

## *Peter McKenzie Brown (1924–2004)*

Peter Brown was born of a wealthy Durban merchant and farming family and was schooled at Cordwalles and subsequently at Michaelhouse where he was Head Boy. It was at Michaelhouse, encouraged, so his mother told



*Peter Brown*

me, by Douglas Pennington, that his social conscience was first awakened. After leaving school he joined the army and served in the Second World War. When he was demobbed he went to Cambridge to read for a degree in agriculture. He remained there for only a year, but, apparently affected by the words of Lionel Abrahams, decided to return to South Africa where he felt his commitment should be. Brown then went to the University of Cape Town to study African Languages and Native Law and Administration. After graduating he joined the Natal Local Health Commission, working in Edendale, where he helped found the Edendale YMCA and the KwaHlengabantu charity for the physically disabled.

He subsequently turned to farming. He was a remarkably disciplined farmer, driving early each morning to Nottingham Road from Maritzburg. Peter was much respected by his workers, largely because he worked as hard as they did. His standards were high – both for himself and for the people who worked there. At his funeral one of his workers said to me, ‘A big man has gone.’

In 1953 Brown was one of the founder members of the Liberal Party. The party was originally under the chairmanship of Alan Paton. In 1958, so that Paton could devote more time to his writing, Brown took over the chairmanship and held that position until he was served with a banning order in 1964. The Liberal Party did not attract many members, but many of those were distinguished intellectuals. It is interesting to note that Peter’s leadership of and influence in that party was never in question. His integrity and his pragmatic wisdom gained for him that acceptance.

In 1960, a few days after Sharpeville, the Government declared a state of emergency. In Pietermaritzburg, Peter Brown, Derick Marsh and Hans Meidner were detained for a period of 98 days. I had always thought that Meidner was the toughest man I knew. He was very intelligent, clear-sighted and could be seen as almost ruthless. After he was released, Meidner told me that Brown was the toughest man that he had ever met.

In 1964 Peter Brown was among a number who were banned for five years. The banning order restricted him to the magisterial district of Pietermaritzburg and he was not allowed to attend a gathering of more than two people. There were, of course, other constraints. I recall visiting him on the day his banning order had been re-imposed. While I was there, Elliot Mngadi, whose ban had just been lifted, arrived. The greeting between these two Liberal comrades was touchingly affectionate – Brown rejoicing in his friend’s ‘liberation’, Mngadi commiserating with Brown.

Peter had the means to live virtually anywhere he chose. Despite the hardships he had to endure, he was determined that his commitment was to this country.

In 1974, when Brown’s second banning order came to an end, he once again continued his fight for justice and started the Association for Rural Advancement, AFRA, an organisation dedicated to the restitution of land rights to those who had been unjustly dispossessed.

Many have been the tributes paid to Brown – obituaries even in *The Times* and the *Independent* in London. A letter to the *Mail and Guardian* succinctly states what Brown meant to Farouk Araia of Benoni.

We have lost a great struggle icon in former Liberal Party national chairperson Peter Brown. He forsook all that apartheid South Africa offered to the privileged minority at great risk to his personal safety and well-being.

He taught us that when government degenerates into tyranny its laws no longer bind its subjects. He was crucial in bringing about the demise of one of the worst institutionalised systems of hatred the world has seen.

Brown made the oppressed feel they were not alone. He gave hope to the poor, friendship to the lonely, understanding to the ignorant, and helped the lost find their way.

I first met Brown in 1954. He invited me to spend 'Dingaan's Day' weekend (16 December) with him on his farm at Giant's Castle. The other guests, as I recall, were Alan Paton, Bill Hoffenberg, Sam Chetty, Harold Strachan and Pat McKenzie. A formidable crew. At night, we talked, we debated, we caroused. The more we caroused, the more certain we were of our opinions. In our comparative youthfulness, we ragged Alan rather mercilessly. He suffered our irreverence with a sort of understanding reluctance. In the mornings, Brown would expiate the night before by leading us on gruelling walks over the hills and, it seemed, far, far away. Peter continued having these 'Dingaan's Day' weekends for nearly fifty years.

Alan Paton had a profound effect on Peter Brown, and conversely Brown on Paton. There was almost a father-son relationship between them. When Alan died Peter was, I believe, determined not to let him fade from memory. Hence, among other things, The Alan Paton Centre and The Paton Centenary Celebration.

Brown was a generous man – sometimes amusingly so. On one occasion a health inspector came to examine the school I ran. He demanded new stainless steel tables, new sinks and new lavatories. I mentioned this, by the way, to Peter. A little later I received a cheque in the post with the following short letter. 'Dear Mitchell, Here is something to help put new sinks in your kitchen, or new seats in your shit-houses, or to act as a preliminary sweetener to your fete – or to put more whisky in your glass. You decide which. Regards, Peter'

More importantly when the school moved from being, as it were, a 'private' Private School, he became chairman of the Trust – a role which he filled with distinction and with remarkably pragmatic advice. From the year in which the Trust was founded until the time of his death, he never missed a single meeting.

Though well-off, Brown was splendid in his plainness. He was part Roman, part Quaker. There was about him an unmistakable gravitas, but there was, too, a sardonic humour which infused his personality. Those of us who knew him well were fuelled by his friendship and sustained by his example.

On the tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Ancient Rome were inscribed the words 'I honoured my gods. I served my country. I loved my friends.'

This might well have been the fitting epitaph for Peter McKenzie Brown.

JOHN MITCHELL

*Editor's footnote: Subsequent to his death the Msunduzi Municipality (Pietermaritzburg) has decided to include Peter Brown's name amongst those to be honoured in the proposed street re-naming process.*