

Obituary

Dr Brian Peter John Molloy ONZM, CRSNZ, AHRIH
(12 August 1930 – 31 July 2022)

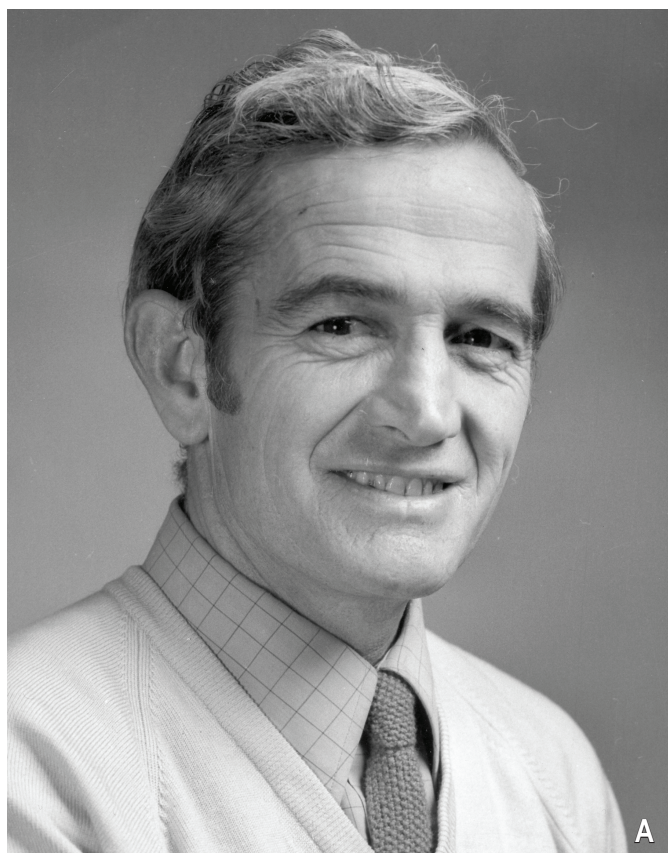


Fig. 1 Brian Molloy. **A**, DSIR Botany Division staff photograph, 1973 (photo: Jim Miles/Bill Rennie). **B**, Brian inspecting a New Zealand myrtle (rōhutu, *Lophomyrtus obcordata*) in flower outside the now demolished Godley Building, Lincoln, 2009 (photo: Murray Dawson).

I've known Brian Molloy (Fig. 1A–B) my entire professional working life, spanning more than forty years.

He was one of a special cohort of professional botanists and ecologists who worked at the former Department of Scientific and Industrial Research's (DSIR) Botany Division, before the transition to Crown Research Institutes in the early 1990s.

His peers at the campus in Lincoln, Canterbury, included such notable achievers as Bill Sykes, Peter Wardle, Elizabeth Edgar, and former Directors Eric Godley and Henry Connor. All remained actively involved in research decades after their official retirements – a testament to their dedication and the nurturing work environment under the DSIR. Their contributions to New Zealand science, including Brian Molloy's, are immense.

Brian was among the last of these remarkable people, and a real survivor considering he had a major cancer scare and extensive surgery that could have easily taken him out well before time.

Brian differed from his contemporaries in being both an ecologist and a botanist, where most would specialise in only one of these disciplines. He was a true naturalist and conservationist with a profound love of and fascination for

the New Zealand flora, and in uncovering, in his words “the stories they can tell” of their circumscription, evolution, and diversification. Brian described many new species and had several named in his honour (Fig. 2A–C).

A few of the many plant groups I remember Brian studying include native conifers, ferns, geraniums, Marlborough rock daisies (*Pachystegia*), *Brachyscome*, *Melicytus* (*Hymenanthera*), and especially orchids. I worked closely with Brian for several years, counting chromosomes of the native orchid species and co-publishing the results. Our work on the native sun orchids (*Thelymitra*) proved especially interesting as it revealed the hybrid origin of many species. Brian also worked on orchids in conjunction with members of the NZ Native Orchid Group, whom he held in high regard and respected their knowledge, not as amateurs, but unpaid professionals in their own right. Brian also collaborated with Canberra orchidologists Mark Clements and David Jones, collecting DNA samples for a trans-Tasman study of genera.

I still remember the smell of formaldehyde emanating from Brian's room, which held jar after jar of preserved orchids and other species, arguably allowable in those days before modern Health and Safety practices. His office was well-equipped (Fig. 3), and I recall Brian spending many hours



Fig. 2 Plants named in Brian Molloy's honour. **A**, the potato orchid *Gastrodia molloyi* (photo: © John Barraclough, CC-BY-NC, via iNaturalist). **B**, The spider orchid genus *Molloybas*, now treated as a synonym of *Corybas cryptanthus* (photo: © Ian St George). **C**, the Cook Strait kōwhai (*Sophora molloyi* Heenan & de Lange), named for Brian Molloy in 2001, was described by author Peter Heenan as being “as tough as old boots” and like its namesake, hardy in all extremes of weather (photo: P.B. Heenan, © Manaaki Whenua – Landcare Research).

looking down a microscope identifying wood charcoals in soils, another of his many interests. This work revealed a widespread pattern of fires in determining the pre-European vegetation of the eastern South Island.

