

OBITUARY

Professor L.H. Briggs
(1905 – 1975)

Through Field Club's more than 50 years of existence no member of the staff of this University had a longer, nor a more remarkable association with the Club than Emeritus Professor Lindsay Heathcote (Bob) Briggs, M.Sc., PhD. (Oxon.), D.Sc., F.R.S.N.Z.; Sir George Grey, Duffus Lubecki and Sir James Gunson Scholar; Hector, I.C.I. and Coronation Medallist; Member of the Swiss Chemical Society; Fellow of the N.Z. Institute of Chemistry and of other learned Societies; Past-President of the Council of the Auckland Institute and Museum and of the Royal Society of New Zealand.

This, however, is not the place to elaborate the background to Bob Briggs's international reputation as an organic chemist. His faithful support of F.C. through forty-five years derived only secondarily from his career-long interest in the chemistry of natural products, especially those of native plants.

He had a deep perception of, almost a reverence for, the wholeness of nature. He understood exactly the place of the green plant in the organic world, especially in relation to man. He loved to be among plants, to watch them growing, to plant and tend them himself. His dahlias and roses were an especial joy to him: and in the once-wild gully behind his old home in Brighton Rd, Parnell, he created out of the wilderness "Briggs's Bush". It was the enthusiastic encouragement of Bob Briggs (with the late Sir Douglas Robb, the late John Reid and a few others) that kept me going during the 20-years job of restoring and labelling the University native plant collections.

He had an almost Ruskin-like sensitivity to the myriad forms and colours of plants and their flowers. Further, he had a keen sense of smell: and he used it not only to enjoy the perfumes of flowers but also as a chemist, to check for volatile substances in leaves. In the thirties on a F.C. trip to the once verdant Mt Wellington lava field gullies (alas, now quite destroyed) he turned to me amid the beautiful carpet of translucent-green *Asplenium lamprophyllum* and, with a crushed leaf fragment between finger and thumb, he said "There's methyl salicylate in this fern". And so there was – the first discovery of oil of wintergreen in any fern.

Bob Briggs was a member of the first F.C. expedition to National Park in 1928: he attended the Presidential address in 1973 less than two years before his death on January 16 last. He had then been a life member (and he was the first such) for a quarter of a century.

Of the countless Briggs-F.C. anecdotes I could recall perhaps two will serve to show why Bob was so vital, so valued, and so generally popular a member of the Club. In November, 1952, F.C.-Tramping Club had been camped near Colville for some days when Bob Briggs, with his faithful Honi, Ruth Elliott (De Berg) – herself later F.C. President – and some others disembarked, after midnight, at Coromandel from the old Coroglen. As dawn was breaking the tired little party arrived at the camp to find everyone there down with dysentery.

“Come along”, said Bob to Ruth “we must find koromiko (*Hebe stricta* var. *stricta*) – and you can make sure of the identification”. Find it they did : and cure the dysentery the koromiko infusion did – just as members of the Maori Battalion were similarly cured by it during their N. African campaign.

In the late forties the University held a “Public Day”, F.C. and other clubs participating as well as staff and research students. I was showing my 16mm South Island film to a lecture room crowded with mainly school children when the fiendishly unreliable University projector broke down. As my struggles to fix the wretched machine prolonged themselves, and the hubbub among the children understandably grew, Bob Briggs’s voice cut through the din : “Mr Millener’s having a struggle with our old projector – on his birthday (it wasn’t, of course) too. Let’s wish him a happy one.” And the rafters rang to ‘Happy Birthday . . .’ and other joyful songs. Those children enjoyed themselves far more than they would have done had I been able to show my film. I have been ever grateful to Bob for that.

Bob Briggs had many interests outside chemistry where his labours were prodigious, not least on behalf of the scores of research students he trained. He had a critical mind, full of curiosity; and he had great persistence in finding answers. He loved people, animals, plants; all responded to him. His Irish background was partly responsible for his irrepressible sense of fun (he could play the fool magnificently) and his most delightful sense of humour. He had a rich fund of stories and jokes, especially Irish, as generations of F.C. members will recall.

Bob Briggs was a great, a warm-hearted, an honest and just, a most friendly and humble man. I cannot say how much I miss him. And I know that F.C. will never be the same without him.

Laurie Millener