book and just shut up."

To my knowledge, Dr Casely-Smith has not been heard of in public debate since.

So, with Dr Casely-Smith's fate in mind, ladies and gentlemen, I approached this Inaugural Brian Medlin Memorial Lecture with some caution. For the duration of our close friendship, some thirty years, Brian and I bickered about life after death. If he was right - and neither of us can know that - then I need have no fear.

If he was wrong – and that is possible, if not probable – then for the next 45 minutes I shall need to tread very carefully. If anyone’s rigour can reach beyond the grave it would be Brian’s - and he was as rigorous with his friends as with the Dr Casely-Smiths of this world, though a great deal more tolerant and affectionate.

I’m honoured to have been asked to present the Inaugural Brian Medlin Memorial Lecture, though I’m all too aware that my academic qualifications for the task are singularly lacking. It’s fair to say that I was not a triumphant student in the traditional sense.

It’s also fair to say that Brian was in no doubt as to where I sat on the philosophy landscape. In a reference he once wrote for me, he was as complimentary as he could be. But when he came to address my academic prowess he remarked, with the deadly precision for which he was famous, that “Mr Schumann is a better philosopher than some”.

And if that is not enough, I’m able to quote from what was one of his last, if not his last, public speaking engagement – the address at my 50th birthday party. It was a terrific speech. He kicked it off with an anecdote about the English fast bowler, Freddie Trueman, which he was able to turn into an affectionate insult. Having set the tone, he went on:

“When I first met John Schumann nearly 30 years ago, I would not have believed that an indulgent humanity would suffer that stammering Mick to achieve such a great age. Brian Matthews, in his triffic intro to John’s triffic-plus new album, describes the young Schumann as diffident. Wrong! In my experience the young Schumann was fanatically and confidently dedicated to convincing his philosophy tutor of the existence of God. In that cause, he enlisted a version of the Ontological Argument. He may say it was the Cosmological Argument, but he wouldn’t know. Over the weeks, in response to various fatal objections, this argument got elaborated into a monstrous growth from which even St Anselm would have recoiled into apostasy.

In that cause, John wasted many precious hours which, had we both known better, could have been dedicated to drinking beer and cheerfully insulting one another.”

I knew very well that it was the Ontological Argument. Still, I take great comfort tonight that, in the years to follow, the Medlin Memorial Lecture will be given by philosophers of national and international stature – people far better qualified than me to utter under the auspices of Brian’s significant contribution to the discipline of philosophy.

In this lecture, Remembering Brian Medlin, I hope to provide you with a mud-map of Brian’s life, share a couple of stories and suggest the extent to which Brian’s impact on our world was greater than you might have thought. There will be, unapologetically, personal memories and reflections, and so you’ll need to view this lecture as an exercise in reminiscence rather than a forensic academic dissertation.

You will also need to view it as one mate speaking of another. Brian was my very dear friend - but our friendship was robust enough stand disagreement and a frank appraisal of each other's failings.

In any event, my hope is that I shall, in a small way, prepare the canvas for philosophers who will, in later years, paint from a more comprehensive palette.

Regardless, it is almost inevitable that, at some point, I'll say something with which you will disagree - and Brian certainly would have. I want you to know that I don't care.

When Brian died in October 2004, for some reason or another I found myself writing his obituary. It was a nightmare. Apart from the fact that we were all still pretty raw, Brian's refusal to allow or to contribute to any biographical work prior to his death meant that all I had to draw on were 30 years of non-sequential conversations and stories - almost none of them shared wholly sober. So, for the biographical detail that follows I thank Trevor Nerlich, Douglas Muecke, Harry Medlin and Greg O'Hair. I also want to say that Brian's refusal to contribute in any way to a store of biographical material was typical of his peculiar brand of personal humility - but a mistake nonetheless.

Brian Medlin was born in 1927 in Orroroo, in the mid-north of South Australia. He grew up in Adelaide, attending Richmond Primary School and Adelaide Technical High School. Notwithstanding his early success at school, it was Brian's oft-repeated contention that his education was drawn from the State Library of South Australia and the bush. While at secondary school the Adelaide poet, Flexmore Hudson, introduced the young Medlin to the work of Bertrand Russell setting the young man on his path through life.

