



BRIAN MATTHEWS FAHA

1936 – 2022

With the death of Brian Matthews in June 2022 we lost a major figure in Australian Studies with a prodigious output over many years as lecturer, critic, biographer, creative writer, columnist, commentator, book reviewer and, of course, as lecturer and then professor in Australian Literature.

Brian Ernest Matthews was born in East St Kilda to Owen Thomas Matthews and Elizabeth Matthews on 27 December 1936. Throughout his life he retained a strong emotional connection with St Kilda and wrote about his early life there in his memoir *A Fine and Private Place*, published in 2000. He also remained a faithful and passionate supporter of St Kilda Football Club through all its ups and downs. After school at De La Salle College he went on to study at the University of Melbourne where he completed a BA in the late 1950s followed by an MA under the supervision of Vincent Buckley. Having also completed a DipEd he taught in Victorian country schools before setting off to travel in Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. Following a period of teaching in London schools he returned to Australia to teach in Victorian schools and then took up a position in 1967 at Bedford Park Teachers College, which led shortly afterwards to his moving as a lecturer in English to the adjacent Flinders University, which was still in its exciting and innovative early years developing courses in new areas such as Children's Literature and the New Literatures in English. At first teaching mainly nineteenth-century English literature as well as undertaking a PhD on George Orwell (a writer of deep and abiding interest to him), Brian moved into teaching Australian literature, establishing only the second course in that field in Australia and quickly making Flinders University one of the leading places in the teaching of the national literature. He joined the Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL) when it first began, and quickly became a leading figure in this professional association that did so much to support teaching and research in this field. In 1986 Brian went to the University of Oregon as a Fulbright Scholar in Residence. This

was the first opportunity for him to bring his interest in Australian literature (as well as Australian culture in general) to an international audience and it was followed by other opportunities in the role of visiting professor, particularly in Italy where he lectured at the universities of Venice, Trento and Lecce. Reasonably fluent in Italian, he was able to engage deeply with students in those universities and convey his passionate interest in Australian studies to them.

After a number of years at Flinders University, where he was given a personal chair, an unprecedented honour at Flinders at that time, Brian in early 1993 took on the role of Head of the Menzies Centre for Australian Studies at the University of London. During his four-year term he promoted Australian literature and more broadly Australian culture, introducing the field to an audience which was largely unaware of its depth and breadth; this he did through his own teaching but also through establishing a series of readings by visiting Australian authors. At this stage in his career he also made a major contribution to the development of contemporary Australian literature as Chair of the Literature Board of the Australia Council from 1993 to 1996. In 1994 he was elected as a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. At the end of his term in London he returned to Australia as director of the Europe–Australia Institute at Victoria University in Melbourne, before retiring a few years later. In 2003, while Brian was at Victoria University, the Academy of the Humanities held its annual symposium there. Brian was one of the organisers of this very successful event which included an evening of readings by three poets, Peter Porter, Chris Wallace-Crabbe and Vincent O’Sullivan, and he subsequently edited *Readers, Writers, Publishers: Essay and Poems*, a collection of papers and poetry from the symposium, published by the Academy in 2004.

Throughout his academic career and after his retirement Brian published prolifically in a wide range of different fields and genres. His first book, published by Melbourne University Press in 1972, was based on his MA dissertation: *The Receding Wave*, a study of Henry Lawson, marked a first stage in his commitment to Australian culture, but it was his next book that drew major attention to his work in this field. Partly out of a feeling that he had not done adequate justice to Lawson’s mother in *The Receding Wave*, Brian devoted his next book wholly to her. It was published simply as *Louisa* in 1988 by McPhee Gribble. The book was acclaimed not only for its attention to a figure of major importance whose stature and influence has not been adequately recognised, but also for its groundbreaking

innovations in the writing of biography. It won high praise from reviewers and garnered/was awarded, amongst other prizes, the Victorian Premier's Award for non-fiction and the Australian Literature Society Gold Medal. Two further pieces of biographical writing followed over the years: a substantial and highly regarded biography of Manning Clark (2008) and his last book *Benaud: An Appreciation* (2016). The latter is only a biography in a very loose sense and was appropriately praised by John Clarke as 'a brilliant meditation on a unique sportsman – on character and gifts and time'. His enthusiasm for cricket had, however, earlier shown itself in his history of the MCG, *The Temple Down the Road* (2003), a favourite book of Brian's and a major contribution to our understanding of the fascination with sport and sportspeople as a central feature of Australian culture. Not surprisingly for this noted, but often unconventional biographer, Brian also wrote the already mentioned memoir, *A Fine and Private Place* (2000), which is not only a personal history but also an important study of working-class life in St Kilda in the 1940s.