When not in the office, herbarium, library, or plant nursery at Lincoln, Brian spent extensive time undertaking fieldwork (so much so, that he is missing from many of the staff photographs). He initiated surveys of the foothills and mountains of South Canterbury, including Peel Forest, and also conducted fieldwork at the Chatham Islands.

Brian was an outstanding communicator, freely sharing his knowledge and captivating audiences, be it explaining to

a group in the field the differences between mānuka and kānuka or delivering a keynote speech at a conference. However, he was no academic elitist; Brian's common-sense and forthright manner (and without doubt his time as an All Black in 1957) were major assets when speaking to farmers about the potential for covenanting blocks of their land under the Queen Elizabeth II National Trust scheme. Brian is reported to have said that “Time spent around the kitchen table or looking at a wetland at the back of the farm results in much bigger gains for conservation than publications in scientific journals.” He was a director of the QEII Trust from 1989 to 1998 and served as their high-country representative until 2012.

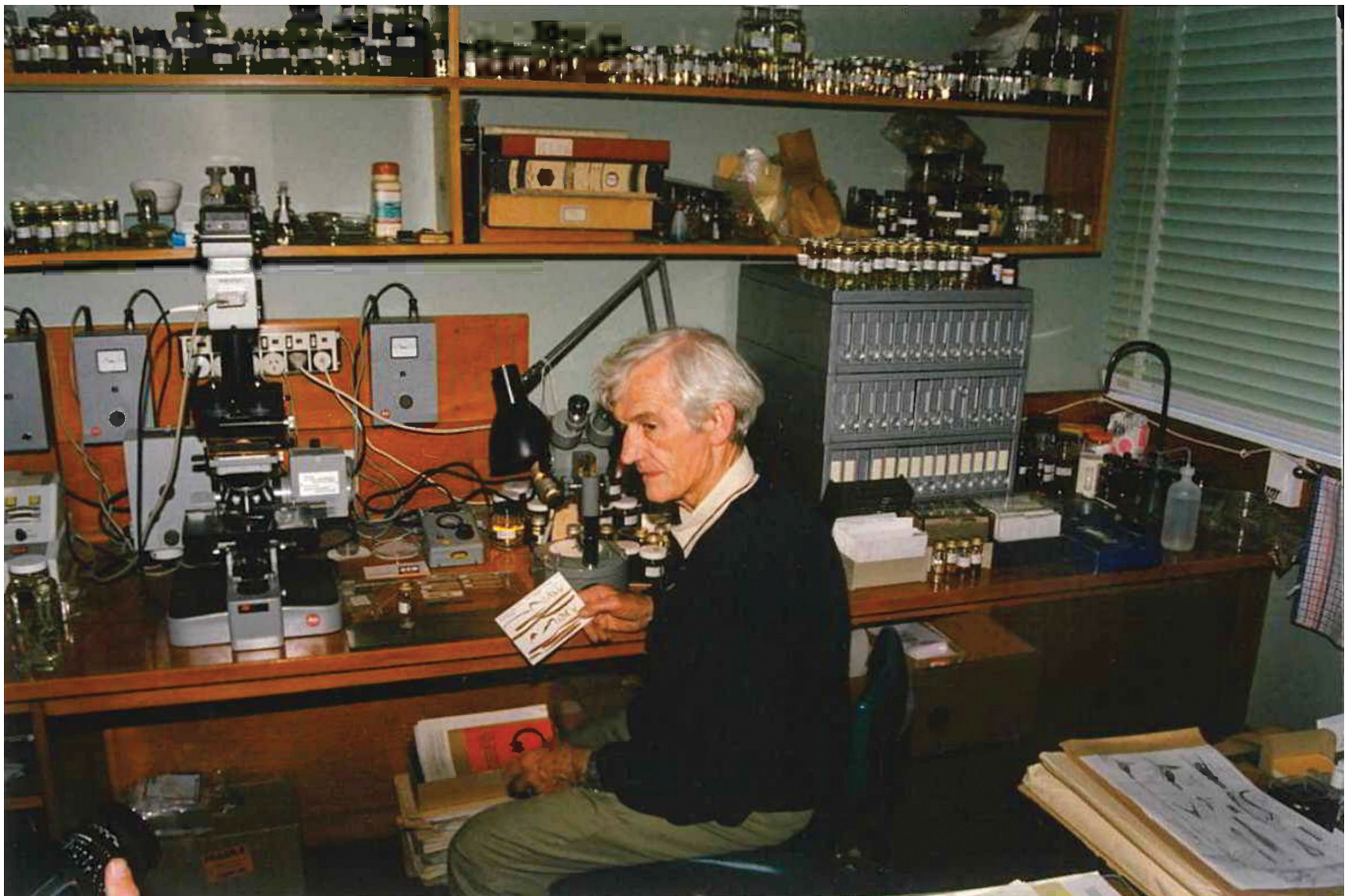


Fig. 3 Brian Molloy's office at DSIR Botany Division in the 1980s. On view are his ‘tools of the trade’, including compound microscope, microscope slide collection (in grey cabinet), herbarium specimens, and numerous vials and jars containing preserved plant parts. Photo: Jim Miles/Bill Rennie, © Manaaki Whenua – Landcare Research.

Brian served on the Riccarton Bush Trust Board for 44 years, managing this indigenous mixed podocarp forest remnant within Christchurch City, and the only remaining example of this forest type on the Canterbury Plains. He was instrumental in the installation of boardwalks and eliminating mowing to encourage regeneration of the bush, and in erecting a predator proof fence. Thanks to Brian's efforts, Riccarton Bush is now a much healthier ecosystem.

He served on many other boards and committees, including the North Canterbury Catchment Board, the South Canterbury Land Settlement Committee, and other parks and reserves committees.

In addition to being a leader, Brian was also an outstanding mentor, and very supportive of up-and-coming researchers and other professionals.

Brian had a remarkably varied and interesting life. As an example, he answered the call to be a horseman as an extra in the 'Lord of the Rings' movies. With his grizzled features being perfect for the part, I suspect that little make-up was required.

Brian openly shared his home life with his colleagues, unlike perhaps many of that generation. He was a proud and supportive family man. I know that it was very difficult to give up on their long-standing family home in Darvel Street (Riccarton, Christchurch) due to extensive damage from the 2010–2011 Canterbury earthquakes. This corresponded with a decline in health of his wife Barbara, and both events weighed heavily on Brian. He lost Barbara in 2016 and his son Michael in 2014; Brian is survived by daughters Sally, Jane, and Sue. Nevertheless, Brian adapted well and made the best of moving into Ngaio Marsh Retirement Village, which suited his gregarious nature.