After graduating from Adelaide Tech in the mid 1940s, Medlin took a position as storekeeper on Victoria River Downs station. Already a prodigious reader, the eighteen-year-old spent his time devouring the books he would get sent up regularly from Mary Martin's bookshop. Staying on in the Territory after resigning from Victoria River Downs, Medlin was variously kangaroo shooter, stockyard builder, horse-breaker and drover with his own plant. Once, at the request of boss drover Matt Savage, Medlin took a mob of 60 horses across the Tanami to the Western Australian coast, accompanied only by Savage's 12 year-old daughter and her uncle. He was immensely proud of his time and achievements in the Territory: indeed, they marked him for life.

Returning to Adelaide in the early 1950s, Brian worked as a clerk for Ansett Airways and as a teacher at Adelaide Tech.

Meanwhile, he enrolled at Adelaide University to study English, Latin and Philosophy. Here he was taught by, among others, Douglas Muecke, Jack Smart and Charles Martin, to all of whom he always acknowledged an intellectual debt. At this time, Medlin became increasingly active in the cultural and literary life of Adelaide, then emerging as the "Athens of the South".

He wrote poetry, the best of which was regarded as strong and arresting, and he moved in Adelaide's literary circles which included the likes of John Bray, Mary Martin, Charles Jury, Max Harris, Douglas Muecke and Michael Taylor. In later years, on long drives and in long camps, Brian would astound me with his prodigious memory for poetry and seemingly endless quotations. These quotations were occasionally delivered, I am constrained to say, in less than wholly convincing accents.

Brian Medlin's intellect and staggering capacity for comprehension were reflected in his academic results. He graduated with first class honours in 1958, having established himself as a brilliant philosopher of great promise. He then went to Oxford, on a Kennedy Research scholarship and with some financial support from his friend, Charles Jury. During his overseas sojourn he taught philosophy for a year in the newly independent Ghana, before returning to England in 1961 to take up a Research Fellowship at New College, Oxford.

Brian Medlin was highly regarded at Oxford. He told me many things about his years at Oxford. The only thing I can recall now was that he was there with Malcolm Fraser - and he thought Fraser was a bit of a dill.

It was here, at Oxford, that he met Iris Murdoch, with whom he corresponded off and on for most of his life. I have among my papers a copy of a letter he wrote to Iris Murdoch. In it, among other things, he wrote of "the billabong" - more precisely what constitutes a billabong and what doesn't. Iris Murdoch or not, there was no way she was going to get away with loose use of the word "billabong". She visited him in Adelaide, no doubt to be shown a billabong at first-hand.

In 1964 Medlin returned to Australia to take up a research readership at the University of Queensland. In 1967 he was appointed Foundation Professor of Philosophy at the Flinders University of South Australia. By this time, Medlin had published significant articles in several areas of philosophy, including the much anthologized "Ultimate Principles and Ethical Egoism" and "The Unexpected Examination". In "Ryle and the Mechanical Hypothesis" (1967), Medlin extended the pioneering Place-Smart "Identity Theory" of sensations as brain processes to a general "Central State Materialism", covering all aspects of the mind. This work was shortly joined by that of David Armstrong in 1968 and David Lewis in 1970-72, and the new theory quickly became central to the philosophy of mind.

It was in his academic post at Flinders that Medlin came to wider attention. As a teacher he was dynamic and forceful and he possessed that rare gift of being able to bring complex intellectual concepts within the grasp of his intellectual inferiors - of whom there were many. He was, generally, patient with his students and made himself freely available to them, much more so than a number of his professorial colleagues.

Demanding hard work and utterly scathing of shoddy thinking Brian Medlin was, nonetheless, a sympathetic, generous and amusing teacher.

He encouraged us to see philosophy not merely as an intellectual pursuit but as something integral to our daily lives. He also encouraged us, wherever possible, to engage in philosophy in accessible language.

“You ought to be able write a lot of your philosophy,” he often said, “so that someone can pick up your essay in a pub, sit down quietly and, with a bit of effort, understand what you’re saying.”

This is not to say that Brian did not support intellectual and cultural excellence. He did – and in doing so he earned the admiration and respect of his colleagues nationally and internationally. It was just that he did not believe that anyone ought to keep knowledge from ordinary people by virtue of high-flown language and academic obfuscation. Nevertheless, in his later years he came to accept that there were some philosophical matters which were beyond the capacity of the ordinary intellect.

Philosophy was his life, one of his greatest loves and greatest passions and, whenever pressed, he would relate what he did for a living with some pride. In his responses he was often witty and sometimes, though not always, self-deprecatory.

Brian used to tell the story of an Australian army officer returning home from Malaysia on the same ship as him. The officer told Brian that he always thought a philosopher was someone who sat on top of a gate and, when anybody reckoned things were crook, he would just shrug and say “So what?”

