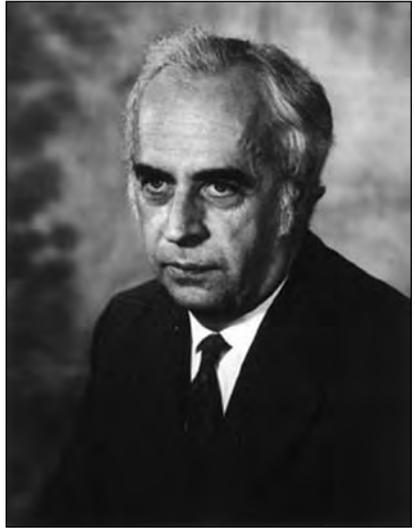


# Obituaries

## *Peter Brain (1922–2005)*

Dr Peter Brain, who died in February 2005 was one of the fast disappearing band of genuine Renaissance men who excelled in both the sciences and the arts.

Peter was born in Pretoria on November 13, 1922. He was taught to read when he was three by his father — a scientist — and could remember almost everything he had ever read, including poetry. His mother, Zoe née Findlay, encouraged his love of poetry by reading to the four children regularly from anthologies and Peter soon knew a large amount of Victorian poetry that he had read in Arthur Mee's *Children's Encyclopaedia*. He possessed a real photographic memory which was filled with poetry and prose in several languages including



*Peter Brain*

Latin and Greek, Afrikaans, Italian, French and German. Later he added the Shakespeare *Sonnets*, the *Sermons* of John Donne and Sydney Smith and would quote them with considerable accuracy. He began to study Ancient Greek through UNISA when he was in his 50s because he was fascinated by Homer and wanted to read the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in the original. He went on to complete a Ph.D. at the University of Natal on Claudius Galen, the second century Greek physician who worked in Rome at the time of Marcus Aurelius; this was published by Cambridge University Press. Peter was amazed to find a detailed description of *Anorexia Nervosa* in Galen's writings.

Peter enrolled at the University of Cape Town in 1939 and completed a B.Sc. in Zoology. He then joined the army and was transferred, with other young science graduates, to the Special Signals Corps, then working in secret on RADAR, which was in the pioneering stage. The unit was directed by Professor Basil Schonland and the courses were held at the Bernard Price Institute at the University of the Witwatersrand. When the training was completed he was sent to North Africa and then Italy with the RADAR group attached to the SAAF and remained there until the end of the war in Europe. He later wrote a light-hearted account of the Special Signals Corps that had been left out of the official histories because its secrecy meant that no records had been left behind.

After his discharge from the army he decided to study medicine and was accepted for the accelerated course at the University of Cape Town. He married Joy in 1948 and, after graduating in 1949, he began an internship as a mine medical officer in Shabani, Southern Rhodesia. The mine employed thousands of mineworkers from all parts of Africa and Peter discovered many with the Sick Cell trait in their blood samples, and undertook an extensive research project in his free time, writing his MD thesis on this topic. He then returned to Cape Town in 1954 and qualified as a specialist pathologist in 1957. He was converted to Catholicism at this time and remained a committed Christian for the rest of his life.

In 1958 the family, with four children, emigrated to Perth where Peter was appointed director of the West Australian Blood Transfusion Service. A fifth baby was born in Perth. The family returned to South Africa seven years later and Peter then joined the Natal Blood Transfusion Service where he later became director, remaining there until his retirement. His research interests were much stronger than his administrative and he had a profound dislike of long meetings and of long-winded speakers. The Natal Institute of Immunology was founded in 1969 as an institute of the University of Natal, housed in a specially designed building at Paradise Valley under the aegis of the Natal Blood Transfusion Service. It was here that Peter developed his interest in immuno-suppressive therapy and transplant immunology. The Institute chalked up a number of firsts including the production of anti-lymphocyte serum and of new reagents for tissue typing. Peter was the haematologist involved with Natal's first heart and kidney transplants in 1969. In 1975 he gave the first George Campbell lecture on *Human Diversity* at Howard College. Over the years he received a number of awards including the Alwyn Zoutendyk medal presented by the South African Institute for Medical Research, and the Bristol prize for medical writing. He was a regular contributor to medical journals, here and overseas. In 1979 his published work was accepted for a Doctor of Science degree at UCT.

Peter was a popular lecturer and an amusing after-dinner speaker with a style of his own that educational methodologists would not have approved of. He carried no notes, often talked too fast and walked up and down the room as he warmed to his subject. Yet his enthusiasm and depth of knowledge was so obvious that his audience remained attentive and interested. Just before his 80th birthday he was invited to lecture on the Trojan War to the Grade 12 class at a Maritzburg school and so vividly did he relate these events that he reduced many of the girls to tears; next day a number of the parents phoned to ask for copies of the script. After reading a new translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy* that he disapproved of, Peter decided to make his own translation and spent several years on this, writing and re-writing to obtain what he hoped was perfection. He shared his ideas with numerous friends and everyone enjoyed the discussions about the exact meanings of Italian versus Latin phrases and idioms and how best to express them in English.

He became interested in the relationship between science and religion in middle life and in recent years attended Professor Barrett's\* lectures, together with Archbishop Denis Hurley who was a close friend. He then began to write on the topic and had several letters and short articles published. He enjoyed translating into Latin and with the Archbishop wrote a Latin version of *Waltzing Matilda*.

\*Peter Barrett, author of *Science and theology since Copernicus: the search for understanding*. (Pretoria: UNISA, 2000)

Soon after his retirement in 1987 Peter attended a short course on silk-screen printing and found great pleasure in drawing designs and patterns suitable for this craft. Having mastered this, he taught a friend and me to print and this became a Saturday hobby. The next stage was to start a small close corporation called *Ibis Images* after the noisy headedas that frequent the garden. This was great fun and gave us an occasion to work together for the first time, since we had very different career interests. Peter had been an excellent photographer since childhood and he now used these skills to produce his own screens and made all the complicated machinery necessary to stretch them as well as the machinery for curing the finished article.

Peter's mechanical inventions always worked well in the end but tended to look like Heath Robinson contraptions; he did not think this was important. Screen printing was not a money making enterprise for us but the work has been sent all over the world and Peter's eccentric designs and the accompanying stories have been translated into several languages. One of the remarkable results of this experience was that Peter, who had always been shy and retiring, began to enjoy the conversations he had with customers at the craft markets and those who came to the house to view the work. We made many new friends as a result.

Peter's final academic enterprise was his work on the *Acacia Karroo* genus. He had joined the Botany Department at the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg as an honorary lecturer after his retirement, enjoying the contacts and the lectures he attended and occasionally gave. He then began to work with Dr Richard Barnes and other members of the Oxford Forestry Institute and carried out the leaf peroxidase study on tens of thousands of leaves collected from all over South Africa by Peter and every family member who could be persuaded to drive to semi-desert areas to collect them. They were provided with seed envelopes so that the leaves from individual trees could be separately packed with the exact location and date indicated. The final report was published in 1994. He and a colleague then continued the study of another variety of *Acacia* in the West Australian outback. This was published in 1996.

Peter managed to carry on with his many interests despite his failing health and attended a U3A course in French conversation until November 2004. He enjoyed Christmas and his 56th wedding anniversary at the end of 2004 with family and friends. His health declined in January and he died peacefully at home on February 13, 2005. He is remembered for his quick wit, strong sense of humour, his phenomenal general knowledge and his love for and loyalty to his family and friends.

JOY BRAIN