

## Obituary Dr Leonard David Brian Heenan 1937–2020

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New Zealand's most influential population geographer of the 20th century, Brian Heenan (as he was known to all), passed away on 23 April 2020 in Dunedin. At the time of his death, Brian was working on a book regarding the country's oldest water supply reservoir in the Ross Creek Reserve in Dunedin. Brian's interest in aspects of Dunedin's history dates back to his University of Otago PhD thesis in 1969 entitled "Pioneer community to urbanized society: A geographical interpretation of population change in the South Island, 1881–1961".

After Brian retired from the University of Otago in 1997, his research focused increasingly on historical dimensions of Dunedin's social development. He was an active participant in the University's celebrated interdisciplinary Caversham Project, led by staff in the Department of History (<https://caversham.otago.ac.nz/index.php>). In 2006, a book he co-authored with Jane Smallfield, *Above the Belt: A History of the Suburb of Maori Hill, Dunedin*, was published by the Maori Hill History Charitable Trust. The Ross Creek Reserve project and the establishment of the Ross Creek Charitable Trust followed. His daughter, Kerri, and son, Peter, hope to finish and publish the

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draft manuscript he had been preparing on the Reserve over the past decade.

Kerri and her daughter, Olivia, are also preparing a website to make the findings of Brian's extensive research into the people who developed the Ross Creek reservoir available to the wider public. They have discovered that he was writing a children's story about a hedgehog and a possum – a legacy of a major gardening project which is mentioned below. Kerri and Olivia hope to see this published in due course as well. Brian remained research-active to the end; early retirement in 1997 did not bring any reduction in his interest in and commitment to understanding the people and places of Dunedin, the city where he lived for the great majority of his life.

L. D. Brian Heenan was born in Clyde, Central Otago in 1937. His family were farmers and he started primary school in Clyde. When he was nine, the family's dairy farm was sold and they moved to Dunedin where he completed his primary education at North East Valley School before going to Otago Boys High School. At secondary school he was a passionate and very accomplished cricketer— skills passed on to his son Peter and his grandsons, Josh and Alex, who were both Canterbury age group representatives.

Brian completed undergraduate and graduate degrees at the University of Otago between 1958 and 1962, during which time he met and married his wife, Natalie. He majored in Geography and History for his BA degree, and his MA thesis in Geography (1962) was entitled "A population geography of the Dunedin urban area". He attended Christchurch Teachers' College in 1961 where he completed post-primary school teacher training. Over the next two years, he was Assistant Master at Hakatere College in Ashburton.

In 1964, the Heenans moved back to Dunedin when Brian was appointed an assistant lecturer in the Department of Geography at the University of Otago. He completed his PhD thesis there in 1969 on the population geography of the South Island between 1881 and 1961. He was a staff member in that Department until he retired in 1997, becoming a lecturer in 1966, a senior lecturer in 1972 and an associate professor in 1981. The title of professor (and, later, emeritus professor

in retirement) eluded Brian. He definitely merited this promotion but as he and other long-serving associate professors in the University of Otago's Department of Geography (and elsewhere) were to find in the 1980s and 1990s, internal promotion to the rank of professor was very difficult to achieve. It was especially hard to achieve if you were not prepared to push yourself forward. A distinguishing characteristic of Brian Heenan was his modesty. He exemplified the *kumara* in the famous Māori whakataukī that acknowledges humbleness: *Kāore te kumara e kōrero mō tōna ake reka* (The kumara does not say how sweet he is).

Brian's research in population geography has been reviewed by me elsewhere (Bedford, 1999). In my view, he is New Zealand's quintessential population geographer. His research contributions span all the various domains that came to characterise the subfield of population geography from the early 1960s. His papers on internal migration in New Zealand in the 1970s and 1980s remain definitive publications on this topic. A joint paper in 1972 with one of his graduate students, Kevin McCracken, laid the foundations for the subfield of medical geography in New Zealand. He wrote extensively on structural changes in populations, anticipating the emergence of an increasing interest among social scientists in issues to do with ageing populations. He wrote on urban and rural population change, population dynamics and population policy. No matter what the topic or theme relating to New Zealand's population from the late 1960s you were interested in, something Brian had written would be informing your research.

This is not the place for another substantial review of Brian's research during the 33 years he was a staff member at the University of Otago. A published list of his papers is available in Bedford (1999). An important international dimension to Brian's career began with a Nuffield Foundation Dominion Travelling Fellowship in the Humanities in 1971. Brian spent a year at the University of Liverpool working with internationally renowned population geographers W. T. S. (Bill) Gould and R. Mansell Prothero. It was in Liverpool that Brian developed a strong and enduring interest in both territorial mobility

(initially through association with Prothero Gould's African Mobility Project) and medical geography.