Another time, on a bus from Broken Hill, having confessed his profession to a young woman, she told him, “Oh, I’m really into philosophy. I’m always reading bus-tickets.”

He also used to tell the story – and right now I can’t recall if it was his or someone else’s – but it involved a conversation overheard between two friends about the trials and tribulations of life. “Oh,” said one to the other, “You have to be philosophical. Just don’t think about it.”

Brian was never the sort of philosopher content to spend his days discussing how many angels one could squeeze into the magazine of an AK-47. In the early to mid 1970s, when I was an undergraduate and the Department was deep into Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tse Tung-thought, he would dismiss those questions as “bourgeois” philosophy, arguing that they were a waste of good thinking time and deliberately designed by the academy to distract philosophers from contemplating an alienating and destructive set of socio-economic relations and calling for change.

Between 1988 and 2004, Brian wrote an important series of papers, the broad thrust of which I’ll discuss briefly. And for much of what is about to follow, I acknowledge and thank Brian’s close friend, Wallace McKittrick.

The first four papers in the series between 1988 and 2004 examine the question,

“What is a constructive response to the current threats to human survival resulting from ecological damage and war?”

The papers argue that both pessimism and despair are untenable positions, and that the positions we take in relation to ecological damage and war determine whether or not we act in ways likely to promote human survival.

In some measure the papers between 1988 and 1991 foretold Brian’s 1992 monograph, *Human Nature, Human Survival*, which provided an ethical framework for the evaluation of public policies, political strategies and personal responses to the threats to human survival.

A fifth paper, “Love, Mortality and the Meaning of Life”, with similar underlying concerns, employs a sustained and elegant interplay between selected passages of poetry and Brian’s argument in prose. Examining the stated or implied metaphysics of some of the greatest English humanist poets – Arnold, Yeats and Housman, among others – Brian’s paper makes us look, afresh, at imagination and language as the great motors of meaning. Still acutely aware of the threats of ecological destruction and war, Brian again points us to constructive contemporary action and celebrates the best moral capabilities of human beings.

“Letter to a Creationist”, was written in 2004 - in quite a different vein from Brian’s other papers. However, like them, it seeks to dispense with the clutter of assumptions and errors that prevents many of us from either taking individual responsibility for our behaviour or formulating a coherent, consistent ethics as a basis for constructive, practical action.

Although some of these papers share some subject matter and lines of argument with *Human Nature, Human Survival*, each has its distinct importance. All papers are accessible to a readership well beyond the academic cloisters and they remain hugely relevant to contemporary society and to social and economic policymakers.

It is a worthy initiative to invite to South Australia, and to promote, “Thinkers in Residence”. Equally, it is shameful of us not to acknowledge and promote our home-grown thinkers. Brian Medlin is no longer with us, but he has left us a legacy of international class thinking. We ignore it at our loss – and indeed our peril.

And so, this evening, I call on the Flinders University to facilitate the publishing of these papers in a single volume. These issues, and Brian’s position on them, are still as current and critical as when they were written.

Brian’s philosophy informed his life and his day-to-day practice. When he arrived at a position and considered it robust enough for him to hold, then hold it he would - in one famous instance to the point of going to gaol.

Australia's participation in the war in Vietnam appalled Brian. In the years before his death he was no less appalled at Australia's participation in the war in Iraq. He will be remembered by many South Australians for his very public leadership of the campaign to stop that war.

For many of us, the enduring image of Brian Medlin is the long-haired professor of philosophy, spread-eagled between two policemen, being dragged from the front of the anti-war march in the September of 1970.

After his arrest, but before being processed, he was taken down to the Torrens and beaten up by a small group of courageous police officers who were, no doubt, doing the bidding of their masters. After a trial widely condemned for its distorted, incoherent and contradictory testimonies, he was imprisoned. As close to tar-and-feathering as the Adelaide Establishment was prepared to go, Brian's hair and beard were shorn. Prior to his incarceration his photo was published on the front page of that God-awful rag, The News – a paper which, over time, has morphed into The Advertiser. Brian was released three weeks later but, during his incarceration, supporters kept a candle-light vigil outside the Adelaide Gaol.

However, as public as his own contribution to the anti-war movement was, throughout his life Brian Medlin continued to insist that there were many campaigners who did much more than he. That alone says much about the man. It was also a measure of Brian that he didn't remain bitter.

