

Memorial Service for Bruce Piggott CBE¹

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Bruce Piggott was a stirrer and shaker. That is why we always got on well together. He was invariably ahead of his time – far ahead of most lawyers. My second-last exchange with him was about the Republic. At the age of 86, Bruce had embraced a new cause. I tried to argue rationally and calmly and then emotionally and noisily with him. Impertinently, I reminded him that he was a Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire. But Bruce would not be moved. He was never a sentimentalist nor a devotee of the past for the past's sake. We honour a famous son of the law, of Tasmania, of Australia. But beyond that we honour a human being whose spirit was big enough to reach out to disadvantaged people in Australia and far away. With Audrey, Bruce's daughters and sons, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, with their extended family and with all who mourn his passing, we come together and remember a very special man.

Bruce was a person of apparent gentleness and diffidence. But how misleading exteriors can be. Behind that veneer lay a steely determination. He was, like Rumpole, full of poetical quotations and operatic allusions. Yet he was a hard-nosed lawyer who established a leading firm of solicitors with a strong commercial practice. In the legal profession, he was surrounded by generally conservative colleagues whom he charmed and led. But he was always a man brimming over with ideas for reform of the law and the righting of wrongs – many of those ideas radical and challenging. Long before it became fashionable, Bruce Piggott championed the rights of women. His very last exchange with me was a letter concerning the oppression of Australians on the grounds of their sexuality. So far as that discrimination was concerned, Bruce was against it. He was a child of tomorrow, completely devoid of irrational prejudice or discrimination. What a model for us all in a man of great years whose life had virtually spanned a century.

¹ Eulogy at the Memorial Service for John Bruce Piggott held on 30 June 2000.

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Bruce Piggott, born in 1913, was a child of Hobart in the early years of the Twentieth Century. He remembered the turnip fields and the milking cows near the centre of town.² He attended Hutchins School and the University of Tasmania. In the period immediately after the Second World War he helped organise the United Nations Association, the Institute of International Affairs and the National Theatre and Fine Arts Society of Tasmania. His restless spirit then took him into the organisations of the legal profession where he rose to be the President of the Law Society of Tasmania. Not content with a single term he was summoned back to service a decade later – a rare accolade. In between, he was elected President of the Law Council of Australia, the peak national body which represents all lawyers throughout our continental country. As a result of that service he became involved in many international legal bodies, including Lawasia which he helped to establish. Fortunate was Australia to have his civilised, enlightened voice as its representative in the International Bar Association, in World Peace Through Law, in Lawasia and in activities of the United Nations.

I came to know him well when he was serving as Chairman of the Tasmanian Law Reform Commission in the 1970s and 1980s. Bruce Piggott threw himself into the fray.³ He was always willing to respond to a new challenge in life. He was a child of the era of Australian nation-builders. Instead of looking on a young judicial reformer from Sydney as an upstart, he embraced active cooperation. Never once did I feel that he closed his mind to new concepts of justice for all.

We kept in close touch when he became Chief Judge and Chairman of the Nuclear Claims Tribunal in the Marshall Islands just a decade ago. His career was a dazzling outreach of a gifted lawyer with a fine mind not satisfied with law alone but committed to social justice and to the vision of the United Nations – peace and security built on human rights and economic justice for all. My admiration for Bruce Piggott stemmed especially from his absolute refusal to give up a just cause simply because others thought it completely hopeless or naively unattainable. To Bruce that was simply part of the challenge.

There are many present who could speak of Bruce as the man, the family head, the professional lawyer, the colleague, the neighbour, the close friend. Each of us who knew him remembers his gentle

² See J B Piggott, *Reflections of a Common Attorney* (1996) esp Ch 1.

³ See S Petrow, 'Lost Cause? Law Reform in Tasmania 1941-1969' (1994) 13 *University of Tasmania Law Review* 369 for details of earlier law reform efforts in Tasmania.

whimsical voice. But when, in the future, images of Bruce come flashing to mind, they will not be those of Bruce the judge, the law reformer, the professional representative of the practising solicitor; instead, they will be:

- Of Bruce and Audrey together in their lovely home in this most beautiful Australian city, true companions, proud of the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren and lovingly supported by each other to the very end.
- Of Bruce escorting my mother and me through the Royal Botanical Gardens, pointing to this plant or that flower and describing where they came from and how they could be struck from the smallest cutting illicitly, and probably illegally, procured by my mother, Bruce prudently turning a blind eye.
- Of Bruce at a meeting of hard-nosed lawyers launching with a quizzical smile into a highly pertinent quotation from Shakespeare or Wordsworth or from the great Australian poet, Kath Walker Oogeroo of the Nunuccal. With Bruce this was no affectation. It was the beauty of the English language turned to good and telling account.
- Or of Bruce the internationalist, puzzled by the occasional parochialism of his country and of his profession, reaching out with a love of humanity that truly circled the Earth.

It is a great sadness that he suffered so much at the end. But it is a blessing that he died at home, with his family, after a minister of religion prayed with him for peace. Two years ago I was with my mother at such a time. I told her (as Bruce Piggott could surely be told) that a good fight had been fought valiantly and that it was time to let go. After such a giving life, Bruce now, at last, is at rest.

One of his favourite poems was the *Song of Hope* written by the Aboriginal Australian Oogeroo:⁴

Look up, my people,
The dawn is breaking,
The world is waking
To a new bright day,
When none defame us,
No restriction tame us,
Nor colour shame us,

⁴ From Kath Walker, Oogeroo of the Nunuccal, *My People* (3rd ed, 1990).

Nor sneer dismay.

See plain the Promise,
Dark freedom-lover!
Night's nearly over,
And though long the climb,
New rights will greet us,
New mateship meet us,
And joy complete us
In our new Dream Time.

To our father's fathers
The pain, the sorrow;
To our children's children
The glad tomorrow.

As a Justice of the High Court of Australia, as a lawyer, as a fellow citizen, as a friend, I honour Bruce's memory. And I honour the family and friends whose lives he brightened and who will never forget him.