

## Obituary: **Brian Ketterer**



Professor Brian Ketterer, Emeritus Professor of Biochemistry in the Faculty of Life Sciences at University College, London and inaugural President of the United Kingdom Alexander von Humboldt Association from 1996 to 1998, died peacefully on 27<sup>th</sup> January 2015 at the age of 84, after a long illness.

Brian was born on 17<sup>th</sup> November 1930 in the gold-rush town of Kalgoorly in Western Australia and moved as a young boy with his family to Perth. He won a scholarship to Perth Modern School, after which he studied at the University of Western Australia, graduating BSc in Zoology with first class honours in 1952. From Perth, he won a Gellibrand scholarship to Cambridge, in the Department of Biochemistry, and subsequently a research fellowship at Clare College.

On his first day in Cambridge, Brian was taken to meet the great biochemist, Frederick Sanger. “Don’t take much notice of Sanger”, he was advised, “He has a one-track mind”. “Not particularly good advice”, Brian wryly remarked a few years later, by which time Sanger had received not one but two Nobel prizes. Cambridge was awash with Nobel laureates at that time – no less than seven in the sciences – and it was among these brilliant minds that Brian worked. No wonder he described it as ‘a magical time, with never ending stimulus.’

After receiving his PhD in 1959, Brian returned to Perth, where he took up a lectureship in the newly established Biochemistry Department, even helping to design its new building on empty bush land. In 1965 he returned to the UK, to the Courtauld Institute of Biochemistry at the Middlesex Hospital Medical School, which he ultimately led as Professor of Biochemistry. There, he had a distinguished research career that lasted

over 31 years. He and his co-workers discovered a new group of enzymes, the theta class of glutathione transferases, and published, *inter alia*, forty-five papers in the Biochemistry Journal about the role and effects of these enzymes in healthy and cancer cells. As a Humboldt award winner, he went many times during the early 1990s to the University of Düsseldorf, Institut für Physiologische Chemie, to work with Prof. Dr. Helmut Spies. Such was Brian's distinction in this field that, on his retirement in 1995, twenty two of his fellow biochemists worldwide dedicated a book to him. He entitled the introduction he wrote 'A Fortunate Life'. A short piece on one of his many contributions can be found at:

<http://www.biochemist.org/bio/02805/0035/028050035.pdf>

The Alexander-von-Humboldt-Stiftung was keen for a Humboldt Club to be set up in the UK, along the lines of the alumni clubs that had been successfully established in many other countries whose researchers had benefited from Humboldt Research Fellowships. Together with the then General Secretary of the Humboldt-Stiftung, Dr Manfred Osten, and supported by the German Embassy, Brian took the initiative of inviting UK Humboldtians in 1996 to a meeting at the German Information Centre, 34 Belgrave Square, London, which led to the foundation of the UK Alexander von Humboldt Association. Brian was elected as its president, a post which he held until 1998, and an early decision was to hold annual meetings with a strong cultural programme that embraced the arts, humanities and sciences in the tradition of Alexander von Humboldt himself. Brian continued to give the Association his active support until some ten years ago, when illness and infirmity began to restrict his activity.

A modest person, Brian seldom spoke about his work, but it coloured his whole approach to life and to people. Always charming and cheerful, he was absolutely non-judgmental, focussing always on the redeeming features of his many colleagues and friends. As one old friend put it, "He never had a bad word to say about anybody. He just didn't do enmity". Our UK Association owes a great debt to Brian Ketterer for his organisational skills and ability to motivate others, as well as to his experience and good judgement in steering the UK Association through its early years.

Dr Peter Wilkinson

President of the UK Alexander von Humboldt Association