His infamy faded along with the immediacy of the moratorium but, in the years that followed, he always cast a wary eye over his shoulder and he was careful as he went about his business. With regard to his beating at the hands of the police, I guess he felt he'd been in tougher, if fairer, fights in the Territory.

His own experiences in the anti-war campaign, and the attacks on him and his fellow campaigners, led him to study, in detail and with his customary rigour, the nature of the society that gave rise to wars such as the one in Vietnam. History vindicated Brian's position but, as you would expect, few commentators have had the decency to acknowledge it

Committed to democracy in all areas of society, including the workplace, Medlin set up a democratic Staff-Student Consultative Committee, just one of the many progressive developments in the Flinders University philosophy department under his stewardship. In the ensuing years, a number of radical courses were introduced, including the first Women's Studies course in Australia. Professor Medlin himself wrote and taught the highly innovative and influential course, Politics and Art, which gave rise to the Australian folk-rock band, Redgum, of which I was a member.

As a philosophy undergraduate steeped in Dominican theology, and despite his best attempts, I was still stubborn enough not have what I still hold to be a reasonable theism mocked out of me.

Tired of trying to refute my admittedly convoluted arguments, Brian claimed to be less than enthusiastic at my prospect of me joining his Politics and Art class. Again, for your amusement I quote briefly from Brian's speech at my 50th:

"And hence, I was gloom-struck when next year one of the first people to drag his knuckles into my Politics and Art course was this same pitiless Scourge of the Unfaithful."

(For pitiless Scourge of the Unfaithful, read me.)

Politics and Art examined the nature of the relationship between art and politics. The central tenet of the course was that, unless specifically created to do otherwise, art in all its forms serves the interests of the dominant social and economic class - either by commission or omission. The course allowed students to present work for assessment that was either theoretical and/or practical. Practical work involved the creation of artistic products in any medium by an individual or group. These works were assessed and criticised by the class.

Politics and Art inspired the fervent support of most participants. It also inspired the most trenchant opposition from some academics - opposition which outlived the course itself and, indeed, Brian. As you might expect, I was and remain a supporter of the course and in the moments to come I shall say why. However, in the context of this lecture, it would be a serious if not grave omission to ignore the contra view.

The very interesting Keith Windschuttle wrote an essay on Australian Maoism for the October 2005 edition of *Quadrant* - and I quote:

"In 1975, Flinders University philosopher and Maoist Brian Medlin asked his students to collaborate in a musical project, and the band Redgum was formed to fulfil this role."

I found this declaration of Windschuttle's quite fascinating - as he wrote of Politics and Art, to the best of my knowledge, in retrospect and without ever having attended a class or having spoken to anyone who had.

As far as Mao was concerned, certainly, "Talks at the Yen'an Forum on Literature and Art" was on the reading list - but so was a wide range of other literature, supporting and decrying the course's fundamental proposition.

I have also read on the net, with some interest, two postings by a couple of ex-students, one of whom claims to have witnessed the psychological traumatising of a mature-age student who presented to the class what was described as "a well-researched paper". None of these people used their surnames. I must say that my own experience of the course over two years gives me no reason to give this tale credence. The ground rules of the Politics and Art were clear and included mutual respect in the context of high standards of diligence and intellectual rigour. If individuals breached these rules, it was not as a result of the design or the way the course was taught and/or administered.

Characteristically, Brian submitted himself to the same creative and philosophical challenges thrown up by the course. During this period, and informed by the central propositions of the course, Brian wrote a suite a suite of thinly-veiled autobiographical short stories under the pseudonym of Timothy Tregonning.

In the spirit of fierce democracy that informed his life and his administration of the department he led, he subjected these stories to the analysis and criticism of class members.

Going through books and papers recently I chanced upon these stories and, after some 20 years, I re-read them. I marvelled again at the width and breadth of Brian's literary capacities. The characters were his own family members, the stories theirs – and his. His elder brother, Harry, emerged as "Horry". Brian himself was "Bruno". In one of these stories, he expands a bit on Bruno and it's fascinating to note the extent of Brian's self-awareness.

"Bruno met Wally at Yudnamutana Bore. About 1975. He was camped nearby at Yudnamutana for three or four months doing whatever it is Bruno does when he takes off into the donga on his pat. Always been a mad bastard like that. Bit of geologising, botanising, bird-watching in a pottering sort of way. Nothing systematic. One thing he's always avoided is organising anything to the point of usefulness. Climbing bloody great rocks alone. And always a piled up mountain of books to scale."