He remained active in research right until the end, almost reaching the age of 92. Brian passed away during the COVID-19 pandemic, and it was this virus that he succumbed to.

At the funeral, Brian was well remembered by eulogies delivered by Prof David Norton and Dr Peter Heenan covering his academic career, and his daughter Sally who spoke of family life and his time playing rugby for Canterbury and the All Blacks. Sue Molloy delivered the main eulogy. On display in the foyer were his numerous awards and recognition received from many organisations.

Recognition from the Royal NZ Institute of Horticulture came in 2007, when Brian was awarded an Associate of Honour. Shortly before his death, Brian was proud to learn that his daughter, Sue Molloy, a botanical horticulturist at the Christchurch Botanic Gardens, was also recognised by the RNZIH in receiving a Fellowship.

Because he is so well known, obituaries have been published for Brian by several groups and organisations for which he had influence. Peter Heenan, David Norton, and Sue Molloy published a comprehensive remembrance for Brian in a 2022 edition of the *New Zealand Journal of Botany*.

A long life well lived, and to use his own, perhaps politically incorrect phraseology, Brian really was a "bloody good bugger."

Awards and Honours

- 1990: Loder Cup, Department of Conservation, New Zealand's premier conservation award, for work on native plants and conservation.
- 1992: Community Service Award, Christchurch City Council.
- 1995: Civic Award, Christchurch City Council, in recognition of civic and community services.
- 1995: Charles Fleming Award, Royal Society of New Zealand, for environmental achievement.
- 1997: Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit (ONZM), for services to conservation.
- 2000: Federated Farmers Award, for contributions to the science, land and people of the high country.
- 2006: Lifetime Conservation Achievement Award, New Zealand Plant Conservation Network, for contributions to native plant conservation.
- 2007: Associate of Honour, Royal NZ Institute of Horticulture.
- 2010: Bledisloe Trophy, Canterbury Botanical Society, for contributions to New Zealand botany.
- 2011: Companion of the Royal Society of New Zealand, for the promotion and advancement of science and technology.
- 2011: Hatch Medal, New Zealand Native Orchid Group, for outstanding contribution to orchidology in New Zealand.
- 2014: Allan Mere, New Zealand Botanical Society.
- 2014: Civic Award, Christchurch City Council.

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Obituary compiled by Murray Dawson