As well as critical and biographical works, Brian was a significant writer of fiction. With Peter Goldsworthy he co-wrote *Magpie: A Novel* (1992), and as sole author he published a fine collection of short stories, *Quickening and Other Stories* (1989). Two years later McPhee Gribble, publishers of this collection, also published his collection of essays *Oval Dreams*, characteristically subtitled *Larrikin Essays on Sport and Low Culture*. Some of the stories in *Quickening* had already appeared in periodicals, including the *Adelaide Review*, and as such form only a tiny part of Brian's enormous output of contributions to periodicals, including newspapers, most notably *The Age*. For example, between 1997 and 2001 he contributed a weekly column to the *Australian Weekend Magazine*, collected and published in 2001 by Text Publishing under the title *As the Story Goes*, and in that same year he began a monthly column for *Eureka Street*. He was also a regular book reviewer, for example in *ABR*. Through this body of writing Brian moved beyond the restricted world of book publication and established himself as a key commentator on things Australian for a very broad general audience. Similarly, while he was particularly admired in his teaching for his inspiring lectures Brian was also an outstanding speaker in public lectures and talks. His lectures were always meticulously prepared (down to writing in his jokes, as he told Rick Hosking) and beautifully crafted, always to brilliant effect. One of his students, Michael Deves, has recalled a bravura lecture on David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life* which was followed by an awed silence before one of the students asked 'Can we clap now?' Alongside this skill in

public speaking ran his extraordinary facility in telling jokes and anecdotes with perfect shaping and timing, one of the qualities that was much admired and loved by his many friends. At this more personal level he will be remembered for his wry sense of humour, his acute commentary on the world around him, his strong friendships, his passionate interest in cricket and football, but also the arts and music, and not least for warmth of his familiar greeting, 'Giddyay'.

It is hard to overestimate Brian Matthews's contribution to our appreciation and understanding of so many aspects of Australian culture. Through his teaching, his running of the Menzies Centre and the Europe–Australia Institute, his involvement in both ASAL and the Australia Council, and especially through his extraordinarily diverse writing in both academic and broader contexts, his influence extended far and wide, not only in Australia but overseas as well.

Returning to Australia after his original overseas trip, Brian met his first wife, Dorothy Jeanne Bonnett (Jeanne), on board ship. They were married in Melbourne in January 1963; a son, David Owen, was born in November. Four children followed: Gillian Christina, Genevieve (who died in infancy); Donald Steven, Patrick James. Jacqueline Emma, a Vietnamese refugee, was adopted in 1973. In the late 1980s Brian's first marriage broke down, although he and Jeanne remained friends. In 1993 he married again, to the literary editor Jane Arms, in addition becoming a stepfather to Sam and Nick Childs.

Brian grew up in a city suburb (albeit one by the sea) and lived in cities at various points but his preference was always for living in the country. Born a Victorian, he also came, over the years, to love South Australia. While at Flinders he lived first in the Adelaide Hills town of Aldgate, but then moved further out to a large property near Echunga where he and Jeanne built a home for their family. After returning from London and then retiring, he lived for a while on a property at Armagh in the Clare Valley and in coastal Victoria, before returning to South Australia where, not far from both Echunga and his last home in Ashbourne, he died on 2 June 2022 in the district hospital at Strathalbyn, a beautiful and tranquil town in those Adelaide Hills in which he had spent much of his life and which he had come to love so much.

EMERITUS PROFESSOR GRAHAM TULLOCH FAHA

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9 OCTOBER 2023

With thanks for information from David Matthews, Rick Hosking and Michael Deves