His wide-ranging interests in population geography were stimulated further by an appointment as a senior research fellow (honorary) at the University of Dundee in 1985 and a subsequent invitation from the editors of *Progress in Human Geography* to contribute progress reports on the subfield. To the best of my knowledge, he was the first geographer in New Zealand to get an invitation to write progress reports for this leading journal in the discipline. He made good use of the opportunity to feature research on population issues by New Zealand and Australian authors in a field that was heavily dominated by writers from Great Britain, Europe and North America.

Outside the university, Brian played a major role in the development of the New Zealand Demographic Society (now the Population Association of New Zealand). He was the Society's foundation vice-president between 1974 and 1976, its president between 1976 and 1978, and a member of its Council in 1979 and 1980. He was very active during the late 1970s and early 1980s on the New Zealand Planning Council's Population Working Party (1977–79) and the New Zealand National Commission for UNESCO's Human and Social Sciences Sub-Commission (1979–83). He made several major submissions to central and local government on population issues in the 1970s including the housing situation in New Zealand (1971), population policy (1975), population trends and issues (1976), and population dynamics on the West Coast (1977) and in the Otago region (1977). In the mid-1980s, he wrote reports for the Social Science Research Committee on the migration of older New Zealanders (1985, 1986).

Brian was a very popular teacher and supervisor. His influence in these contexts is summed up very well in the words of two of his early graduate students: Kevin McCracken (Retired Dean, Environmental and Life Sciences, Macquarie University, Sydney) and Paul Spoonley FRSNZ (Distinguished Professor, Massey University,

Auckland). They have both given permission for their comments to be included in this obituary.

Kevin points out that: “Brian was a hugely influential person in my life. Without his encouragement I would never have had the confidence to head off to Canada for a PhD back in 1970. Then, later on, when I pursued my career at Macquarie, he was always there in a supportive background mentoring role. On top of that was the generous 50-years-plus friendship he and Natalie and my wife and I enjoyed. Visiting Dunedin in the future is not going to be the same without his genial presence.”

Paul states: “My two supervisors on the research for my master’s thesis (Geography, Otago) on the Niuean community in the mid-1970s were Brian Heenan and Cluny Macpherson, so I was very lucky to have such skilled and supportive supervisors. In terms of my studies with Brian, he was always very measured, a great listener (even when my ideas were probably not worth listening to) and very gentle in how he guided your academic work. I have always regarded him as a model for any supervision and student support that I have done over the years. He was one of the greatest influences on my own academic career, both in terms of subject matter and how to behave in ways that support student learning and research independence.”

Brian was also a tremendous mentor for new faculty at the University of Otago and one of his mentees, Sarah Turner (now a professor at McGill University, Canada), provides the following reflections: “I first met Brian in 1998 when I arrived at University of Otago as a newbie lecturer still trying to wrap up my thesis and start to teach full-time. My PhD was based in the UK with an absentee supervisor, and Brian spontaneously took me under his wing. He taught me the fundamentals of university life and academic writing – or any writing for that matter. He was incredibly generous and kind. Brian’s examples of patience, humour, and goodwill are all virtues that I continue to try to imitate with my own students today”.

No obituary for Brian would be complete without reference to the magnificent garden featuring rhododendrons that the Heenan family developed on an extremely steep section in Braeview Crescent,

Maori Hill between 1980 and 2016. Anyone who had the good fortune to visit their home will never forget this garden. Kerri observes: “We all toiled to clear the section and Dad built incredible rock walls to create terraces which became the home for over 400 rhododendrons as well as natives and other exotic plants. His interest was sourcing rhododendrons species and at this that time he was an active member of the Rhododendron Society and a Trustee of Tannock Glen [[https://dunedingardens.co.nz/content/tannock\\_glen\\_garden](https://dunedingardens.co.nz/content/tannock_glen_garden) – a specialist rhododendron garden in Dunedin].”

Brian Heenan’s legacy will live on, in the memories of his students and mentees as a kind and generous teacher and adviser, in his wide-ranging publications on population issues which remain important sources for researchers, and through his family, who are committed to ensuring the two major projects he was working on at the time of his death (the social and botanical history of the Ross Creek Reserve and the children’s story on the hedgehog and the possum) reach their intended audiences.

## **Acknowledgements**

I am very grateful for the generous support provided by Natalie and Kerri with details of Brian’s early life and his retirement research so soon after his death. I also appreciated very much the messages from Kevin McCracken, Sarah Turner and Paul Spoonley, amongst others. The paper on Brian’s research that I wrote in 1999, and refer to in the obituary, is entitled “End of an era? Population geography in New Zealand at the turn of the century”, *New Zealand Geographer*, 55(2), 8–24.

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