It is the mark of the truly gifted teacher that his or her influence moves on and on through many different spheres in many different ways. Despite antagonism from some quarters, Brian's Politics and Art course achieved just that. For a number of Flinders' graduates who went on to succeed in the arts world, Politics and Art was seminal in that they took what they learned in Politics and Art and applied it to real work in a real world.

A few years ago, a PhD student from ANU tracked me down and put to me the following proposition: he had a theory that the fact that Australian contemporary music had changed to the point that it now actively embraces singers who sing like Australians and not pseudo-Yanks and also embraces songwriters who dare to deal with social and political issues - not just matters of the heart - is, in many ways, due to Redgum. He had traced Redgum's origins through Politics and Art at Flinders to Professor Brian Medlin and the Philosophy Department. He went further, in that he discerned an intellectual framework that underpinned a lot of Redgum's material – in contrast, he said, to a lot of the socio-political music that trailed along in the band's wake. He didn't even mention the Maoist brand.

On reflection, I think he was correct. If Redgum was simply the pebble in the pond, the outer rings were bands like Midnight Oil and Goanna and solo artists including Paul Kelly and Archie Roach. In 2006 we have Missy Higgins, Sara Storer, Xavier Rudd and a host of others, all distinctly and unashamedly Australian in tone and manner.

There is even a successful, politically outspoken hip-hop band in Sydney that cites Redgum as a major influence.

The point is this: without Brian Medlin there would have been no Politics and Art and there would have been no Redgum.

(Given the idiosyncratic nature of Redgum songs, the whining, nasal delivery and the impoverished imitators that followed [in?] our tracks, there are as many who would condemn him as would commend.)

Brian Medlin, it can be argued, lies at the heart of a very significant shift in the most accessed and accessible form of cultural activity in Australia – contemporary popular music. Ironic, indeed, as Brian was never a big fan contemporary popular music.

I have memories of Brian – many and varied. I have spoken briefly of his life in the Flinders University from the perspective of one who passed through rather quickly and unspectacularly. But there are other memories.

He and I shared a lifelong love of the bush. In the early years of our friendship Brian used to go off into the bush for weeks on end - to read and write. Mainly to Yudnamutana, as in the short story I quoted from a little earlier - and the Coorong. A few privileged friends were invited to join him for short periods on these sabbaticals.

I camped with Brian in the Flinders and the Coorong. We argued for years about the right sort of fire to build. My fires were always small, elegantly constrained affairs. In the early years his were drovers' fires – unruly, sprawling and voracious. In later years, as the environment movement gained traction, he came to my way of thinking. In the end, he was using less than wood to boil a billy that anyone I know – including me.

In the bush we did all sorts of things. We shot rabbits. We lay around and read. We ate entire legs of lamb in one sitting. We tried our hands at drawing. We were both dreadful at it, though he argued that he was less so than me. We drank deeply.

One glorious day in the Coorong we drank four days' beer supply in one day. The ice would have melted, you see, so we had to drink it all while it was still cold. It was on this occasion I hazarded the question as to whether he thought we drank too much. He looked at me and said, "Well John, I can't speak for you – but for my part, I drink steadily and regularly to calm a feverishly overactive mind".

One memorable time, my lung collapsed while we were away camping in the Flinders - a spontaneous pneumo-thorax the medicos called it. Neither of us wanted to go home and neither of us knew what was wrong with me, so we both tried to drink me better with bottles of St Agnes Brandy and beer from the Blinman pub. On that occasion the booze failed us.

While I shared Brian's love of the Australian bush, I did not share his ease with snakes. As a Catholic boy, I hold to the 'curse in common with mankind'. While Brian was likely to leap from the car and move quickly and quietly after a snake, following it for some distance to wonder at its colour and movement, I was much more likely to scramble onto the car's roof.

On another trip to the Flinders I watched him hurl an uncooperative gas bottle into the bush. Brian's temper could scorch overhanging foliage at 50 paces. I quietly recovered the bottle the next day and was able to return it to productivity.

As I prepared this lecture, I received phone calls from a couple of friends who, to the best of my knowledge, didn't know Brian. I told them what I was doing and I was struck by their responses. Both were deeply reverential though neither of them had been camping with Brian which, perhaps, accounts for this.

One, a bloke of about my age, said of Brian . "...when I was at Pulteney, that bloke was responsible for many detentions and at one least public caning. Marching in the Vietnam moratorium in full school uniform was not exactly smiled upon at Pulteney. That bloke taught me a great deal about how the world really works and those lessons have stayed with me to this day."

The other, a dear friend from Canberra, told me that she remains deeply grateful to him for his courage and his leadership at the time of the moratorium.

I might have emerged from Brian's tutelage with a less than perfect grasp of Wittgenstein and the intricacies of the Blue Book but, like many of his students, I took from him an ability to demolish other people's bullshit while elegantly defending my own.

I carried away with me Brian's intolerance of callousness, hypocrisy, unreason and clever stupidity on the part of those who should know better. As I advance in years I am even less tolerant of this than I used to be.

I learned from his genuine love of people from all walks of life and I learned from his ongoing wonder at the world around him. In a world of stress, overdrafts and family and social obligations, he taught me to stop, look, wonder and learn.

A fit and intensely physical man, Brian Medlin never fully recovered from a serious motorcycle accident in 1983 - which occurred while was on his way to my place for New Year's Eve. His injuries were very severe and he was hospitalised for quite some time.

Another close friend of Brian's, Wallace McKittrick, wrote a terrific poem for him at this time which spoke, with great emotional eloquence, for us all. With your permission, I'd like to share it with you now.

For Brian Medlin

*This last week
Knowing you are motionless
My world has turned imperceptibly slower,
My thoughts taken up with your silence.*

*Over and again,
I've remembered the agile teacher
Leaping campus steps, hurling meteors
Through the brains of the quick and dead.
We learned not what, but how, to think.*

*Remembered too
The organiser, force inspiring
Fuse and flower of resistance. Your fury
In a wrong world. Sometimes, rotting despair.*

*Remembered you
Skinning rabbits, setting lamps, singing
Gently in the Coorong dark. This bold
Tip of the hat, that grave sweep of the arm.
Friend in a hundred disguises, splendid magician.*

*And, at the centre,
Uncut opal, impossible integrity,
Wit to scythe odd rubbish and human beings.
Silences deeper than the workers' songs we share.*

*Comrade,
You belong to so many of us.
'No separate self, no entity to hold
Together, to keep afloat, for the world to drown.'
Take our love into your limbs and rise.*

Due largely to the effects of this accident, Brian retired early, in 1988, after which he was named Emeritus Professor. He settled in the Wimmera with his wife, Christine Vick, where they worked to restore ten run-down acres to covenanted bushland, publishing their findings as they went. Brian and Christine were awarded Environmental Hero Awards (Wimmera 2004) for their work.

In his later years Brian maintained his passionately active interest in all things, including history, current affairs, science, natural history and photography. To the time of his death, he continued to write philosophy and exchange correspondence with friends and academics from all over the world.

On hearing of his death, one of my friends, who didn't know Brian at all, remarked that he loved the fact that we had an internationally renowned philosopher who was also a poet, bushman, drover, horse breaker and photographer. "Nowhere else but in Australia," he said.

Throughout his life, Brian maintained a very close friendship with Dr John Bray [1912-1995] who was Chief Justice of South Australia from 1967 until 1978. Dr Bray was respected throughout the common-law world as a learned reformer and jurist and was notable for his classical scholarship, poetry and wit.

In a volume of Bray's poems written between 1961-1971 and published by the Jacaranda Press, Brisbane, in 1972 the following poem is to be found

To Brian Medlin

*Fifteen years ago we drank
Till the ship of darkness sank,
Stranding us with feet of clay
On the lurid reefs of day.*

*We talked dramas, theme and plot,
Whether God exists or not,
Virgil. Metrics, short and long,
The ultimate of right and wrong.*

*In verse of intricate design
You took the high romantic line,
Heard yet scorned the bomb's alarms
Strong in the beloved's arms.*

*Recently we drank again
Till daylight smashed the window pane.
Pragmatically we kept in play
Selected topics of the day.*

*Courts, politics, academies,
Committees, personalities,
Sex and the police: then, tired of this,
Fell to self-analysis.*

*Now in "free verse" - I grant the free -
You spurn the laws of prosody,
Clinically compile the chart
Of a polyandrous heart.
And the thing that worries me
Is, does this mean maturity?*

*Have we grown up or down,
Gained a throne or lost a crown?*

Shortly after Bray died in 1995, Brian and I were driving somewhere, yarning, and the subject turned to Bray's departure. I remember he looked at me sadly and said, "You know, with Bray dead, there's one less person I can really talk to."

I know just what you mean, Brian, I know just what you mean.

John Schumann

June 2006